MATURATION BEYOND THE GRAVE: 
A NARRATOLOGY READING TO SUSIE SALMON 
IN ALICE SEBOLD’S THE LOVELY BONES

Rizki Arrida 
E-mail: rizki.arrida@gmail.com 
State University of Malang

Abstract: Susie Salmon, the main character in Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones*, acts as a dead narrator that tells her story from the place she calls ‘heaven’. In this thesis, the researcher questions the maturation process of Susie Salmon, the dead narrator, in the afterlife. Using narratology to analyze the psychological and mental growth through her narration, this research aims to prove the maturation process that Susie undergoes in the afterlife.

Keywords: Afterlife, dead narrator, fabula, maturation, self-actualization

The idea of presenting a story with the criteria of being extraordinary and, at the same time, fitting to the situations and issues of everyday life can be seen in the novel written by Alice Sebold entitled *The Lovely Bones*. This novel is a perfect example of American popular culture that embraces the afterlife and the dead narrator style as the fictional devices. The story itself revolves around Susie Salmon, a teenager (fourteen year old) girl who is raped and murdered by her neighbor. The story then develops more when Susie, who narrates her own story using first person point of view, still maintains her awareness to the affairs surrounding her death and the life of people that are closely related to her—even the person that murdered her, George Harvey. After her death, Susie enters an afterlife, or as she always recalls in the story, her personal heaven, and becomes the observer from that point up to the part where she ends her story.

In correlation with the subject of the research, *The Lovely Bones* represents several aspects of psychological developments in the main character, Susie Salmon. These aspects show how an individual can achieve maturity by enabling himself into a state of self-actualization. As Horney (1950:17) states, real self as the central inner force of every human beings is the deep source of human’s growth. ‘Growth’ here means “the attributes of free, healthy development in accordance with the potentials of one’s generic and individual nature” (Horney, 1950). In psychology, this theory of life that is based on the actualization of human potentialities is called “self-development.”

The problem of the research is “How does the narratology analysis prove the maturation of Susie Salmon, the dead narrator, in the afterlife?” Analyzing the maturation process of a character that is not in a condition of actually being alive, as in the same
definition of breathing and socializing with other human being that is alive, will need
different theoretical approaches with the analysis of characters that do live and socially
capable in physically interacting with another human beings that are alive. That is why, in
order to analyze such narrative text with a dead narrator that holds such important role to
the story, this thesis will demonstrate a narratology reading. By using narratology, this
research aims to prove how *The Lovely Bones* portrays the process of maturity
development through its main character, Susie Salmon.

The idea of dead character narrating the story, or also known as the dead narrator
genre, in novel has become increasingly popular nowadays, especially with the teenagers
and students. On the other hand, analysis towards this particular genre is hardly found.
Hence, this thesis is expected to be a contribution of literature review towards this genre.
Theoretically, the result of this thesis can be used as a study of how narratology reading
can prove character development process that is undergone by the dead character that also
acts as a narrator of the story.

**ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION**

This part is divided into two: the analysis towards the depiction of the concept of
afterlife that Susie experiences, and the classification of the inner events of the narration;
the *hamartia* (the mistake), the *anagnorisis* (recognition), and the *peripeteia* (sudden
reversal).

**Susie Salmon’s Afterlife**

The illustration of Susie Salmon’s afterlife in *The Lovely Bones* is similar yet
totally different with the concept of heaven in Christianity. The way the Christians view
the afterlife is not vividly described in details, unlike other religions. It is not about how
the Christians view the heaven by its physical imagery, because it is certainly something
that cannot be simply imagined by mere human mind. However, there is a contradiction
from what was stated in the quotation about the Christians’ heaven with the way Susie’s
heaven is presented in the story. The most obvious paradox here is the fact that, as Tidy
(2009, 32) states in her paper, there is no single text in Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones*
that indicates the manifestation of God, or far superior being that displays the quality of
deity, not even the appearances of anything that resemble the depiction of angels and
demons. Based on this findings, the researcher concludes that, although there are slight
influences of Christianity in the book, *The Lovely Bones* does not coherently follow its
notion. On the other hand, it is also implied (from the way Susie describes it) that the
heaven’s description in *The Lovely Bones* is very personal. Every person that goes to the afterlife has their own distinctive heaven that automatically follows their own perception (Tidy, 2009: 37). Susie slowly describes her view towards this personalized heaven after several days being in her own personal heaven. In this personal heaven, Susie experienced the social life that contributes to her character growth and social development (Maslow, 1943). As Tidy (2009:45) states: “Allowing Susie to grow in heaven with the wisdom gained in watching real time events after her death, gives Sebold the benefit of narrative effect through character growth.” In *The Lovely Bones*, the concept of relationship between the living and the already-deceased character is somewhat different with the usual concept in other novels or fictional works. Usually the livings only have one-sided relationship with the dead, in a sense that their grieving process that is caused by the loss of the dead character is not affected by how the dead thinks or acts. This living will eventually move on with or without the affection from the dead; the dead does not have any influence at all towards the way the livings grieve. However, *in The Lovely Bones*, it is clearly stated that there is two-way relationship between the livings and the dead. Susie’s version of heaven that has been explained so far definitely does not fit the criteria of heaven in Christianity. In fact, based on the statements and facts from the narration, Susie’s current heaven is more like a place where she has to redeem herself and achieve ‘something’ before she can enters ‘the true heaven.’ This ‘true heaven’ or as Susie calls it wide wide Heaven (notice the usage of capital letter H) is introduced to the reader in the last chapter. This implication becomes a basis of argumentation of how in the ‘small-heaven’ version, Susie can experience the mental development and self-maturation process.

**Susie Salmon’s Maturity Development**

This part is divided into three key elements based on the course of action of Susie Salmon that are narrated in the story from the first chapter to the final chapter. Using Aristotle’s *Poetics* theory in determining three basic elements through aspects of the plot; the *hamartia*, the *Anagnorisis*, and the *Peripeteia*, the analysis aims at classifying and establishing evidences of Susie’s maturity development from the quotation in the book and narratology analysis.

The first key element is *Hamartia*, which means a functional element in the structure of plot which is the representation of the ignorance act and from the protagonist that induces the tragedy in a story. Susie’s acts of ignorance according to her own narration from the very first chapter leads her to the point where she cannot achieve the
inner peace that prevents her from getting into the higher heaven. Chapter one is one of the important chapters to be analyzed because it is the phase where the narration reveals the beginning of Susie’s ignorance act/the mistakes that invokes the occurrence of the tragedy in *The Lovely Bones*. By using internal focalization from Susie, the details are narrated the way Susie thought by the time the occurrence happened. Mimesis is primarily shown in chapter one to stresses some details and reasons of why Susie becomes the victim of rape and murder by George Harvey. The information about herself and the year when she was murder are presented using analeptic technique. This flash back is used as a tool to distinct the past and the present time. As a homodiegetic narrator, Susie shows her knowledge about the social condition of the era where her murder took place. She explicitly states that murdering and raping were not something that normally happens on 1973. Furthermore Susie begins to explain the details of the murderer. This part of narration is explained using analeptic method. Through the narration, the researcher signifies the background element that builds the idea that led Susie to do the first phase of the *hamartia* or the ignorance act. George Harvey was considered harmless by Susie’s parents thus he would not do such a horrible crime to anyone ever. This idea was what makes Susie put her guard down and ignored her doubt later on, as shown in the next part of the narration where George Harvey began to start a conversation with Susie and invite her to enter the hole where she was murdered. Susie also narrates some events that show how careless she was by not noticing the first sign of how strange George Harvey was when he called Susie by her first name. This careless act was also caused by the idea of how George Harvey is a neighbor, thus it is possible that he might have known Susie’s name from her parents. The analepsis is used to show the magnitude of Susie’s regret towards her ignorance that eventually cost her own life. The direct and tagged speech done is presented in to intensifies the feeling of Susie’s regret. Some passages implicitly show the disappointing feeling Susie had in her heaven when she looked back to the memory of her own tragedy. Susie also tells the reader the biggest ‘sin’ that she did the day that tragedy occurred; it was not only the naivety, but also the curiosity of a young immature girl that got her killed. From this point on, it is apparent that Susie was more immature than she was supposed to be according to the actual age she had. The fact that on 1973, as Susie previously stated in her narration, there were rarely raping and murdering happened had created standard age difference towards the teenagers at that period. This means although she was fourteen years old at that time, her attitudes and personality were more like a twelve years old or even less than that. Teenagers were more
childlike and inexperienced especially if they are directly compared to the way the teenagers’ maturity at the present time.

In the beginning of chapter two, the depiction of Susie’s heaven is narrated using mimetic method. Susie gives several details about the heaven using internal focalization which allows her to show the reader that the heaven she entered was truly a manifestation of her desire that she has not been able to achieve yet on earth. In this heaven, Susie meets Holly, who is introduced as her roommate. Susie also meets Franny, the intake counselor, who is described as an acting mother for her and Holly in heaven. Almost everything that Susie desires and wishes would automatically emerge into her heaven, but all of these does not seem to matter after she learns the fact that she cannot get what she desires most above all of that. Susie wants the reader to realize that she and Holly were at the same phase of maturity level at that time; by having the desire of growing up even though they were already died, it shows that both of them still have not reach the Anagnorisis or realization phase. Susie shows how juvenile she was because she would not let herself misses the people that she loves. Ignoring the fact that she indeed misses the people she loves was a condition that Susie created to cope with her fear of not being able to be with those people. Susie cannot accept the fact that she is already dead and her inability to let go of Earth becomes one aspect that separates Susie from the Anagnorisis or realization phase. Susie also explains the trauma that becomes the main root of why Susie cannot move on from Earth and certainly has prevented herself to achieve the realization phase. Fortunately, the meeting with the other girls who were also the victims of George Harvey certainly help Susie to the extent where she finally able to tell the story about her family and the people she cares about. This story leads the researcher to find out the aspects of Peripetia that is achieved by Susie Salmon.

The second key element is Peripeteia, which means a functional element in the structure of plot which shows the reversal of fortune event that is experienced by the protagonist. Throughout chapter three to chapter five, Susie mainly narrates about how each member of her family handled their grief of losing her. However, the important character that is also told in those chapters is Ruth.

It is in the beginning of chapter three where there is a prolepsis shown. Susie introduces the reader to Ruth Connors, the girl who went to the same class at school with her. The mimesis that is shown in this introduction gives the reader a big hint towards the Peripeteia that will happen to Susie later on. By stating that Ruth was the first person that Susie saw right after she was murdered, it is a prolepsis of how Ruth is going to become one of the important factors that helps Susie reaches the turn-round phase as well as the
introduction of Lindsey Salmon’s—Susie’s younger sister—relationship with Samuel Heckler, Lindsey’s boyfriend. This chapter also shows how Susie finally understood the mystery of her mother, Abigail Salmon. The omniscient point of view from the heaven enables Susie to understand the meaning behind those eyes. This is because Susie’s mother has the tendency of not showing her true self when she knows someone is looking at her. The narration also shows how Susie realized the depth of loss that Abigail felt over losing her.

At the end of chapter five, Susie’s internal focalization indicates a prolepsis of the love making that happens in the next chapter between Lindsey and Samuel. Also, the kissing that almost makes Susie alive again is an excellent foreground about the love making that she will also experience through Ruth’s body at the phase of turn-round (peripeteia). This is why Ruth’s introduction in the previous part is very crucial.

Chapter six, where Susie narrates her meeting with Ruth, is the initial point where Susie starts to feel that she and Ruth are alike in strange ways that she cannot possibly explain. This chapter also shows a special attachment between Susie, Ray, and Ruth; the kind of attachment that is significantly related with the event that will occur later on; the event where Susie experiences her Peripeteia or reversal of fortune. That is why Susie also narrates the bond or friendship that grows over the death of Susie between Ray and Ruth.

In the beginning of chapter ten, Susie begins to introduce Samuel more by using a mimetical narration. According to Susie here, Lindsey and Samuel’s bond has stepped up into something way more serious than just a simple adolescence relationship. Susie implies that this is the kind of feeling that she would never experience herself had not she been dead already and able to omnisciently know the feeling of the people she loves. This part clearly shows the reader how Susie initially learns the fact that lust can also be pure, beautiful and also unwanted at the same time; the usage of ‘weeds’ as a metaphor implies that. At the end of chapter ten, she even implicitly shows her jealousy towards Lindsey by directly comparing their first sex experience at exactly the same age. Susie shows the reader how she learns that sex can be affectionate and very gentle instead of violent and hurtful that she uses ‘horror and blood’ as a metaphor. This is the unexpected point where Susie starts to get close the phase where she experiences the realization or the Anagnorisis.

In the beginning of chapter twenty-one, Susie tries to give hints about an unbelievable supernatural occurrence that will happen later on in the same chapter. She uses the analeptic method to bring back the memory where she experienced her first kiss
with Ray Singh, the boy who she has always loved. Susie’s affection towards Ruth also creates a very strong attachment between them both. As it has been stated before, the bond between Susie and Ruth has been growing very strong since the moment Susie felt the affection the first time in school where she was still alive. This bond is what prepares us for the supernatural occurrence and perhaps the unbelievable aspects of life and death that is portrayed in *The Lovely Bones*; Susie inhabits Ruth’s body, while Ruth is leaving the earth by the time this happens.

Chapter twenty-two is where Susie finally achieves the *peripeteia* or the reversal of fortune. Mimesis is shown to construct chronological order and clear details of Susie’s greatest desire. After all those years of watching the Earth from her personal heaven, Susie finally got her ‘redemption’. Susie is finally able to do the love-making with the only boy she loves, Ray Singh. Through Ruth’s body, she immensely develops her sexuality process. As she and Ray make love, Susie finally able to heal the scar that is caused by George Harvey. Susie implies this reversal of fortune as something that relieves the horror that is left by George Harvey, the horror of leaving the earth violently and forcefully. This horror is replaced with the feeling of being loved and accompanied by the people she cares about. This is also the part where Susie finally capitalizes the first letter of both Earth and Heaven in her part of narration.

The last part of the three key elements of the plot in *The Lovely Bones* is The *anagnorisis*, or realization. This part mainly shows the outcome of the *peripeteia* (reversal of fortune) that occurs to Susie Salmon. Susie can finally accept the fact that she has to let go of her family and the people she loves. Throughout the story, Susie explains how each of the characters feels trapped in their own world, e.g., Susie is trapped in her heaven, Lindsey feels trapped with her status of being Susie’s sister (the girl who is murdered), Jack Salmon who feels trapped by the guilt of losing his daughter, and Abigail that feels trapped with her role as a mother. The act of storytelling helps Susie relieves her pain. The more she tells story about her family, the less pain she feels. In chapter seventeen, it is tacitly shown how the connection between members of the family grows stronger after Susie’s death. This part occurs at the moment after Jack’s responsible feeling for avenging Susie’s death is resulting in getting himself hurt. There is mutual feeling of responsibility between that (Jack’s act of avenging Susie’s death) and the way Lindsey and Buckley feel the responsibility of taking care their father after he got himself hurt. This mutual feeling of responsibility is starting to create stronger bond between the parent (Jack) and the children (Lindsey and Buckley). This is also what happens in
chapter nineteen where Abigail comes to the hospital to visit Jack. The bond between husband and wife is finally healed, long after Susie’s death.

Finally, in chapter twenty-one, Susie uses diegesis in her narration to relate the way her family feels. After eight years of Susie’s death, the family finally admits the fact that Susie has gone and not coming back. From the family point of view, represented by Jack Salmon’s speech, it is shown that this is the moment of truth where they finally get the ‘redemption.’ All of the events that occurred after Susie’s death create a stronger connection between the members of the family. From this passage, it is also implicitly shown how close Susie is to the *anagnorisis*.

It is in chapter twenty-three that Susie finally reveals the moment of her realization from her narration. Susie shows her realization of the connections that has been made between the people she loves. She uses ‘bones’ as a metaphor of this connection. Without her death, this connection would not exist and Susie is grateful for the fact that she is also the one that creates this bones. By using this narration, she also explains the impact of her death towards the world and makes a comparison of the world with and without her in it.

Finally, *The Lovely Bones* is closed with an epilogue entitled *Bones*. She explains in a mimetical way the heaven that she is currently living into. In this passage, Susie implies that she is no longer desire for life, and that she has been able to move on for her own death, leaving the human world as it is. In the last part of her narration, she even clarifies something that is really important to answer the statement of problems of this research; Susie shows her awareness to the imperfections that she does not troubled anymore by his or her own growth process.

**Self-Actualization and Maturity**

there is no such thing as perfect standard of measuring how mature a person is. However, there are some characteristics that can be used to identify maturity and these characteristics certainly will give better understanding of how an individual can be called as a mature person or not. One of the most noteworthy approaches to identify characteristics of a mature person was introduced by Abraham Harold Maslow through his self-actualization theory. According to his theory, self-actualized person is defined as a person who is able to make full use of his or her talents, capacities, potentialities as an individual. (Maslow, 1943). Thus, in order to support the hypothesis of this research, the characteristics of self-actualized person will be used as the instruments to measure Susie Salmon’s maturity:
1. Self-actualized person tends to be more realistically oriented. As shown in the epilogue (page 321), Susie shows her realistic perception towards herself, her family, and her new heaven. She is unthreatened anymore by the unknown possibility that she may face in the future. She is able to accept the truth and more logical towards her condition.

2. Self-actualized person is not selfish and he or she focuses on problems outside himself or herself. Susie’s act of selflessness is shown by letting go the affairs that happen in the world of the livings as shown in chapter twenty-three.

3. Self-actualized person is detached and values privacy or solitude. In the epilogue, Susie expresses this feeling by showing the acceptance to the fact that Grandma Lynn has not met her yet even though she has been died. She does not bother or even mind at all by the absence of Grandma Lynn in her heaven. (page 319).

4. Self-actualized person tends to have freshness of appreciation. This characteristic is shown in epilogue (page 321) where Susie expresses her appreciation that is based on simple values towards the heaven where she lives in. She does not even have that much concern anymore with the event of death that strikes George Harvey, the man who murdered her.

5. Self-actualized person achieves the peak experiences, or moments of intense joy, wonder, awe and ecstasy. (Maslow, 1943). Susie conveys this moment of peak experiences through the narration of the wide wide Heaven and how she enjoys it in the epilogue (page 321).

6. Self-actualized person becomes more aware to imperfections that he or she does not troubled anymore by his or her own growth process. Susie clearly shows this characteristic as she closes the story. (epilogue, page 324).

After conducting the analysis and discussion about the maturation process of Susie Salmon and giving the characteristics of self-actualized person as the instrument to support the analysis, this research proves that narratology reading can be used to analyze the maturation process of Susie Salmon, the dead narrator, in the afterlife.

**CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

**Conclusions**

Narration from the point of view of the dead character allows Susie to know everything about what is happening on Earth. The difference between Susie’s narration and the narration of the usual third person omniscient narrator is that Susie plays a key role in the plot; her murder is the main conflict of the novel, and the way the living
characters come to terms with her loss is the primary action of the novel. With a third person omniscient voice, the narrator does not play a role in the lives of the other characters. However, Susie is a first person omniscient narrator with her own plot progressing in heaven. She, like her living counterparts, also goes through character growth and development in the course of the novel. In order to analyze the maturation process of Susie Salmon, the researcher uses three key elements of plot in to proof Susie’s maturity development.

The first key element is the mistakes that Susie did in the past. Because Susie was not nearly as mature as her age, as implied by her great curiosity and incompetence of taking a good decision, she could not get away from George Harvey’s trap that eventually led her to be a victim of rape and murder. This fact is revealed from the way Susie narrates the mimetical flashback of the event in chapter one; it is full of regrets and excuses. In her heaven, Susie could not prevent herself from watching the life of those people she left on Earth. This indicates Susie’s inability of accepting the fact that she was already dead. She also desperately hoped that she would be able to affect the lives of people that she left on Earth. Furthermore, it is also shown that Susie’s trauma becomes the primary reason of why she cannot move on from Earth and certainly has prevented herself to achieve the realization phase. All of these reasons are the hammartia or the mistakes that Susie did.

The second key element is the reversal of fortune that is experienced by Susie. There are three important factors that become the background cause of Susie’s reversal of fortune:

1. Susie’s bond with Ruth Connors, the girl whose body is inhabited by Susie later on.
2. The relationship between Lindsey and Samuel in which shows Susie how a sexual intercourse can be affectionate and very gentle instead of violent and hurtful.
3. Ray Singh, the boy who kisses Susie and later on makes love with Ruth’s body that is inhabited by Susie.

All of these factors give the most significant contribution towards the reversal of fortune (the peripeteia) of Susie Salmon.

Finally, the third key element is the realization. Susie shows her realization by being able to “survive” her grief at being taken out of the human world and missing her family after she made love with Ray. So basically, the realization is the outcome of the reversal of fortune. Susie also realizes the connections that have been made between the people she loves after her death. She uses ‘bones’ as a metaphor of these connections. By using Maslow’s self-actualization theory as the instrument to support the hypothesis, it is
finally concluded that Susie Salmon reaches the state of self-actualization and therefore can be identified as a mature person.

**Suggestions**

The study of literature is not like the study of math or science, or even history. While those disciplines are based largely upon fact, the study of literature is based upon interpretation and analysis. There are no definite answers in literature, outside of the factual information about an author’s life and the basic information about setting and characterization in a piece of literature. The rest is a highly subjective reading of what an author has written; each person brings a different set of values and a different background to the reading. As a result, no two people see the piece of literature in exactly the same light, and few critics agree on everything about a book or an author.

The topic of this study is the maturation process of Susie Salmon in her afterlife. This research is based on the blending narratology theories, specifically Aristotle’s Poetics reading. The suggestion of this study can be followed up to people who are interested in the study of narratology and its application. There are two suggestions of this study.

For students of literature, this research can be used to get more knowledge about the methodology of applied narratology reading towards literary works. Furthermore, this study can also be used to understand Aristotle’s poetics reading in contemporary work. Not to mention that it is also helpful to determine the core themes and significance of the story.

For future researchers, the study of narratology is still open to further studies, especially about the usage of Aristotle’s poetics reading towards other literary works. The result of this study is expected to help other researchers who wish to comprehend more about literary critics, specifically narratology, that is used as tool of analysis towards novels.

**REFERENCES**


