

SELF-DISCOVERY AND RECONCILIATION  
IN THE NOVEL *BELOVED* BY TONI MORRISON

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**ABSTRACT**

The objective of this research is to analyze the process of self-discovery and reconciliation experienced by the main character in the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. This study aims to: (1) identify the types of identity found in the main character, (2) explore the interrelated processes of self-discovery, and (3) describe the aspects of reconciliation reflected in the novel. This research applies Erik Erikson's identity theory, Charles Taylor's self-discovery theory, and John Paul Lederach's reconciliation theory. The method used is qualitative research with a descriptive approach, and the data were collected through documentation of character narratives and dialogues in the novel. The findings show that: (1) the most dominant type of identity is identity conflict, (2) the process of self-discovery involves four main elements acceptance of the past, the role of social relationships, awareness of autonomy, and symbolic influences, and (3) reconciliation includes past trauma, confrontation with the past, and recognition and acceptance. The result indicates that *Beloved* presents a deep psychological journey of identity formation and emotional healing through self-discovery and reconciliation.

**Keywords:** *self-discovery, reconciliation novel*

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## **1. Introduction**

Literature serves as a vital medium for portraying the complexity of human experiences, including inner struggles and psychological dynamics that are not always accessible through purely scientific approaches. According to Wellek and Warren (2014), literary works both written and oral reflect social, cultural, and psychological realities through various genres such as poetry, drama, film, and novels. Among these, novels offer a powerful narrative form that allows for deep exploration of individual conflicts, identity, and the meaning of life. A prominent example is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which powerfully addresses historical trauma, identity crises, and reconciliation within the context of American slavery, particularly through the character of Sethe, who is haunted by her past.

This research aims to analyze the process of self-discovery and reconciliation experienced by the characters in *Beloved* through a literary psychological approach. It focuses on how past trauma shapes personal identity and how the characters strive to integrate these traumatic experiences into a coherent sense of self. The study applies Erikson's identity theory (1986), Charles Taylor's theory of self-discovery (2020), and Lederach's theory of reconciliation (1997) as its theoretical foundation. This qualitative and exploratory research employs a descriptive-analytical method to examine the novel's narrative and dialogue. By merging literary and psychological perspectives, the study seeks to contribute to interdisciplinary scholarship and demonstrate how literature functions as a reflective space for understanding identity and psychological healing in the face of oppressive historical and cultural contexts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **a) Psychological Approach**

Approach is one of the important steps in evaluating and analyzing literary works. According to Ratna (2007), the approach plays a very important role in studying and understanding literary works. One of the relevant approaches is the psychological approach. As defined by Hornby (1995), it is the scientific study of the mind and its functions. In the context of literature, this approach is applied to interpret literary texts, particularly those that depict the psychological characteristics, personalities, and actions of the characters in the

narrative. This approach allows for the analysis of character motivations, inner conflicts, psychological development, and mental dynamics based on psychological theories such as psychoanalysis, positive psychology, and developmental psychology.

According to Luman (2016), the psychological approach in literary criticism focuses on the psychological elements found in literary texts. Each approach offers different ways of explaining, predicting, and describing behavior in the context of literature. In evaluating literary works, historians and critics often highlight the psychological development of characters not only by viewing them as individuals but also by linking them to the social, cultural, and historical contexts that influence their behavior. Thus, the psychological approach provides a broader and deeper understanding of the dynamics that shape character development in a novel.

### **Identity Theory**

#### **1. Definition of Identity**

Identity is a fundamental concept in psychology that refers to an individual's understanding of who they are, particularly in relation to social, cultural, and psychological roles. In this context, identity encompasses various aspects that shape an individual's uniqueness, such as name, ethnicity, religion, gender, and cultural background. Identity is not something static, but rather a dynamic process that continues to develop throughout a person's life. Erikson (1986), an important figure in developmental psychology, emphasized that identity is formed through the interaction between the individual and their environment, and is influenced by the life experiences they undergo.

#### **Types of Identity**

##### **a) Loss and Personal History Names**

This identity problem arises when a person loses a name or personal history that connects him or her to his or her origins, family, or culture. A name is not just a label, but also a symbol of social and personal identity.

##### **b) Identity Conflict**

Identity conflict occurs when a person occupies two or more conflicting social roles, such as between personal roles and roles imposed by society. In psychological terms, this conflict often manifests as cognitive dissonance, where an individual struggles to reconcile their self-concept with external expectations.

### **c) Past Trauma that Affects Identity**

Past trauma, whether physical, emotional, or psychological, can have long-lasting effects on identity development. Individuals who experience severe trauma may feel disconnected from themselves, have difficulty trusting others, or have difficulty building a stable life narrative. Trauma can shape the way a person sees themselves and the world around them, disrupting the integrity of their identity.

### **d) Search for Self-Meaning and Acceptance of the Past**

This is a form of identity struggle in which an individual attempts to understand who they are and how their past has shaped who they are today. This process involves reflection, searching for meaning in life, and accepting past experiences both positive and negative. This stage is essential to the formation of a healthy and whole identity, and usually occurs during adulthood or when facing major life changes.

## **Self-Discovery**

### **1. Definition of Self-Discovery**

According to Taylor (2020), self-discovery is an individual's effort to explore the psychological and emotional elements that shape personality and influence decision-making in life. Throughout this process, individuals are often confronted with various challenges that compel them to reflect on past experiences and reconstruct their self-understanding. Self-discovery is also closely related to the ability to embrace change, recognize personal strengths and weaknesses, and adapt effectively. This process significantly contributes to improved mental and emotional well-being, offering individuals a greater sense of control over their lives.

### **2. Processes Interrelated of Self Discovery**

#### **a) Acceptance of the Past**

Self-discovery often begins with the courage to face and accept the past, including traumatic experiences, mistakes, or losses. This process involves reconciling who one was in the past with who one is now.

#### **b) The Role of Relationships in Self-Discovery**

Interpersonal relationships with family, friends, or partners often serve as a mirror for someone to recognize themselves. Through these relationships, individuals learn about responsibility, empathy, self-limitation, and receive emotional support.

### **c) Awareness of Freedom or Autonomy**

Self-discovery also occurs when an individual realizes that he or she has the right and power to choose his or her own path in life. This awareness of freedom usually arises after releasing control or influence from external parties such as social systems, cultural pressures, or past traumas.

### **d) Influence of Symbolic or External Forces**

Sometimes, the process of self-discovery is triggered by external or symbolic things such as memories, dreams, certain figures, or spiritual experiences. These symbolic presences often trigger deep reflection on identity, values, and the meaning of life.

## **Reconciliation**

### **1. Definition of Reconciliation**

Lederach (1997) defines reconciliation as an effort to rebuild trust and mutual understanding between conflicting parties, through an approach that includes elements of justice, truth-telling, and open communication aimed at achieving shared understanding. Reconciliation is also closely linked to transitional justice, which refers to the legal and social frameworks used to address systemic human rights violations in post-conflict settings. In this context, reconciliation is not limited to the repair of personal relationships, but also includes structural reform and collective healing within a society that has experienced trauma. The success of reconciliation is highly dependent on the recognition of victims' narratives, as well as the willingness of responsible parties to demonstrate good faith in rebuilding trust.

### **2. Aspect of Reconciliation**

#### **a) Trauma and Memories of the Past**

Trauma and memories are central elements that often hinder the formation of a complete identity. The process of reconciliation is impossible without first acknowledging the existence of emotional wounds left behind from past experiences. In the study of trauma psychology, trauma that is not faced will remain alive in the subconscious memory and continue to influence behavior and self-perception.

#### **b) Confrontation with the Past**

Reconciliation requires not only an acknowledgement of the past but also the courage to actively confront it. This confrontation involves cognitive and emotional processes in which individuals revisit difficult events that have been

avoided or repressed. In reconciliation theory, confronting the past head-on is the only way to integrate these experiences into the narrative of the self.

### **c) Recognition and Acceptance**

Recognition of the reality of what happened and acceptance of it are the core of true reconciliation. After the trauma has been faced, the individual needs to accept that the past cannot be changed, but its meaning can be reinterpreted. Acceptance does not mean justifying the bad experience, but freeing oneself from the burden of denial or lingering regret.

## **2. Method**

The researcher employed a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the types of characteristics of Momonga and several other involved characters, as well as the impact of Momonga's social life in the new world. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), qualitative research was a research procedure that produced descriptive data in the form of spoken or written words and observable behavior. The researcher designed this study with a focus on qualitative research using natural data, considering qualitative research as data inherently tied to its background, including various related social phenomena, making it a multivariate investigation developed by the researcher.

## **3. Finding and Discussion**

### **a. Finding**

This finding presents all the data resulting from the identification of key themes related to "Identity Problem, Self-Discovery, and Reconciliation" in the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. During the data collection and analysis process, the researcher successfully identified several key findings related to the themes of "Identity Problem, Self-Discovery, and Reconciliation" in the novel. The issue of identity in this context was associated with the characters' search for and understanding of who they are after experiencing the past and slavery. Self-discovery referred to the characters' process of inner reflection and emotional journey in understanding and accepting their own identities. Meanwhile, Reconciliation reflected the characters' efforts to make peace with their past, especially the traumatic repression that shaped their lives in the present. The data in this study were obtained through descriptive analysis techniques of the narrative and dialogue, used in the novel.

### **b. Analysis**

In this section, the researcher explains the types of identity, the interrelated process of self-discovery, and the aspects of reconciliation used in the main character, namely: Loss of Names and Personal Histories, Identity Conflict, Past Trauma That Affect Identity, Search for Self-Meaning and Acceptance of the Past, Acceptance of the Past, The Role of Relationship in Self-Discovery, Awareness of Freedom or Autonomy, Influence of Symbolic or External Forces, Trauma and Memories of the Past, Confrontation with the past and Recognition and Acceptance.

### **1. Types of Identity as Seen Through Main Character in the Novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.**

#### **a) Loss of Names and Personal Histories**

Erikson described how the loss of name and personal history led to an identity crisis, which was formed through social interaction and the roles one played. When someone lost connection with their past, they struggled to build a stable identity, as identity relied on social recognition. This could be seen in the following dialogue:

#### **Datum 1**

**Paul d** : "Sethe," he says, "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow."

**Sethe** : "You your best thing, Sethe. You are, Me? Me?"

**Paul d** : "You Your best thing"

**(Page 285)**

The dialogue above showed that the theme of loss of name and personal history in *Beloved* was strongly portrayed through how Sethe and Paul D were burdened by a painful past, where **yesterday** represented the trauma, suffering, and loss of identity due to slavery. The phrase **we got more yesterday than anybody** referred to how they carried a heavier past than others because their life history had been stolen, unrecorded, and filled with pain. They had no intact personal historical trace, no inherited name, or family story that formed the basis of their self-identity. Therefore, *Paul D's* longing for "some kind of tomorrow" reflected a desire for a future free from the shadows of that loss, an attempt to rebuild the identity that had been torn away.

#### **b) Identity Conflict as a Mother and a Slave**

Erikson described the identity conflict of being both a mother and a slave as occurring because individuals played multiple social roles that could be in conflict

with each other. In slavery, a mother did not have full control over her child, who could be taken or sold at any time. This created tension in a mother's identity, as the maternal instinct to protect her child clashed with the reality of slavery, which constrained her freedom. Erikson emphasized that identity was formed through social interactions, and in the condition of slavery. This could be seen in the following dialogue:

**Datum 1**

**Beloved** : Where your diamonds?

**Sethe** : **Diamonds? What would I be doing with diamonds?**

**Beloved** : On your ears.

**Sethe** : Wish I did. Come to think of it, I had some crystal once. A present from the lady I worked for.

**(Page 69)**

The dialogue above reflected the identity conflict as a mother and a slave because it showed how *Sethe*, as a former slave, had never experienced luxury or personal possessions like jewelry, which symbolically reflected the dignity of a free mother or woman. *Sethe* said, **Diamond? What would I be doing diamonds?** which showed Sethe's inner conflict as a mother who deserved to be valued and honored. However, as a former slave, she was accustomed to feeling unworthy of owning something valuable. This reflected the contradiction between her identity as a worthy human being and her life experiences that had been degrading.

**c) Past Trauma That Affected Identity**

Erikson described that past trauma could affect a person's identity because identity was formed through social interactions and the roles played within society. When an individual experienced deep trauma, such as slavery or violence, it could disrupt the consistency of their identity. Trauma could create internal conflict between the identity expected by society and the painful personal experiences, causing individuals to struggle to redefine who they were within an ever-changing social context. This could be seen in the following dialogue:

**Datum 1**

**Paul D** : What's that on your back, Sethe?

**Sethe** : **A tree. A chokecherry tree. That's what she called it. Bare feet and somebody's hands and the nastiness of life above me.**



**Paul D : “A tree?”**

**Sethe: “Schoolteacher’s boys. Took turns.”**

**(Page 18)**

The dialogue above showed that the theme of past trauma affecting identity in *Beloved* was clearly depicted through the physical and emotional wounds experienced by *Sethe*. When *Paul D* asked, "What's that on your back, *Sethe*?", and *Sethe* replied, **A tree. A chokecherry tree. That's what she called it. Bare feet and somebody's hands and the nastiness of life above me**, as well as **Schoolteacher's boys. Took turns**, it was evident that *Sethe*'s body bore the traces of past violence that shaped who she was. The wound was not merely a scar from whipping but a symbol of trauma that became intertwined with her identity. As a woman and a mother, *Sethe* carried that wound not only physically but also psychologically, which influenced the way she perceived herself and her life. The trauma of slavery did not end with freedom; it clung to memory and body, forming an identity marked by pain.

**d) Search for Self-Meaning and Acceptance of the Past**

Erikson described the search for self-meaning and acceptance of the past as a process in which individuals adjusted their identities based on social roles and life experiences. A person's identity was formed through social interaction and the roles they internalized. In the context of trauma or major change, individuals had to renegotiate their identities, connecting the past with a new understanding of themselves. Acceptance of the past occurred when someone was able to integrate traumatic experiences into their self-narrative without losing meaning or identity stability. This could be seen in the following dialogue:

**Datum 1**

**Paul d : We all got a past, Sethe. It's just they want to deny us the present.**

**Sethe : My past is still with me, and I can't see a future.**

**(Page 73)**

This dialogue illustrated the theme of the search for self-meaning and acceptance of the past in *Beloved*. *Sethe* felt trapped in the trauma of her past, as reflected in **My past is still with me**, which prevented her from envisioning a future. *Paul D* tried to offer a perspective that, although their pasts were filled with pain, they still deserved to live in the present, with **They want to deny us the present** serving as a reminder of the external forces that limited them. However,

*Sethe* felt, **I can't see a future**, indicating her struggle to release the trauma that had shaped her identity. Overall, the dialogue depicted the struggle to accept the past and to find peace and self-meaning amidst the heavy burden of history.

## **2. The Interrelated Process of Self-Discovery are Portrayed Through Main Character in the Novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison**

### **a) Sethe's Acceptance of The Past**

In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, *Sethe's* acceptance of her past could be explained through Taylor's (2020) theory of self-reconciliation, which stated that healing from trauma was not achieved by forgetting the past but by compassionately integrating it into one's life narrative. *Sethe*, who was haunted by her decision to kill her child to save her from slavery, gradually confronted her guilt and traumatic memories through *Beloved's* presence. This process reflected the steps of identity reconciliation according to Taylor, where *Sethe* no longer rejected her past but began to accept and reinterpret it as part of her selfhood, thus paving the way for healing and self-forgiveness.

#### **Datum 1**

**Paul D** : "We all got a past, Sethe. It's just they want to deny us the present."

**Sethe** : "My past is still with me, and I can't see a future."  
(Page 73)

The dialogue above reflected the theme of *Sethe's* acceptance of the past because it showed how *Sethe*, as a victim of the trauma of slavery, had not yet been able to free herself from the shadow of her past. *Paul D* said, **we all got a past, Sethe. It's just they want to deny us the present**, emphasizing that everyone had a past, but the real challenge was not allowing that past to rob them of their right to live in the present. This dialogue illustrated *Sethe's* inner conflict: on one hand, she wanted to live her life, but on the other hand, she was trapped by guilt and trauma. This reflected the difficult process *Sethe* experienced in accepting and making peace with her past as a step toward personal healing.

### **b) The Relationship Between *Sethe* and *Denver***

The relationship between *Sethe* and *Denver* in *Beloved* reflected a strong yet complex bond between mother and child, shaped by the trauma of the past. *Denver* was emotionally and socially dependent on *Sethe*, while *Sethe* considered *Denver* to be the only reason she continued to survive after losing her other children. However, this bond was also filled with tension due to *Sethe's* past, which haunted

their lives including her act of killing her child to protect her from slavery. Over time, *Denver* began to seek her own identity and step out from under her mother's shadow, marking an important process of growth and separation for both of them.

**Datum 1**

**Denver : "I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me your daughter."**

**Sethe : "I do. Every time I look at you, I do."**

**(Page 50)**

The dialogue above Denver expressed his longing for emotional intimacy and recognition of his role as a son from his mother, and Sethe asserted that she always felt that closeness and she recognized and returned Denver's love as her son. This dialogue emphasized their inner bond and Denver's need for explicit recognition of affection.

**c) Paul D's Awareness of Freedom**

In *Beloved*, *Paul D's* awareness of freedom evolved as he transitioned from life as a slave to a physically free individual, yet still emotionally bound. At first, he believed freedom merely meant being free from slavery. However, after staying at 124 and interacting with *Sethe* and *Beloved*, he began to realize that true freedom involved the ability to feel, love, and choose without fear or guilt inherited from the past. This awareness led him to question his identity and discover that the meaning of freedom was an internal process, not just a physical condition.

**Datum 1**

**Paul D : "Mister, he looked so... free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son of a bitch could walk where he pleased with no chain. Not like me."**

**(Page 72)**

The dialogue above reflected **Paul D's awareness of freedom** because it showed how *Paul D*, as a former slave, internalized a deep sense of entrapment. In his statement, **Mister, he looked so... free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son of a bitch could walk where he pleased with no chain. Not like me**, *Paul D* expressed his admiration and jealousy toward a rooster named Mister, which, for him, symbolized true freedom that even humans like him did not possess. This dialogue showed that although *Paul D* was physically freed from slavery, he still felt bound mentally by the experience of oppression and the loss of his dignity. The realization that an animal could be freer than him demonstrated the depth of the

psychological wounds he suffered, and highlighted *Paul D's* long journey to understand the true meaning of freedom.

**d) The Influence of *Beloved's* Spirit on *Sethe***

*Beloved's* spirit had a significant influence on *Sethe*, as it became the physical embodiment of the traumatic past *Sethe* had long tried to forget. The presence of *Beloved* forced *Sethe* to confront the guilt and pain caused by the murder of her child, which she had once considered the only way to protect her from slavery. Initially, *Beloved* provided *Sethe* with comfort and a chance to atone for her actions, but over time her presence became an emotional burden that drained *Sethe* both physically and mentally. Ultimately, *Beloved's* spirit became a catalyst for *Sethe's* process of awareness and acceptance of the past, pushing her toward self-reconciliation, though through a painful journey.

**Datum 1**

**Sethe : "Beloved, is that you?"**

**(Page 67)**

At this moment, *Sethe* first realized that the young woman who appeared in front of her house was the incarnation of her deceased daughter, *Beloved*. This recognition marked the beginning of *Beloved's* strong influence on *Sethe's* life. *Beloved's* presence forced *Sethe* to confront the trauma from her past that she had been trying to forget. *Sethe's* identification of *Beloved* as her lost daughter showed how deep the guilt and regret she felt were, which then affected every aspect of her life.

**3. Aspect of Reconciliation are Described Through Main Character in the Novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison**

**a) Trauma and Memory of the Past**

Trauma and memory of the past in *Beloved* were depicted as psychological burdens that continuously haunted *Sethe's* life, where the experience of slavery and the tragic act of killing her child created deep emotional wounds. The memory of the past did not only manifest in the form of recollections but also physically embodied through the figure of *Beloved*, who represented unresolved trauma. Toni Morrison showed that traumatic memories were persistent and invasive, and could only be addressed through confrontation, acknowledgment, and acceptance, not through avoidance or denial.

**Datum 1**

**Paul D : "Sethe, what's that all over your back?"**

**Sethe** : "What? The scar? **I have a tree on my back and a haunt in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms.**"

*(Page 15)*

The dialogue above reflected the trauma and memory of the past because it showed how *Sethe*, as a former slave, was trapped in the memories and wounds of her past slavery that continued to haunt her life. *Sethe* explained that on her back was a scar she referred to as a "tree," a visual representation of both physical and emotional wounds that were deep. The phrase **I have a tree on my back and a haunt in my house** indicated that *Sethe* not only carried physical scars but also the spirit of her past that still haunted her home and life. By mentioning **the daughter I am holding in my arms**, *Sethe* tried to express that, despite the ongoing trauma, she was still trying to protect and love her child, showing her inner conflict between the suffering past and her struggle to give her child a better future. This reflected the tension between the traumatic memories that constrained her and the hope for emotional freedom to move forward with her life.

#### **b) Confrontation with the Past**

Confrontation with the past in *Beloved* occurred when *Sethe* had to face the trauma and guilt she had long suppressed, especially through the presence of *Beloved*, who became the physical embodiment of the child she had killed. *Beloved* forced *Sethe* to remember the suffering she had endured during slavery and the tragic decision she had made. These moments became a turning point for *Sethe*, as she could no longer avoid these dark memories but had to confront them directly, marking the first step in her process of healing and self-reconciliation.

#### **Datum 1**

##### **Sethe and Paul D Discussing Beloved's Death**

**Paul D** : "Was it hard? I hope she didn't die hard."

**Sethe** : "**Soft as cream. Being alive was the hard part.**"

*(Page 7)*

The dialogue above reflected the confrontation with the past because it showed how *Sethe*, as a mother who had once lived in slavery, had to face the traumatic actions she had taken in the past. *Sethe* said, **Soft as cream. Being alive was the hard part**, which indicated her belief that allowing her child to live in a world full of violence and oppression was far more cruel than death itself. This dialogue illustrated *Sethe's* inner conflict as she had to take responsibility for her

actions, which were motivated by love but ended in tragedy. As a mother, she tried to express that her child's death was a loving choice in a situation with no options. However, as a former slave, her life experience had shaped a bitter view that life in slavery was an endless torment. This reflected the clash between her maternal instinct to protect and the deep trauma from her past full of cruelty, where humane choices became nearly impossible.

### c) Acknowledgment and Acceptance

Acknowledgment and acceptance were two important stages in the process of healing from trauma, where an individual first acknowledged the existence of past wounds or wrongdoings, then gradually learned to accept the reality of those as part of their life journey. In this context, acknowledgment involved the courage to face and realize painful experiences, while acceptance was the process of embracing them without rejection or self-hatred. Both of these allowed the individual to rebuild a complete identity and open space for growth and inner peace.

#### Datum 1

**Sethe : "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another."  
(Page 95)**

The dialogue above reflected **acknowledgment and acceptance** because it showed how *Sethe*, as a former slave, realized that physical freedom alone was not enough without the acceptance of herself as a free individual. *Sethe* said, **Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another**, which indicated that freeing oneself from slavery was the first step, but acknowledging and accepting oneself as a free person was a much greater struggle. This dialogue reflected *Sethe's* inner conflict in internalizing her new identity; she was legally free, but still bound by feelings of inferiority, guilt, and past psychological wounds. It reflected the contradiction between the external condition of freedom and the internal journey to truly accept and claim her dignity and identity as a free woman.

### Conclusion

There are four types of identity in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, namely: loss and personal background, identity conflict, past trauma, and symbolic influence. The data found are two instances of loss and personal background, six instances of identity conflict, four instances of past trauma, and two instances of symbolic influence. In loss and personal background, the researcher found that the

character experienced difficulties related to their name and background. In identity conflict, the researcher found confusion and guilt that affected the character's self-perception. In past trauma, the researcher found emotional wounds caused by traumatic experiences. Meanwhile, in the symbolic influence, the researchers found external factors that affect identity formation. In conclusion, the most dominant identity conflict is found in this novel, as the characters are greatly affected mentally by a traumatic past and an unclear self-concept.

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