
**BETWEEN CUP AND LIFE: ABSURDITY IN DEE LESTARI'S SHORT STORY
*FILOSOFI KOPI***

Prapto Waluyo^{1*)}, Dedi Yusar¹⁾

¹⁾Pakuan University, Bogor, Indonesia

^{*)}Email Correspondence: praptowaluyo@unpak.ac.id

Manuscript chronology:
received May 15, 2025, revised May 29, 2025, decided July 19, 2025.

ABSTRACT

Dee Lestari's short story *Filosofi Kopi* (The Philosophy of Coffee) not only narrates the journey of Ben and Jody in opening a coffee shop but also explores the existential meaning and absurdity of life. This study examines the absurdity of their philosophical journey through an existentialist perspective in *Filosofi Kopi*. Coffee is portrayed as a symbol of Ben and Jody's struggle to balance the duality of idealism and pragmatism, especially in the context of Ben's obsession with coffee perfection and Jody's pragmatic focus on profit. The analysis shows that the pursuit of perfection, challenged by the presence of Tiwus coffee, prompts both characters to reflect deeply on the meaning and purpose of life. Ben realizes that perfection is not only about complexity but also about authenticity and touching the soul. Meanwhile, Jody begins to appreciate the profound philosophy embedded in coffee. Within the existentialist framework, *Filosofi Kopi* presents the idea that humans can find harmony by accepting life's absurdity and creating personal meaning.

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

INTRODUCTION

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 set for continued growth. There has been 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 for interaction (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 the act of drinking coffee philosophically. Ben is said to be an idealistic and perfectionistic barista. This is represented through his coffee, Ben's Perfecto. However, Ben's idealism often contradicts Jody's pragmatism. Jody is responsible for managing *Filosofi Kopi*, their coffee shop. Jody sees coffee as a commodity that has to make them a profit. These differences initially appear to contradict each other, but over time, they come to realize that idealism and pragmatism can complement one another.

The climax of the short story happens when a customer believes that the taste of Ben's Perfecto isn't very different from Pak Seno's local coffee, called Tiwus coffee. Ben and Jody search for the Perfect coffee until they realize that perfection isn't just about taste or skill,

but also about authenticity, honesty, and how coffee can connect with the hearts of those who drink it. This shift in their view indicates that they are embarking on a profound philosophical journey.

This article explores Ben and Jody's meaningful journey with coffee as a medium. Using a semiotic approach and literary philosophy, particularly existentialism, this analysis aims to demonstrate that coffee is not merely a beverage but a means of self-discovery and the exploration of life's meaning. Through Ben's experience with coffee, the act of drinking coffee illustrates the challenges of human existence. The goal of this article is to demonstrate that coffee can symbolize the philosophical pursuit of life's meaning.

Some earlier studies have employed linguistic approaches and semiotic elements in Dee Lestari's short story "Filosofi Kopi." Rohmawati et al. (2019) explained that philosophical meaning is shaped through grammatical and lexical choices that create cohesion. Zainal et al. (2018) also noted that the short story can serve as a medium for learning critical thinking due to its grammatical cohesion, which encourages readers to explore deeper meanings. This critical thinking is especially important because there are numerous traditional and modern cultural elements associated with coffee (Norva, 2020). Additionally, Estyaji (2020) and Kariim and Haryanti (2020) revealed that semiotic elements expanded in the transition from short stories to films, such as Ben's character becoming more complex with self-actualization conflicts and past trauma.

Previous studies suggest that the existentialist approach has not been widely employed to analyze the short story "Filosofi Kopi." Therefore, it is crucial to explore existentialism more deeply as a literary approach. Existentialism tackles issues such as existence, change, freedom, self-awareness, isolation, responsibility, free will, and alienation, which are essential in character analysis and literary narratives (Kaya, 2019; Kakulte, 2019). In the concept of existence precedes essence, humans are believed to define their own meaning and identity through actions and choices. Consequently, existentialist works often portray individuals wrestling with the weight of absolute freedom and responsibility for their decisions (Kaya, 2019; Tidd, 2021). Existentialist stories also frequently feature protagonists who feel isolated from society, struggle against alienation, confront the absurdity of the human condition, and search for meaning in the universe (Elimelekh, 2014).

Meanwhile, other research on coffee in Indonesia shows that coffee is more than a commodity. Coffee has strong connections to culture and social practices. Ridaryanthi et al. (2022) explained that coffee drinking serves as a means of social interaction, influenced by local rituals, symbols, and philosophies. This is evident in the tradition of the Wonosobo people, who combine coffee trading activities with cultural elements. A similar phenomenon occurs in the Arokat Selamatan ritual in Mulyorejo Village. The ritual is a monthly expression of gratitude involving coffee farmers (Sumarjono et al., 2019). Additionally, Iskandar et al. (2019) demonstrated how the Baduy community integrated coffee cultivation into their traditional agroforestry system, showcasing a blend of ecological knowledge and modern practices that promote sustainability and preserve cultural identity.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative-descriptive method, drawing on an existentialist philosophy approach. This approach is used to explore the meaning of coffee, which is not only viewed as a consumption commodity but also as a medium for existential processes and self-actualization. The data for the study were obtained from the text of the short story "Filosofi Kopi" in the book "Filosofi Kopi" short story collection (2006) by Dee Lestari. Additionally, the research conducted a literature review related to previous studies on 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 reading of the short story and related sources. Then, text analysis techniques are employed

to gain a detailed understanding of the narrative, characters, and symbols within the story. This research adopts an existentialist philosophical approach to explore themes such as freedom, responsibility, existence, alienation, and the search for meaning. This approach is applied to the characters of Ben and Jody, focusing on their journey to understand and interpret coffee philosophically. The core concept of existentialism, namely that existence precedes essence, serves as the analytical framework to illustrate how humans define their essence through choices and actions, as exemplified by the act of drinking coffee.

Furthermore, the analysis process occurs in several stages. First, narratives, dialogues, and descriptions in the short stories are identified to find elements related to the meaning of coffee. Then, these elements are categorized based on semiotic meaning and existential themes. The categorized data are subsequently interpreted using existentialist theory, emphasizing how Ben and Jody's character journeys mirror their philosophical developments. The results are then compiled into an analytical narrative that illustrates the relationship between coffee as an existential symbol and as a reflection of the socio-cultural context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ben's Perfecto as a Representation of Existential Struggle

The process of discovering the meaning of life for Ben and Jody starts with their differing perspectives on coffee. Ben is an idealistic barista who sees coffee as an art form and a symbol of perfection. To him, every cup of coffee should have purpose, touch the heart, and reflect a personal philosophy. Jody, however, approaches coffee practically, viewing it as a commodity that needs to turn a profit. Despite their differences, they ultimately agreed that Ben's Perfecto—Ben's coffee—was the perfect brew.

“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 challenged Ben to make the best coffee. The man gave a check as a sign of appreciation and approval, indicating that the coffee Ben had made was the best he had tasted. Jody, in her narration, revealed that she and Ben provided Ben's Perfecto as a sample product to their customers. The customers' response is similar to the man's, showing that the coffee made by Ben aligns with the philosophy behind his name.

The dialogue illustrates how meaning is constructed. The perfection mentioned in the card Ben gave to the businessman can be understood through the process of making coffee. Ben searches for the best coffee beans to approach the concept of "sempurna". He also uses brewing techniques that align with the idea of "sempurna". The coffee beans Ben chooses will undergo a carefully designed process, resulting in a flavor that Ben considers perfect.

Ben pays close attention to the quality of raw materials. Coffee beans possess unique characteristics that underscore the notion that each step in the coffee-making process holds intrinsic value. Ben's brewing technique also shows his perfectionist approach. Every step, from grinding to setting the serving temperature, is carefully designed to create a complex harmony of flavors. The process Ben follows aligns with what Camus (1942) expressed as the absurdity of life, represented by Sisyphus constantly pushing the rock up Mount Olympus.

In Ben's Sisyphus-like analogy, Ben is stuck in a cycle of searching for meaning through perfecting the coffee he makes. The process of creating Ben's Perfecto—from selecting the best coffee beans to serving with high precision—symbolizes Ben's struggle to define himself and the world around him through something perceived as absolute. The belief that the coffee he makes reflects the perfection of life leads Ben to view the success of Ben's Perfecto as the peak of his existential effort. Ben's belief is as Camus expressed, namely "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." In Camus' view, happiness doesn't come from finding absolute meaning in life, but from accepting and making peace with the inherent absurdity of human existence. For Ben, believing that Ben's Perfecto is the perfection of his life mirrors Sisyphus' effort to push the stone to the top of the mountain, even knowing it will fall back down.

Jody holds a more pragmatic view. He sees coffee as simply a commodity that must turn a profit. As the narrator, Jody often describes Ben with skepticism. Still, he admires Ben's dedication and idealism. Jody considers coffee a practical tool for running a business and something with real exchange value. However, his experience with Ben has led Jody to reconsider his 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 reflects Ben's feeling of defeat after drinking Tiwus coffee. The phrase "aku kalah" reveals his confession, specifically his obsession with perfecting the art of coffee. Ben's obsession cannot be sustained with Tiwus coffee. Meanwhile, the pragmatic Jody appears confused. Jody feels that Ben's Perfecto is the result of his own creation, not a competition with others. However, the feeling of defeat is unavoidable, so Ben decides to retire from brewing coffee.

According to Camus (1942), the conflict lies between the human desire to find absolute meaning and the world he describes as absurd. Within this context of absurdity, Ben has dedicated all his effort to making the perfect coffee in BEN'S PERFECTO. However, he is suddenly faced with the realization that the coffee he sees as perfect is fragile and relative. That is why Ben expressed his wish to retire as a coffee brewer.

In Ben's view, the "boulder" is his obsession with BEN'S PERFECTO—a coffee he believes represents perfection. When this coffee demonstrates simplicity that is equally impactful in conveying meaning to consumers, the "boulder" rolls back, breaking Ben's belief in his pursuit of creating the perfect coffee.

On the other hand, the phrase "Kalah dari apa? Tidak ada kompetisi di sini," delivered by Jody, presents a pragmatic view of absurdity. For Jody, Ben's struggle is not about external competition but an internal conflict that Ben creates himself. However, as Camus (1943) noted, absurdity does not disappear with recognition; humans must come to terms with it. Ben finds that peace when Jody is also able to see it. Jody can offer Ben a new perspective on coffee and life. She tries to remind Ben that meaning doesn't have to depend on perfect achievements like BEN'S PERFECTO. Instead, she shares a simple view through Tiwu's coffee, which, despite its simplicity, conveys a profound message about accepting 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 captures an emotional and reflective moment between Jody and Ben. The narrative starts with Jody brewing fresh coffee for Ben. Usually, Jody uses sachet coffee, but today she prepares a cup for Ben. Her actions indicate her desire to show that she has also undergone the philosophical journey of life that Ben has experienced. At first, Ben refuses, but ultimately, he drinks Jody's coffee. His reaction changes after tasting it. Ben's response to the coffee is not entirely positive. He asks, "Apa maksudnya ini?" in a half-barbed tone, revealing a mix of disappointment, confusion, and feeling cornered—suggesting that the coffee symbolizes something deeper, perhaps a challenge to his beliefs and the pursuit of perfection.

The phrase, "Although nothing is perfect, life is beautiful just the way it is" in the card Jody gives is symbolic of the reality of absurdity according to Camus, where life has no absolute intrinsic meaning. Ben, who focuses his life on the search for perfection through BEN'S PERFECTO, finds that Tiwus coffee, which is simple and not meant to be perfect, gives a deeper message about life.

Ben's reaction, shifting from a small smile to surprise and annoyance after tasting Jody's coffee, reflects a moment of "revolt." According to Camus, this moment is the initial human response to absurdity. Camus (1942) states that the first step in revolt is to accept that nothing is perfect, but to continue the struggle for meaning. Therefore, the Tiwus coffee and philosophy cards that Jody made and gave to Ben forced him to confront imperfection 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 *Filosofi Kopi* illustrates two different perspectives on facing life's absurdity. Ben, with his idealism, views coffee as a way to pursue perfection, reflected in his efforts to create Ben's Perfecto. However, his belief in perfection is shattered when he encounters Tiwus coffee, which signifies simplicity and acceptance of life. Meanwhile, Jody, with his pragmatism and more practical outlook, represents a more accepting approach to absurdity without seeking absolute meaning. In this story, coffee is not just a commodity to be consumed, but a symbol of existential struggle and the search for life's meaning. Through coffee as a medium for a philosophical journey, Ben and Jody demonstrate that life's meaning is not always found in perfection or absolute idealism, but rather in the ongoing pursuit of it.

REFERENCES

- Camus, A. (1942). *The myth of Sisyphus* (J. O'Brien, Trans.). Vintage International. (Original work published in French, 1942).
- Elimelekh, G. (2014). Existentialism in the works of Abd al-Rahman Munif. *Oriente Moderno*, 94(1), 1-31. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22138617-12340036>
- Herrick, S. S. C., Hallward, L., & Duncan, L. R. (2021). "This is just how I cope": An inductive thematic analysis of eating disorder recovery content created and shared on TikTok using #EDrecovery. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 54(4), 516-526. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.23463>
- Iskandar, B. S., Iskandar, J., Irawan, B., Suroso, & Partasasmita, R. (2019). The development of coffee cultivation in the traditional agroforestry of mixed-garden (Dukuh lembur) to

- provide social-economic benefits for the outer Baduy community, South Banten, Indonesia. *Biodiversitas*, 20(10), 2958-2969. <https://doi.org/10.13057/biodiv/d201026>
- Kakulte, A., Ghosh, P., Samudra, M., & Chaudhury, S. (2024). Existentialism: An overview. In *A guide to clinical psychology: Therapies*.
- Kaya, H. (2019). A comparative study: Existentialism in *No Exit* by Jean-Paul Sartre and *Shadowless* by Hasan Ali Toptaş. *Folklor/Edebiyat*, 99(3), 577-591. <https://doi.org/10.22559/folklor.986>
- Raza, A., Ishaq, M. I., Khan, A., Ahmad, R., & Haj Salem, N. (2023). How fashion cewebrity influences customer engagement behavior in emerging economy? Social network influence as moderator. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 74. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2023.103392>
- Ridaryanthi, M., Ahmad, A. L., & Dwityas, N. A. (2022). Coffee culture in Indonesia: A symbolic interactionism point of view. *Journal of Communication: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 38(2), 215-230. <https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2022-3802-13>
- Sumarjono, Prasetyo, B. A., Surya, R. A., Soepeno, B., & Swastika, K. (2019). The dynamics of social culture of the smallholder coffee farmers in Mulyorejo village, Silo district, Jember Regency, 2000-2017. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 243(1). <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/243/1/012166>
- Tidd, U. (2021). Existentialism and the novel. In *The Cambridge history of the novel in French*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108683920.033>