



**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MEMORY IN SOLVING  
INDIVIDUAL'S IDENTITY CRISIS DEPICTED IN JAMES  
DASHNER'S *THE MAZE RUNNER***

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**Abstract**

Identity crisis is a psychological condition that happened to an individual because of the confusion of roles someone experienced in the society. This study was conducted to analyze the significance of memory in solving individual's identity crisis depicted in James Dashner's *The Maze Runner*. The purposes of this study are to describe how identity crisis depicted in the novel and to explain what factors cause an identity crisis. This study was done using a descriptive qualitative method and using Erikson's psychosocial theory to explore the identity crisis of the main character in the form of words. The object of the study was the novel *The Maze Runner* and this study focused on Thomas as the main character. List of an observational sheet was used as the research instrument and the data was taken through library research. The analysis was conducted by interpreting Thomas' utterances and actions using Erikson' stages of development's theory to describe Thomas' identity crisis. The study results showed that the identity crisis Thomas' experienced was the results of the changing environmental condition and Thomas' missing memories that made him unable to make new sets of values needed to form an identity. In order to solve his identity crisis, Thomas had to remember old memories he had forgotten in order to create new sets of values.

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## INTRODUCTION

Children upon entering their adolescence stage will take activities that challenge them to explore. They will find out which activities they are like or dislike and they will be able to find what they want to do. Gradually, the children who turn into adolescents will undergo a series of observational process of mutual judgment between them and their environment. According to Erikson (1968: 24), the way the adolescents perceive themselves through mutual judgment with the environment is called identity formation.

Identity is an essential part of people's lives that make them different and unique from the others. It is during the adolescence that people's identity is formed because adolescents will develop physical growth, mental maturation, and social experience. If the process of identity formation goes smoothly, children will find their identity (Erikson, 1968: 93). When children should pass their adolescence stage and their identity is not found yet, according to Erikson (1968: 98), it means they are experiencing an identity crisis. If their identity is not found yet, it means they are experiencing an identity crisis. The crisis in identity crisis itself does not mean in sense of threat of catastrophe but tend to mean more into a turning point, a crucial period of the children increasing vulnerability and heightened potential.

Furthermore, the adolescence is the transition period from childhood to adulthood. It means that they successfully passed through childhood stage. In order to go into adulthood phase, they have to pass through adolescence first. With their mental maturation increasing, adolescents will learn the complexity of their roles in society. As a result, it grows confusion in the children's feeling and it can lead them to have an identity crisis (Erikson 1968: 95).

Frequently, adolescents suffer from identity crisis triggers social problems either with their family or their environment. Punk kids could be included as one of them. Punk kids express themselves in eccentric ways. They dye their hair, pierce their ears or lips, and wear

clothes with tears in several spots. Despite their scary looking appearance could definitely judge their personality, some punk kids could behave nicely with other people and being responsible adolescents, while the others are not. For the former type of punk kids are the kind who would still be considered as good teenagers as long as they still uphold the moral values of the society. The later type, on the other hand, is the kind of teenagers that cause the uneasiness in society. They behave badly like skipping classes, smoking carelessly wherever they want, and causing a ruckus by fighting other kids, and many others. They let their ever-changing emotional state controls their actions instead of thinking of the consequences of doing that.

It goes without saying that in the society the punk kids behavior is frowned upon. The adults in their environment are needed to step in and guide them back into the right path into becoming well-mannered and responsible adults. The insolent behavior of the punk kids will continue until they have grown up unless they finally resolve their crisis and form a new identity. Identity crisis emerges from the internal turmoil of the adolescents or comes from the external factor of themselves like their family and home situation (Rausch, 2012, p.4).

For example, in the Catholic Church in 1969 occurred a problem in regards to the faith of adolescents in the church. Many of them leaving the college as it seemed their college influenced them to let go their childhood beliefs for free-living experiences. As adolescence was the stage that the children finding out the identity that also made them attempted at breaking away from home in the process. They often found idols outside their family as well. Moreover, they would express various conflicting desires such as a desire to love and hate; or desire to give and take, and even the desire to abandon their childhood beliefs to embrace their freedom without the restriction from their family or the laws of the church. As time went by, the knowledge absorbed by adolescents was climbing high in order to satisfy their curiosity. A question such as "what is the purpose of they live started to form. They would

begin asking questions to their parents or relative as the family is the first place that forms their identities (Metz, 1969, p.30-31).

Unfortunately, most of Catholic Church taught the children by saying '*you should commit yourself, the church was right, therefore, you should accept the true church,*' even to the point of forcing their beliefs by saying '*if you dare to defy the Lord, you shall be excommunicated.*' Here was when their parents and any member of the church needed to be careful in giving the answers related to religion. During this stage where doubt in choosing their beliefs was in question, members of the church should not dismiss their doubt with answers like '*No, No! That was wrong! That was not what God wants,*' but tell them what church really was that was a searching community in which there was freedom to grow. The church allowing the adolescents to ask a question rather than simply give them answers they did not ask was advantageous to the growth of the adolescents' mature faith (Metz, 1969, p.64).

Based on examples above, identity crisis has become a popular and intriguing topic to discuss. Not only this phenomenon of identity crisis happens for real, the importance of solving the identity crisis has expanded its wings into the literary works. In this study, the writer would like to analyze identity crisis depicted in *The Maze Runner* novel by using psychosocial approach by Erik Erikson (1968) theory of development. In order to find the causes of identity through their adolescence stage, the writer needs to overlook the earlier developmental stage of the main character. By employing the stages of development proposed by Erikson, the writer attempts to make a new interpretation in regards to the related topic.

## METHODS

The qualitative research method was used to reveal "The Significance of Memory in Solving Individual's Identity Crisis Depicted in James Dashner's *The Maze Runner*" by explaining and describing the data. The data that has been collected by reading, identifying,

classifying, selecting, and interpreting then proceeded to be analyzed. Then, the data were elaborated by using psychosocial point of view. In this step, the data were analyzed to find the representation of identity crisis depicted in the story. In analyzing the data, the writer used some citations from the selected data. The citations were taken from the novel and had been classified and selected before. Then, with the supporting data taken from some reference books, those data collections were analyzed. After that, the data related to the significance of memories was presented in the findings and discussion section while the conclusions were presented in the last chapter, in order to solve the research problem of this study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section consists of the findings and discussion about identity crisis depicted in the novel and the factors caused the identity crisis in *The Maze Runner*.

### Identity Crisis Depicted in *The Maze Runner* Novel

In this novel, the identity crisis experienced by the main character named Thomas. Thomas found himself woke up in the place he knew nothing about. There, he met other boys around his age who welcomed him into the strange place called Glade. The boys were called Gladers. The Glade was vast courtyard several times the size of a football field, surrounded by four enormous walls made of gray stone and covered in spots with thick ivy plant. The Glade divided into four parts. There were garden, Bloodhouse, homestead, and deadheads, that was the forest area of Glade with graveyards located in the back. Every month, the Gladers would welcome new member that was sent into the Glade and Thomas was the latest boy sent to the Glade. The boys of the Glade had their own duties to be done which decided after they did various trial jobs that suited them best. In the Glade, the jobs divided into three categories. The first one was working in the garden to grow crops. The second one was working in the Bloodhouse to

raise and slaughter animals. The third one was Runner whose job was exploring the Maze that surrounded them to try find exit for them get out of there.

Thomas was five foot nine tall brown haired teenage boy, which considered tall for boy in his adolescence period. Chuck was one of the Glader who was assigned as Thomas' companion for the day. Chuck assumed that Thomas was sixteen-year-old adolescent as stated in the following quotation:

The boy scanned him up and down. "I'd say you're sixteen. And in case you werewondering, five foot nine ... brown hair. Oh, and ugly as fried liver on a stick." Hesnorted a laugh. (Dashner, 2009, p.15).

From the quotation above, it could be inferred that Thomas was about sixteen years old as Chuck exploring him with his eyes. Thomas was considered to be tall and thin with brown hair. Based on Chuck's description about Thomas' age, he belonged to the adolescence stage proposed by Erikson who stated that adolescence stage began when someone was in the age of twelve to eighteen years old.

Now that Thomas' physical appearance was described, the writer would like to elaborate more about his personality. Thomas was curious, observant, and brave adolescent. All of Thomas' traits above made him became a special character. Thomas' curiosity made him became a person that would not stop finding answers despite being told to give it time until he got used to his surrounding. But, combined with his observational traits made him realized he had to hold himself back from making enemies just because he could not keep his curiosity in check. Those traits Thomas possessed also that made him different from other Gladers. He was too engrossed in satisfying his curiosity while the other Gladers did not think too hard about the questions they barely knew the answers. While in truth was they actually as desperate as Thomas was to find the exit but they did not show it. Thomas' quest in finding answers to his

questions would eventually lead to him to create a new bond with other Gladers to survive the Maze together.

Thomas as the main character of *The Maze Runner* who was still in his adolescent stage was experiencing an identity crisis. Thomas' identity crisis could be traced since the beginning of the novel. Thomas who at the beginning of the story woke up confused and disoriented inside of moving box surrounded by darkness, spent the time inside of the box trying to figure out who he was. His' struggle could be seen in the quotation:

*My name is Thomas*, he thought. That ... that was the only thing he could remember about his life. He didn't understand how this could be possible. His mind functioned without flaw, trying to calculate his surroundings and predicament. Knowledge flooded his thoughts, facts, and images, memories and details of the world and how it works. He pictured snow on trees, running down a leaf-strewn road, eating a hamburger, the moon casting a pale glow on a grassy meadow, swimming in a lake, a busy city square with hundreds of people bustling about their business (Dashner, 2009, p.1).

Thomas here was feeling conflicted. Thomas knew who he was; he was Thomas. He remembered his name, knowing the general knowledge of the world works that indicated that his brain functioned just fine without any problems. However, what Thomas did not know about himself was, what he was. He could not remember anything important about himself. Thomas began to feel confused about his roles for the first time. The sudden images of him eating hamburger or swimming in a lake did not exactly help him figure out what Thomas was. His confusion about his own role could also be seen further in the following quotation:

And yet he didn't know where he came from, or how he'd gotten inside the dark lift, or who his parents were. He didn't

even know his last name. Images of people flashed across his mind, but there was no recognition, their faces replaced with haunted smears of color. He couldn't think of one person he knew or recall a single conversation (Dashner, 2009, p.2).

Thomas swarmed up by a confusion of the lack of general description of himself. His mind ran wild tried to find a single memory that indicated his identity. That could solve his role confusion. Yet, he still could not remember aside from his name and a glimpse of random images of memories in his mind. It was as if his mind was big canvas filled with patches of a random pattern as the representation of the strangers plastered in his mind. Dark haunting colors covered the faces of people he did not recognize. The colors of the paint as the form of other information filled his brain were splashed on to the canvas carelessly. Disabling him from focusing on one thing as every thoughts and information messed up together. Thomas tried hard to retrieve the knowledge or information of someone familiar or even past conversation to fill in the blank holes to no avail, which made him feel depressed even more.

In addition to feeling hopelessly unable to understand himself, Thomas got even more confused when the strangers surrounded him spoke an unfamiliar language. Thomas' ears managed to hear some words that he did know about even though some of the words escaped his understanding. Thomas' confusion could be seen in the following quotation:

Thomas once again felt a pressing ache of confusion—hearing so many words and phrases that didn't make sense. *Shank. Shuck. Keeper. Slopper.* They popped out of the boys' mouths so naturally, it seemed odd for him not to understand. It was as if his memory loss had stolen a chunk of his language—it was disorienting (Dashner, 2009, p.6).

The words said by the Gladers addressing him made his head filled with thorns of turmoil

that resided in an unspeakable level beyond his knowledge. The utterances were easily said by those boys but fell on deaf his ears as Thomas still could not grasp the meaning of those words. His disability that failed to register unfamiliar language made him wonder that there was a possibility that something was missing from his mind. Overwhelmed with different emotions, Thomas felt hopeless and felt the need to get away from the strangers which could be seen from the quotation:

Different emotions battled for dominance in his mind and heart. Confusion. Curiosity. Panic. Fear. But laced through it all was the dark feeling of utter hopelessness, like the world had ended for him, had been wiped from his memory and replaced with something awful. He wanted to run and hide from these people (Dashner, 2009, p.6).

Thomas felt like his mind was a jumbled mess of different emotions fighting back to take a control. Confusion, curiosity, panic, fear, were piling up together. Amongst all of those emotions, it was hopelessness he felt stronger than the rest. Thomas truly believed that his world was ending. He felt hopeless at failing to figure out who he was or what his role in the past. The hopelessness he felt had seeped through his mind, left nothing but a terrible feeling in his mind. The terrible feeling of hopelessness that enclosed him in made Thomas wanted to run away.

Thomas was so overwhelmed by the confusion of roles, he did not know what to do. Things happened to him in a short time, Thomas barely had the time to catch a break. He needed to find the answer to his current whereabouts and the reason he was put inside the Glade with other boys around his age as well. Thomas' state of confusion of his own roles in the society—or in his case was inside the Glade—disrupt the formation of his identity in structural aspect. Thomas would need to reconstruct his identity formation whether he

liked it or not in order to survive in the foreign place called the Glade he resided in.

As an adolescent who experienced an identity crisis, what Thomas lack was fidelity. Fidelity was set of values to consist of ideology and truth and affirmation of companionship. Living in a new place surrounded by boys who talked strange language shook Thomas to the core. He was at disadvantage upon finding out that he had no recollection as to why he was sent to the Glade. Thomas was experiencing the confusion of roles ever since. He tried to find new sets beliefs of his own making. Thomas being a curious adolescent himself, tried to find the truth by asking around the Gladers. He desperately needed to know the pieces that fitted his disorganized memories. From the way he was behaving, Thomas unable to commit himself fully to the Glade until he learned about who he was in the past and truth of what really happened.

### **The Causing Factors of the Identity Crisis Happened in the Novel**

In this section, the writer would like to describe more about the factors that caused the identity crisis happened to the main character in this subchapter. In this novel, there were two factors that caused the identity crisis. The first one was the environmental condition and the second one was memory lost.

#### **1. Environmental Condition**

Thomas as the main character of this novel who experienced an identity crisis did not know what truly happened to the world outside of the Glade and the Maze. In addition, to overcome his identity crisis because he could not remember his past life, Thomas had to find a way out of the Maze to discover the truth. Thomas was miserable because of not knowing the truth. Upon escaping the Maze but not without some sacrifices being made, Thomas and the remaining survivors that went along with him arrived in a huge underground chamber.

Thomas finally knew the truth from one of the people that took them away. She told the Gladers that all began from the occurrence of massive catastrophe called sun flare, the heat

from the sun burned the satellites and wrecked half of the human population. Human race was on the verge of extinction because of the sun flare. More explanation about the sun flare could be seen in the following quotation:

She paused, took a breath. "As the ecosystem fell apart, it became impossible to control the sickness—even to keep it in South America. The jungles were gone, but the insects weren't. People call it the Flare now. It's a horrible, horrible thing. Only the richest can be treated, no one can be cured. Unless the rumors from the Andes are true." (Dashner, 2009, p.366).

The event in the quotation above happened when the Gladers including Thomas were taken away by the group of people who attacked the creators' hideout by bus. The quotation above explained how bad the condition in the world outside of the Maze Thomas and the Gladers had been living for years before they were sent to the Glade. From the phrase "As the ecosystem fell apart," it could be assumed that the scorching heat destroyed the ecosystem because of the draught it brought, which made the chance getting water from the ground was decreasing. As if that was not enough, the phrase "The jungles were gone," showed that the heat from the sun made the jungles slowly died away. Cutting off the necessary fresh air and oxygen for the human and animals. In addition to that, the sun flare also created sickness that affected the brain. The sickness that attacked the brain would turn the infected people into zombie-like human being, as they gradually lost their sanity. Moreover, from the phrase "Only the richest can be treated," showed that there were a lot of people who were infected because they could not be cured. Thus, increasing the number of death tolls rapidly.

Because of the sun flare, the world was dying, the people were eliminated by sickness, Thomas and the Gladers lived a miserable lives. Another information Thomas got from the woman was that the Gladers were few of the

millions of orphaned kids that were being tested. Before they were chosen, the creators who were part of WICKED (World In Catastrophe: Killzone Experiment Department) organization tested thousands of orphans. The remaining Gladers were chosen for the big ultimate test. She said that everything the Gladers did in the Glade was calculated and observed thoroughly. The creators did that to study their reactions, their brain waves, and their thoughts. All of those attempts were done to find those capable of helping them to find a cure to beat the Flare.

## 2. Missing Memories

The identity crisis experienced by Thomas as the main character heavily influenced by the lack of memories he possessed. His missing memory condition took great contribution to his identity crisis. As mentioned in the previous subchapter, Thomas could still remember things, although not all. Thomas still lost some memories that fitted the gaping hole of his own identity. Thomas confused because he still remembered some random memories, but not the memories of past events that defined his personal identity that was still missing. Thus, Thomas also began to recollect the missing memories regarding his past self to overcome his identity crisis.

Forgetting is something common that could happen to everyone. Forgetting happens because of interference that occurred inside someone's memory system. Interference happens when some information blocked the recalling process of other information. In Thomas' case, the interference that disrupted the recalling of past memories was happening because of the recent event he experienced became new information that blocked the old memories stored in his memory system.

In the beginning, Thomas woke up in cold Box surrounded by darkness with only one memory clinging to his mind that was his own name. Thomas was overwhelmed by the new information he got as soon as he woke up in the Box. It made him panicked that led to his inability to recall past memories that happened before he woke up in the Box. It could be assumed that the state of confusion that Thomas

experienced was the interference itself. The interference that made him unable to perform the recalling of past memories buried inside of his mind. The interference that Thomas experienced was the retroactive interference. Retroactive interference that happened when new information disrupted the retrieval of older information. Thomas who was struck by sudden new information about his unknown whereabouts unconsciously focused his mind on the current situation instead of trying to recall his past memories.

Thomas was depressed because he felt the urge to remember his past more than before. This feeling emerged stronger when he together with the Gladers tried hard to solve the Maze codes that led them to opening the exit door. The snippets of memories that began to surface one after another did not really help him find the necessary information to escape the Maze. Thomas needed to remember who he was in the past since he felt like he was too familiar with the Glade's atmosphere more than anyone. Thomas began to make a new secret plan that could help him remember his old memories. His plan could be seen in the following quotation:

As bad as it was, he had a plan. They needed more clues about the code. They needed *memories*. So he was going to get stung by a Griever. Go through the Changing. On purpose (Dashner, 2009, p.291).

The quotation above happened in the event when Thomas and the Gladers were trying to solve the Maze code located in the maps the Runners had been making to find the exit. The mapping the Runners done was actually just like it was called, mapping. They mapped every wall of the Maze that moved and changed pattern every day. The Runners were trying to find a different pattern that may lead them into the exit. Thomas decided to take a drastic action. Thomas was going to do The Changing. He was going to let himself being stung by the Grievers in order to find more clues through the memories of his past self.

The Changing was the process of bringing back snippets of past memories before they lived in the Glade. To go through the Changing, the Glader had to be stung by Grievors with its nasty and horrible needles. It was called the Changing because every time Glader was stung and he remembered his past memories, he would turn into psycho afterward. Possibly unable to handle the truth that laid in his past memories. Every person who was stung by the Grievors had to be injected with serum provided from the creators to survive. The serum was sent along with necessary supply for the Gladers through the Box every once in a while. The same Box where Thomas was sent to the Glade with at the beginning.

Thomas plan worked as he got himself stung by the Griever when he was trying to save one Glader and put himself in harm's way. He was stung and finally in the process of the Changing. His Changing experience could be seen in the following quotation:

Thomas had no concept of time as he went through the Changing. It started much like his first memory of the Box—dark and cold. But this time he had no sensation of anything touching his feet or body. He floated in emptiness, stared into a void of black. He saw nothing, heard nothing, smelled nothing. It was as if someone had stolen his five senses, leaving him in a vacuum (Dashner, 2009, p.297).

The quotation happened not long after Thomas was stung by the Grievors and the rest of the Gladers shouting his name in worry. During the Changing process, Thomas felt like he entered a new realm where time did not exist. He felt the same emptiness surrounded by the darkness just like the first time he found himself in the Box. The coldness began to envelop him following the darkness. Thomas could not feel his body. He was numb physically and mentally. Thomas felt like he was floating in nothingness with the only void of black as his companion. He truly felt nothing at all. When Thomas woke up, he finally remembered his past self.

It could be assumed that what Thomas experiencing during the Changing was flashbulb memories that resurfaced from his memory system. Flashbulb memories tended to happen when someone recollecting extremely significant personal or historical events from his old memories. Flashbulb memories only happened when someone was experiencing great emotions such as panic and fear. When Thomas was surrounded by the Grievors, Thomas felt an unspeakable fear that he was going to be taken away. Thomas only planned to get himself stung, not taken away and died in the hands of the Grievors. It was possible that during his panicky moments, Thomas finally remembering memories stored away in his memory system just like he was hoping for.

Upon managing to retrieve old memories, Thomas finally knew the answer to why the Glade and Maze felt so familiar to him. Thomas was one of the creators who helped build the Maze. It would make sense that Thomas knew things he should not know for someone who did not have memories about his past self. Thomas knew things that other Gladers did not such as Thomas realized that the sun that was shining around the Glade was fake sun or how Thomas felt at peace living in the Glade despite the horror that awaited him there. Thomas was there, helping those people he loathed so much create this horrible place.

To summarize, Thomas' experience with identity crisis caused by two factors. They were environmental condition and missing memories. The missing memories affected Thomas crisis of identity as he was unable to determine who he was. The lack of memories Thomas possessed made him confused about his own identity because he did not know his ideology and truth, what group he belonged, or who was he supposed to believe in. These three aspects Thomas lacked were called fidelity. Fidelity was sets of values that should be possessed by an individual to form their identity. Since missing memories was becoming the factor why he experienced an identity crisis in the first place, Thomas needed to recollect the past memories he had forgotten in order to discover new sets of

values as the foundation of his identity formation to solve his identity crisis. By remembering old memories, Thomas would be able to create his own ideology based on the truth that was revealed through the answers he looked for the questions such as who was he and what was his purpose right now to solve his identity crisis as part of his fidelity.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the writer concluded that identity crisis heavily relies on the formation of identity which centered around someone's ego. Fidelity or sets of values are needed for building the formation of identity. Fidelity consists of ideology and truth and affirmation of companionship. Thomas who lacks fidelity in forming his identity gradually gains values one by one from the truth he finds to make up the ideology he believes in and which group he will lay his loyalty on.

In addition to the environmental condition, identity crisis could also be caused by missing memories. Thomas could not remember who he was, who he could trust, or his belief was. The lack of memories Thomas possessed led him into experiencing identity crisis because he was confused about his own roles in the society.

Two suggestions are drawn from this study. First, the writer finds that the portrayal of an identity crisis in Dashner's novel *The Maze Runner* quite realistic in a unique way. The identity crisis contained inside make the readers realize that the identity crisis is important to discuss openly and should not be ignored because it is influenced by other factors, such as environmental conditions or losing memories. Second, the study expected to raise the awareness for adults to pay more attention to the adolescents. As adolescence stage is an important stage of life that can determine what kind of adults the adolescents become when they finally left for adulthood stage, it is important for adults to give them proper guidance when they are on their way forming an identity.

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