
**BETWEEN CUPS AND LIFE: ABSURDITY IN THE SHORT STORY
PHILOSOPHY OF COFFEE BY DEE LESTARI**

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ABSTRACT

Dee Lestari's short story *Filosofi Kopi* (The Philosophy of Coffee) not only tells the story of Ben and Jody's journey in building a coffee shop, but also delves into the existential meaning and absurdity of life. This study explores the absurdity of the philosophical journey through an existentialist approach in *Filosofi Kopi*. Coffee in this story is positioned as a symbol of Ben and Jody's struggle to face the duality of idealism and pragmatism, specifically Ben's obsession with coffee perfection and Jody's pragmatic view, oriented toward profit. The analysis reveals that the absurdity of perfection, shaken by the presence of Twix coffee, prompts both characters to engage in a profound reflection on the meaning and purpose of life. Ben realizes that perfection lies not only in complexity but also in authenticity and the ability to touch the soul. Meanwhile, Jody begins to appreciate the profound philosophy embedded in coffee. Within the existentialist framework, Coffee Philosophy offers the perspective that humans can find harmony by accepting the absurdity of life and creating personal meaning.

Keywords: *absurdity; coffee; meaning of life; existentialism.*

BACKGROUND

Coffee influences people's interaction and communication styles (Said, 2017). The majority of coffee drinkers are adult men (Fauzi, 2019). In Indonesia, the coffee industry is poised for continued growth. There is an increase in the number of coffee shops in Indonesia (Kurniawan & Ridlo, 2017).

Drinking coffee is part of the culture. The coffee drinking culture can serve as a medium of interaction between humans. This causes coffee shops and cafes to become places where people can interact (Garner, 2015). Darwin et al. (2020) explain that coffee drinking activities can be seen as a contemporary cultural phenomenon because they are closely tied to lifestyle. Therefore, there is a change in the meaning of drinking coffee. The coffee drinking culture has become an activity closely tied to identity, experience, lifestyle, and even social status (Samoggia et al., 2020).

Short Story "*Filosofi Kopi*" (2006) by Dee Lestari tells the story of coffee drinking culture. In the short story, the character Ben interprets philosophically the act of drinking coffee. Ben diceritakan sebagai barista yang idealis dan perfeksionis. This is represented through his creation of Ben's Perfecto coffee. However, Ben's idealism often contradicts Jody's pragmatism. Jody is responsible for managing *Filosofi Kopi*, their coffee shop. Jody considers coffee to be a commodity that must bring them profit. These differences are contradictory, but over time, they realize that idealism and pragmatism can complement each other.

The climax of the short story occurs when a customer feels that the taste of Ben's Perfecto is not significantly different from Pak Seno's local coffee, Tiwus. Ben and Jody

then seek out Tiwus coffee. They later realize that perfection is not only about taste or technique, but also about the overall experience. They understand that authenticity, honesty, and coffee can touch the hearts of those who enjoy it. These experiences demonstrate that they are embarking on a profound philosophical journey.

This article discusses the journey of Ben and Jody. Their journey is meaningful, with coffee serving as the medium. Using semiotic and existentialist approaches, this article demonstrates that coffee serves as a pathway to finding identity and meaning in life. The culture of drinking coffee reflects the issues in human life. This article aims to demonstrate that coffee can serve as a symbol of the philosophical quest for the meaning of life.

Previous studies have employed linguistic approaches and semiotic elements in analyzing the short story *Filosofi Kopi* by Dee Lestari. Rohmawati et al. (2019) explain that philosophical meaning is constructed through grammatical and lexical choices that create cohesion. Zainal et al. (2018) also suggest that the short story can serve as an effective medium for fostering critical thinking, due to the presence of grammatical cohesion that encourages readers to explore deeper meanings. Such critical thinking is indeed necessary, considering the numerous elements of both traditional and modern coffee culture (Norva, 2020). Moreover, Estyaji (2020) and Kariim and Haryanti (2020) expand upon semiotic elements within the transformations of the short story into film, noting that the character of Ben in the film is depicted with greater complexity, involving conflicts related to self-actualization and past trauma.

Existing research indicates that the existentialist approach has been underutilized in analyzing *Filosofi Kopi*. Therefore, it is essential to delve further into existentialism as a literary approach. Existentialism addresses fundamental concepts such as existence, change, freedom, self-awareness, isolation, responsibility, free will, and alienation—elements that are pertinent to character and narrative analysis in literature (Kaya, 2019; Kakulte, 2019). According to the notion that existence precedes essence, humans are believed to define their meaning and essence through actions and choices, which is why existentialist works often portray individuals grappling with the burden of absolute freedom and the responsibility of their decisions (Kaya, 2019; Tidd, 2021). Existential narratives frequently feature protagonists who feel isolated from society and struggle against alienation, confronting the absurdity of the human condition and seeking meaning within the universe (Elimelekh, 2014).

Meanwhile, other research on coffee in Indonesia demonstrates that coffee transcends mere commodity status. It holds significant connections with culture and social practices. Ridaryanthi et al. (2022) explain that coffee drinking functions as a means of social interaction influenced by rituals, symbols, and local philosophies. This is evident in the Wonosobo community's tradition of integrating coffee trade activities with cultural elements. A similar phenomenon is observed in the Arokat Selamatan ritual in Mulyorejo Village, which expresses monthly gratitude through involving coffee farmers (Sumarjono et al., 2019). Additionally, Iskandar et al. (2019) describe how the Baduy community integrates coffee cultivation into their traditional agroforestry systems, reflecting a fusion of ecological knowledge and modern practices that promote sustainability and preserve cultural identity.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative-descriptive methodology with an existentialist philosophical approach. This approach is utilized to explore the meaning of coffee not merely as a consumable commodity but also as a medium for existential processes and self-actualization. Data for this study are derived from the text of the short story "*Filosofi Kopi*" within the collection of short stories "*Filosofi Kopi*" (2006) by Dee Lestari. Additionally, a

literature review is conducted to examine previous studies related to the short story *Filosofi Kopi*, existentialism in literary works, and coffee culture in Indonesia.

Data collection is conducted through a literature review, which includes an in-depth examination of the short story and related scholarly works. Subsequently, textual analysis techniques are employed to provide a detailed understanding of the narrative, characters, and symbols present in the story. This study applies an existentialist philosophical approach to explore themes such as freedom, responsibility, existence, alienation, and the search for meaning. This approach focuses on the characters Ben and Jody, emphasizing their journey of understanding and philosophically interpreting coffee. The core concept of existentialism, *existence precedes essence*, serves as the analytical framework to demonstrate how humans define their essence through choices and actions, as illustrated through the symbolism of coffee.

Furthermore, the analysis process involves several stages. The first stage consists of identifying narrative elements—such as dialogue and description—in the short story to discover elements related to the meaning of coffee. These elements are then categorized based on semiotic significance and existentialist themes. The categorized data are subsequently interpreted using existentialist theory, highlighting how the journeys of Ben and Jody reflect their philosophical exploration. These findings are integrated into an analytical narrative to illustrate the relationship between coffee as an existential symbol and as a reflection of social and cultural contexts.

HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN

Ben's Perfecto sebagai Representasi Perjuangan Eksistensial

The process of finding meaning in life for Ben and Jody began with their different views on coffee. Ben is an idealistic barista who considers coffee to be an art and a symbol of perfection. According to him, every cup of coffee must have meaning, touch the heart, and reflect the philosophy of life. Instead, Jody sees coffee practically, namely as a commodity that must make a profit. Although they were different, they finally agreed that Ben's Perfecto—Ben's coffee—was the perfect coffee.

“Pria itu mengeluarkan selembar cek. 'Selamat. Kopi ini perfect. Sempurna.'”

“Sebagai ganti, Ben memberikan kartu Filosofi Kopi. Kartu itu bertuliskan:

‘KOPI YANG ANDA MINUM HARI INI: BEN'S PERFECTO ARTINYA: Sukses adalah Wujud Kesempurnaan Hidup’”

...

“Sore itu berlalu dengan sempurna. Kami membagikan sampel Ben's Perfecto pada semua pengunjung, dan minuman itu mendapat sambutan yang luar biasa.”

(Lestari, 13:2006)

The quote is a dialogue between Ben and a businessman. The man challenges Ben to make the best coffee. The man gave a check in appreciation and approval, stating that the coffee Ben made was the best after tasting it. Jody, in his narration, reveals that he and Ben used Ben's Perfecto as an example of a product for their consumers. The consumer's response is not much different from the man's. It shows that the coffee made by Ben is following the philosophy of his name.

The dialogue shows the construction of meaning. The perfection referred to in the card that Ben hands the businessman can be defined through the process of making coffee. Ben is looking for the best coffee beans so that he can get closer to the meaning of "perfect". Ben also applies brewing techniques that are close to the meaning of "perfect". The coffee beans selected by Ben will undergo a precisely designed process, resulting in a taste that Ben believes is perfect.

Ben shows deep concern for the quality of raw materials. Coffee beans possess unique characteristics, reflecting the idea that every step in the coffee-making process has intrinsic value. Ben's brewing techniques also reflect his inherent approach to perfectionism. Every step, from grinding to serving temperature, is meticulously designed to produce a complex harmony of flavors. The process that Ben goes through is following what Camus (1942) expressed as the absurdity of life, represented by Sisyphus, who keeps pushing stones to the top of Mount Olympus.

In Ben's Sisyphus-like analogy, Ben is caught up in a cycle of searching for meaning through the perfection of the coffee he creates. The process of making *Ben's Perfecto*—from selecting the best coffee beans to serving with high precision—is a representation of Ben's struggle to define himself and the world around him through something that is considered absolute. The belief that the coffee he created was a manifestation of life's perfection made Ben consider the success of Ben's Perfecto as the culmination of his existential struggle. Ben's belief, as Camus expressed, is "*One must imagine Sisyphus happy*". In Camus's view, happiness is not the result of finding absolute meaning in life, but instead of accepting and reconciling with the absurdity inherent in human existence. For Ben, the belief that Ben's Perfecto is the embodiment of his life perfection is a reflection of Sisyphus' struggle to keep pushing the rock to the top of the mountain, even though he knows it will fall back.

Jody has a more pragmatic perspective. Jody sees coffee as nothing more than a commodity that must make a profit. Jody, as the narrator, often portrays Ben in a skeptical tone. However, there is still admiration for Ben's dedication and idealism. Jody views coffee as a tool for running a business, something practical, and having a real exchange rate. However, her journey with Ben prompts Jody to reevaluate her perspective.

"'Aku kalah,' desisnya lucu."
"Kalah dari apa? Tidak ada kompetisi di sini."
...
"Aku pensiun meramu kopi."

(Lestari, 2016:23)

The dialogue between Ben and Jody above represents Ben's experience of feeling defeated after drinking two cups of coffee. The phrase "I lose" is said to show his self-recognition, which is his obsession with coffee perfection. Ben's obsession with the existence of twix coffee cannot be maintained. Meanwhile, the pragmatic Jody exhibits a confused attitude. Jody believes that Ben's Perfecto is the result of Ben's creation, not the product of competition with other parties. However, Ben couldn't avoid the feeling of defeat, so Ben decided to retire for coffee.

According to Camus (1942), the conflict between man's desire to seek absolute meaning and the reality of the world is described as absurdity. In the context of the absurdity Camus described, Ben has devoted all his energy to creating the perfect coffee in BEN'S PERFECTO. However, he was suddenly faced with the fact that the coffee he thought was perfect turned out to be fragile and relative. That's why Ben expressed his desire to retire as a coffee drinker.

In Ben's context, the "boulder" is his obsession with BEN'S PERFECTO—a coffee that he believes is the embodiment of perfection. When Tiwus coffee shows an equally powerful simplicity in influencing meaning for consumers, the "stone" rolls back, shattering Ben's belief in his goal of making the perfect cup of coffee.

On the other hand, the phrase "Losing to what? There is no competition here," which Jody conveyed as a representation of a pragmatic view of absurdity. For Jody, Ben's struggle is not about external competition, but rather an internal conflict that Ben has created himself. However, as Camus (1943) said, absurdity does not disappear with recognition, but man

must make Peace with it. Ben found Peace when Jody was able to see it. Jody can offer Ben a new perspective on coffee and life. Jody tries to remind Ben that meaning doesn't have to depend on perfect achievements like BEN'S PERFECTO. Instead, he presents a simple view through Tiwus Coffee, which, behind its simplicity, holds a profound message about the acceptance of life, as seen in the quote below.

“Dari dapur, aku keluar dan menyuguhkannya secangkir kopi. “

““Tidak, terima kasih,' gumamnya.”

“Jangan begitu. Kapan lagi aku yang cuma tahu menyeduh kopi *sachet* ini nekat membikinkan kopi segar untuk seorang barista? kelakarku.”

“Ben menyunggingkan senyum kecil, lalu mencicipi sedikit kopi buatanku. Seketika air mukanya berubah.

“Apa maksudnya ini? Setengah menghardik”

“Aku tak menjawab, hanya memberinya sebuah kartu.”

“KOPI YANG ANDA MINUM HARI INI: 'KOPI TIWUS' Artinya: 'Walau tak ada yang sempurna hidup ini indah begini adanya.”

(Lestari, 2006:27)

The dialogue represents an emotional and reflective moment between Jody and Ben. The narrative begins with Jody making fresh coffee for Ben. Jody, who usually uses coffee sachets, makes a cup of coffee for Ben. Jody's actions suggest that he intends to declare that he has also undergone the philosophical journey of life that Ben experienced. Ben's first response was to refuse, but he ended up drinking Jody's coffee. Ben's reaction changed when he tasted the coffee Jody had given him. Ben did not respond to the coffee sauce given by Jody. The phrase "What does this mean?" was delivered by Ben in a half-rebuking tone. This tone reflects a mixture of emotions—disappointment, confusion, and a sense of cornering—as if the coffee Jody serves is a symbol of something more profound, a challenge to the confidence and perfection she has been pursuing.

The phrase "Although nothing is perfect, life is beautiful as it is," as stated in the card given by Jody, is a symbol of the absurd reality, according to Camus, that life has no absolute intrinsic meaning. Ben, who has focused his life on the pursuit of perfection through BEN'S PERFECTO, has found that Tiwus coffee, which is simple and not meant to be perfect, instead provides a more profound message about life.

Ben's reaction, which changed from a small smile to surprise and annoyance after tasting Jody's coffee, reflected a moment of "*revolt*" or rebellion. According to Camus, the moment is man's initial response to absurdity. Camus (1942) stated that the first step in rebellion is to accept that nothing is perfect but the struggle for meaning. Therefore, the Tiwus coffee and philosophy cards that Jody made and gave to Ben forced him to face imperfections and encouraged him to reflect on the meaning of life.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion in the previous section, Ben and Jody's journey in *the Coffee Philosophy* represents two distinct perspectives on dealing with life's absurdities. Ben, with his idealism, sees coffee as a medium to seek perfection in life, which is reflected in his efforts to create Ben's Perfecto. However, Ben's belief in perfection is shattered when he is confronted with coffee twigs, which conveys the meaning of simplicity and acceptance of life. Meanwhile, Jody, with his pragmatism and more practical point of view, represents an approach that is more accepting of absurdity without needing to seek absolute meaning. In this story, coffee is not just a commodity for consumption, but a symbol of existential struggle and the search for life's meaning. With coffee as a medium for a philosophical

journey, Ben and Jody demonstrate that the meaning of life is not always found in perfection or absolute idealism, but rather in the process of striving for perfection.

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