



\*Corresponding author:

**Selwan Abdur-Ridha Dhemed**

**Asst. Prof. Aseel Kadhim**

**Alrikabi, Ph. D.**

University: Wasit University

University of Babylon

College: College of Education  
for Human Sciences

Email:

[selwanad901@uowasit.edu.iq](mailto:selwanad901@uowasit.edu.iq)

[hum.aseel.kadhim@uobabylon.edu.iq](mailto:hum.aseel.kadhim@uobabylon.edu.iq)

[du.iq](mailto:du.iq)

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**A Portrayal of Mental Disability in Nora**

**Shalaway Carpenter's Novel**

**The Edge of Anything**

**A B S T R U C T**

The present study deals with the suffering of Lennon a mentally disabled teenager in Nora Shalaway Carpenter's novel The Edge of Anything according to the psychoanalytic theory and critical disability theory. It attempts to explore how the author's background and experience are reflected through the protagonist, how some social circumstances influenced Lennon, the psychological consequence reactions she shows towards these influences, and which issue affects her most, the outer social impacts or the inner psychological ones. The study proves that mental illness does not mean insanity or lacking logical thinking. It also asserts the importance of friendship and family members besides the psychotherapy for the protagonist to overcome her disability.

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**تصوير الإعاقة النفسية في رواية حافة كل شيء لنورا شالوي كاربنتر**

سلوان عبد الرضا ضمد/ جامعة واسط / كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية  
ا. م. د. اسيل كاظم الركابي/ جامعة بابل / كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية  
**الخلاصة:**

تتناول الدراسة الحالية معاناة لينون المراهقة ذات الإعاقة النفسية في رواية نورا شالوي كاربنتر حافة كل شيء باستخدام نظريتي التحليل النفسي و نظرية الإعاقة النقدية. تحاول الدراسة الكشف عن كيفية تأثير خلفية وتجربة الكاتبة بانعكاسها خلال البطلة، كيف ان بعض الظروف الاجتماعية اثرت على لينون، ردود الفعل النفسية الناجمة التي ابدتها تجاه هذه المؤثرات، و أي مسالة اثرت عليها اكثر، المؤثرات الخارجية الاجتماعية ام الداخلية النفسية. اثبتت الدراسة بان المرض النفسي لا يعني الجنون و فقدان التفكير المنطقي كما اكدت على أهمية الصداقة و العائلة بالنسبة للبطلة حتى تتغلب على اعاقتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مرض الوسواس القهري، الخلفية النفسية، العلاج النفسي

The novel revolves around the mentally disabled teenager Lennon (Len) who shares the author's mental disability; obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Len is disdained by others because of her weird actions resulting from her health condition. She has no one to express herself to nor her family can pay for her health care. Thinking that she has child dementia (like her grandmother), Len is afraid that she is going to lose her mind. Accordingly, she has to endure troubles that are too much for her to bear. Near the end of the novel, she makes a friendship with Sage (a physically disabled girl) who helps her so much to overcome her dark times.

Nora Shalaway Carpenter writes her novel *The Edge of Anything* (2020) using her experience with OCD. Therefore her psychobiography (broadly means any biological approach emphasizing psychological development and inner life while more specifically, it means writing a biography using formalized psychological theory and concepts based on psychoanalytic theory. [Psychobiography, 2022]) is the cornerstone on which the present study relies while highlighting Len's suffering.

The study is based on psychoanalytic theory which is established by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) while treating his patients who have neurological disorders to describe both normal as well as abnormal individual experiences. It explores the impact of the unconscious on thoughts, feelings, and eventually behavior. Freud claims that most people's motivations come from what is outside their immediate awareness. Early childhood events, according to the theory, influence psychological and personal futuristic development. Therefore, it is an efficient procedure to relieve painful emotional symptoms and increase self-awareness through the exploration of the unconscious mind. Recent psychotherapies rely heavily on this theory. (Psychoanalysis, 2022). The study also bases its analysis on critical disability theory which emerged during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century emphasizing the psycho-social impacts on people with disabilities, how disabled people are described, and what they face through literary works.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is the mental health condition both the author and Len share. It is a chronic, neuropsychiatric, anxiety disorder in which the person has a kind of reoccurring thoughts, mental images, and urges which are uncontrollable (obsessions) and/ or behaviors (compulsions) that cause her/ him to feel the urge to repeat the action several times. The role of behavior is to decrease the anxiety or distress that is related to the motivating experience no matter what it is. (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, 2018; Yip, 2020).

OCD symptoms affect personal relations, work, and school. People with OCD have negative beliefs about expecting bad things to happen and their obsessions are sometimes difficult to diagnose because they are related to thoughts (Yip, 2020). Obsession common signs encompass fear of condemnation and germs, thoughts related to taboo, forbidden, and unwanted issues involving harm, sex, and religion. These thoughts usually violate the moral values of the patient. While compulsion, as a repeated response to obsessive thoughts, makes the person with OCD acts to release the urge. Common signs of compulsion encompass: washing and/ or cleaning the hands excessively, having things arranged and stacked in perfect manners, and checking things repeatedly. These signs are normal unless they become out of control. Doing things excessively does not make the person with OCD happy but relieved to dispose of the anxiety caused by such thoughts. Symptoms vary in their tense over time (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, 2018).

Psychotherapy research is a way of treating people with OCD that has proved its effectiveness. It includes cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), habit reversal training, response and exposure (spending time in the triggering situation), and prevention (avoiding compulsive behavior). It involves triggering compulsion (for example touching dirt) without undertaking the expected compulsion (like washing the hands). (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, 2018; Yip, 2020) Like other mental disorders, the treatment can start with either psychotherapy or medication, or both.

Some people with OCD may engage in certain kinds of mental rituals to dispose of their bothersome thoughts. For example, they may avoid situations that motivate such thoughts by excessive praying and/ or removing negative thoughts with positive ones. In some cases of checking and re-checking, people with OCD tend to experience intrusive urges, images, and thoughts coming from their fear of unintended others or self-harming which results from negligence or carelessness. This fear is usually accompanied by an overwhelming feeling of dread, self-doubt, and bearing the responsibility of accidents (Yip, 2020).

## **1.2 The Mentally Disabled Protagonist: Len**

Len (originally Lennon) is the protagonist whom the novel opens with. Carpenter reflects her sufferings and experience with OCD through Len. The dream of Len is to get the Melford

Scholarship through competition in photography. Getting it will make her the first one in her family to join college.

From the beginning of the novel, Len is introduced as a weird person. Her weirdness attracts the attention of many characters in the novel, “Len seemed headed for the door, but kept stepping sideways, then forward again, then pausing, irritating everyone trying to get by” (Carpenter, 2020, p. 31). Her hobby explains this matter. She is a photographer whose work is so competitive in the previous year. In an assignment which is to express her current mood of the previous year, Len gets some airy, light, and free pictures that express joyful moments with her sister Fauna. Next year, her mental condition is reflected negatively in her pictures. Despite her talent, her teacher tells her that: “your works feels... quite honestly, it feels sterile” (Carpenter 2020, p. 25). Len is so attached to photography that it becomes like a part of her body that she cannot lose and she decides to protect. She considers it her best part thus, Ms. Saffron’s words hurt her so deeply. Her weirdness and mood express part of her suffering which causes her inner struggle.

Len thinks that her niece is dead because of her. This matches the feeling of guilt by which many other people with OCD are dominated. Moreover, they tend to experience intrusive urges, images, and thoughts coming from their fear of unintended others or self-harming which results from negligence or carelessness. This fear is usually accompanied by an overwhelming feeling of dread, self-doubt, and bearing the responsibility of accidents (Yip, 2020). Accordingly, the trauma of that death besides feeling guilty causes her OCD and eventually other obsessions and fears. Therefore, she is escaping her sister to dispose of harmful feelings and to prevent triggers since talking with her sister reminds her of guilt. In addition to that, she feels that she does not deserve to talk to her sister. When Len's mother tells her that Fauna “asked for you,’ [...] She said you haven’t been emailing her like you used to.’ [...] ‘I think she really misses you’, Len’s breath caught, the words digging like rusted scissors in her chest” (Carpenter 2020, p. 13). Feeling guilty tortures Len and causes her severe inner pains; therefore, she escapes from her sister to prevent pain. she often screams because no one can understand her not even her mother. Feeling guilty overwhelms her need to talk to her sister. That is one reason why she is always alone and alienated.

Cognitive therapists like Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck assert that it is dysfunctional thinking that leads to dysfunctional emotions or behaviors. By changing their thoughts, people

can change how they feel and what they do (Different Approaches to Psychotherapy, 2009). This fits Len's behavior, though she is not a volleyball fan, she attends a volleyball match because she needs some time away to forget her supposed guilt as well as to distract thoughts and fears coming from her OCD or even to escape teasing by others. She is suffering so much and struggling to overcome it. She wants to dispose of her pains that are making sirens, noises, shouts, screaming, and obsessive thoughts in her mind which she cannot bear nor stop. Though she struggles, hides, and fights them, they appear in her imbalanced motions.

Len is keeping secrets she thinks related to her mental health like that of her friend Hazel who gradually stops talking to her telling people that she has gone abnormal. She talks to Hazel only because their mothers work together. She cannot tell her mother about Hazel because her mother considers her lucky to have such a friend. Moreover, she agrees with her mother's praising Hazel because she always bears pains and buries them in her soul deep in the unconscious. After all, she is sure that no one can understand her. This is part of the suffering many disabled people endure; they are socially alienated even inside their families.

Len has to join some rituals her family practices. For instance Loving Kindness Circle (a term that stands for practices and meditations used in the treatment of chronic illness), Living Force (believing that a person can heal herself/ himself through positive thinking), Karma (a belief in supernatural justice during life), mantra (silent repetition of a word or a phrase during meditation to focus on them and to eliminate what you are thinking about before meditation), meditation, ...etc. They also believe that nature is sending guiding signs (to do or not to do something). Yet, "privately Len had wondered if they all weren't mixing up signs with coincidences" (Carpenter 2020, p. 45). Despite looking weird and having a mental illness, Len has logical thinking; she enquires about the beliefs of her family that some incidents happen because of these rituals which send them signs. Len thinks of interfering with incidents. This highlights Carpenter's wish to say that mentally ill people are not insane because they can think logically better than many people who are supposed to be mentally healthy.

Due to her obsession, Len keeps on struggling with many issues which lead to forgetting even essential things like how she drives home. She also gets seizures repeatedly, thinks she is dying, and losing her mind. Despite her inner torture, she thinks that she deserves punishment because her father claims that people call their destinies to themselves. Sometimes she gives up on these thoughts though other times she fights them. She dislikes dying and feels terrified of it.

Screaming can release part of her repressed emotions well and prevent her from listening to negative thoughts, “whatever was happening, whatever was trying to take over her, she would battle it. She would tear out its heart and throat.” (Carpenter 2020, p. 57). Such violent reactions expose her depressed will to live and struggle no matter what. She refuses to give up. She shut, “her ears and screamed again. It was a horrible sound, horrible to know it came from her. But it seemed to break something, too—something she couldn’t name but knew instinctively needed to be shattered” (Carpenter 2020, p. 57). She wants her sickness to be shattered of her. This is also a way she uses to release the panic and burn out her repressing pains. After that, she becomes able to move and breathe well again. This is a kind of therapy for her or a way to fight. This is also how she treats the panic attack she suffers of. She gathers her oppressing issues in her unconsciousness and then releases them either consciously when conditions are suitable or unconsciously in panic attacks. This relieves her rather than makes her happy.

Len cannot scream publicly or at home, instead she curls up like something fragile because she cannot imagine how she can add that new weight to her family. She cannot tell them that she probably has childhood dementia (not OCD, as she thinks mistakenly) while they can do nothing for her. Being not able to pay for medical care adds more to her repression because she needs to tell them about her suffering and illness. She watches Nonni’s (her grandmother’s) suffering as an old woman how about her as a young girl? She dislikes losing her mind.

Besides keeping social distance, Len cannot touch anything touched by anyone else. As an OCD patient, Len is so obsessed with the fear of transferring germs and eventually the possibility of causing death. She always wonders about people’s cleanliness, “Len’s insides twisted. The woman was touching all of them. Who knew what else her hands had touched, what she was transferring to the fruit? Len sneaked a glance at the woman’s cart. Rust spots speckled the handlebar” (Carpenter 2020, p. 84). Len thinks that rust causes tetanus, so her heart starts to beat faster, “was there tetanus on all those pears? What if she bought some and Mom used them and people died, all because of her? Thoughts, mountains of them, piled on top of her” (Carpenter 2020, p. 84). She cannot bear causing death to more people because she thinks that her niece is dead because of her. So she keeps these issues with her wherever she is. They are like inscriptions in her unconscious, triggering her fears and obsessions in a way that she cannot defeat.

After listening to a story by her father, and due to his encouragement besides the help of her new friend Sage, Len decides that she can fight her brain and thoughts, “like the man Dad told her about. The brain was powerful—humans only understood ten percent of it, after all. She just needed to try harder, to will it into submission. She wanted herself back. Her real self” (Carpenter 2020, P.126). The decision to re-find herself comes from inside with the help of her friend and father who motivate her by telling a true story.

### **1.2.1 The Environment of Len**

Len is surrounded by many abusive teenagers at school. They insult her very often that she, “didn’t matter. Len was used to the insults” (Carpenter 2020, p. 1). They often insult her because of her weird behaviors. She knows that, so when she is home, Len curls herself up trying to distract her obsessions till she falls asleep. She tells nobody about such insults.

Len’s father is always busy painting pictures that are never sold. Her mother works as a seller and cooks for her colleagues at work to get additional money. Her grandmother (Nonni) has dementia and is losing her mind gradually. Thus, Len's family has to pay extra money for her grandmother’s health care. Len’s sister, Fauna, is married to another woman and they are living separately. In addition to her sickness, her parents’ business, the sickness of Nonni, losing her friend Hazel, and the death of Fauna's daughter, Len starts feeling with alienation. She loses all those with whom she often expresses herself. As a teenage girl suffering from illness, she feels so depressed not having a pal to express herself to; someone who can sympathize with her. The financial problems of her family add more to her suffering.

Len is afraid that she may inherit Nonni’s sickness and that she is becoming mad like her grandmother. This is one of her subconscious obsessions which causes her more pressure and depression. Nonni tells her that dementia starts with forgetting things. She also starts to forget things; therefore, her obsessions are increasing with the idea of losing her mind.

Instead of searching for the reason behind her pains and alienation to help her accordingly, Len’s family makes her join some kind of meditation like the Loving-Kindness Circle. Although she is terrified of it, her parents insist on her joining them thinking this is useful for her and her sister as well. Such matters create a gap between her and her parents. This gap cannot be redeemed because neither her parents ask her, nor does she expose her repressed pains. Her family is unable to offer mental health care so they recourse to spiritual issues.

Dread floods Len When her father makes them join Loving Kindness Circle, “Len’s parents exhaled long and smooth, but Len’s breath snagged in her throat. I shouldn’t be doing this, Len thought. It’s not safe” (Carpenter 2020, p. 15). She is so scared of touching the ground and that is one reason why she hates having it. Her parents have a different mood, “If any thoughts arise, just notice and let them go. Let them float away like leaves on a river” (Carpenter 2020, p. 15). This is a glimpse of how they treat Len's psychological illness. She is in trauma but they want her to let her thoughts go so easily. Her parents enforce her to do what she dislikes and cannot. This is a reflection of the author’s psychobiography by which she reveals her sufferings. People tell Carpenter to stop it as if she is faking it or that she can stop it whenever she wants. (MacGregor, 2020).

Len has to suppress her rejection to have the Loving Kindness Circle only for the sake of Fauna as her mother asks her, “Len ignored the burning in her gut and yanked off her beloved knit gloves. She took her parents’ outstretched hands” (Carpenter 2020, p. 15). She cannot bear the whole thing but she suppresses this for the sake of Fauna again to relieve the pain of guilt. She does whatever they tell her for the sake of Fauna except being in touch with Fauna because this reminds her of her guilt. She is escaping from her sister meanwhile doing her best for her sister.

### **1.2.2 The Health Condition of Len**

Len’s health condition starts at the moment when she discovers the death of her niece in her bedroom because when she recalls that moment she lives the trauma, “her mind wound back, and she was there again, living it, the sirens and crying and blueness. And screaming. So much screaming.” (Carpenter, 2020, P. 135) What increases her feeling of guilt is the death of her niece happened while she is watching cartoons.

Len thinks that she has caused the death of her niece. Feeling guilty is the reason behind her illness. Due to this trauma, she vows not to touch anyone. She becomes obsessed with thoughts related to germs and dirt because she is so scared that she may transfer germs to other people and eventually cause them death. So she follows many habits (compulsions) that she thinks will keep her healthy. For example, excessive washing of her hands and showers, using anti-germs towels, wearing clothes covering her body (like long sleeves shirts, jeans, gloves, and boots), and avoiding touching others or things that others touch before her. Moreover, she is not

able to look at dirt because she will face countless thoughts wondering about dirt and subsequent illnesses.

Len is socially alienated because she is obsessed with the fear of germs and eventually her weird habits, and above all, no one can understand her. She admires how easily Sage banter socially and wishes she can do so. She keeps this wish inside her till the end of the novel when she releases it and hugs her sister Fauna as well as talks freely (like Carpenter). She tries various ways to fight and oppress her fears and wishes. For instance, once, feeling guilty and fearing germs obsesses her that she bites her arm. She attempts to oppress her wish to scream and eventually avoids copes. She also keeps on avoiding memories of her sister Fauna. Yet, whatever she does reminds her of blissful memories about her sister which are no longer peaceful; they are fearful and ignite feelings of guilt. These oppressed issues appear from time to time in corrupted forms like screams. What increases her pain is that her disability is invisible and she cannot tell, nor can others discover it. So she receives no help most of the time.

Len's mind is tricking her in many ways for example, "the word spun through her. Child. Child. Child. It twisted and reformed. Nadia. Nadia" (Carpenter, 2020, p. 85). She struggles to stop her brain from echoing the word "child" because it reminds her of her niece but her mind worsens it by saying "Nadia", the name of her niece. So she struggles consciously to defeat oppressed memories she buries in her unconsciousness. It is a psychological fierce battle where the name Nadia twists to reform as a child. The repetition of words is not done only unconsciously; Len sometimes uses it consciously and intentionally to overcome her fears. For example, "It's just mud, Len thought again, repeating the word like a mantra. Mud, mud, mud" (Carpenter, 2020, p. 1). She attempts to overcome her fear of the spot she notices. She wants to force herself to think that it is just mud and not something which has germs. These are the same ways used by psychological therapeutics which is done through distracting negative thoughts and changing them with positive thinking. As Len searches the net wishing to diagnose her mental illness, she also searches it for therapies. She knows something is wrong with her and she struggles to overcome it, yet she cannot diagnose it.

As a person who suffers from OCD, Len has to endure some common complications and problems like troubles in relationships due to the inability to deal with OCD symptoms. Like other patients, she also finds it difficult to engage in social activities besides the inability to attend a school or join any work or even social activities. Patients usually suffer from side

effects and additional health problems emerging from compulsions. (*What Are the Causes, Risk Factors and Complications of OCD?*, 2022)

Sage succeeds in convincing Len to talk about her condition. Len has magical thinking. She thinks that Nadia is destroying the life of Fauna and her wife Diane. She believes the power of her thought manifests in the death of Nadia. Sage assures her that it is not her fault and that she does everything she is supposed to do. Sage also tells her that it is called sudden infant death syndrome. Sage's biggest achievement is making Len admit that she has OCD and that it is too big for her to keep for her alone. She can release her pains and have others empathize with her. This is a very essential way according to psychoanalytic therapy according which the patient can express herself so that she can get help. It is called free-flowing which allows the patient to explore freely and talk about dreams, fears, fantasies, and desires (cherry, 2020) Consequently, Sage helps Len to get medical low-cost therapy.

## **Conclusion**

The present study proves Carpenter's intention to establish many important issues through the novel like the need of sick people (like Len) for understanding, solace, and empathy through dark times. The idea of a real friend who is "a person who likes you despite your weirdness. [...] A person who sticks up for you, who doesn't go to parties that they were invited to but you were snubbed from. Who helps if you ask, no matter what." (Carpenter 2020, p. 164) While the deeper kind of friend is the one who knows "what you needed sometimes before you did. And they gave it to you without needing to be asked" (Carpenter 2020, p. 165) A real friend also makes you full of energy so that you become stronger. That is the kind of friendship of Sage that helps Len to overcome her fears, feel relaxed, and control her brain.

Confession, talking, and facing fears are very important features that Carpenter asserts. Not giving up on inherited ideas blindly is also genuine "Some of our parents' ideas,[...] can be important to people, and helpful, to a point. [...] But they're like anything else, you know? Too much reliance on them... it throws you out of balance." (Carpenter 2020, p. 208) Confessing secrets and exchanging views are important to relieve the unbearable pressure caused by those secrets and pains. "Terrible things happen sometimes [...] you have to face them, though. You have to go through all the darkness. [...] If you don't, it will devour you." (Carpenter 2020, P.

208). This is what Len does to overcome her dark moments with the help of her friend Sage as well as her father's motivating story.

No one has the right to hurt other people whether by degrading sights or words or whatever. Everyone had enough pains to endure. Some people might look weird just because there is no one to care about them even their parents. People after traumas are no longer what they are before it. They need support from people whom they love to overcome. It will be difficult to get the confidence of people who get used to being mocked by others. This makes the outer social impact exceeds the inner psychological one by igniting psychological pains within the targeted person.

According to the study, mentally disabled people are not insane at all nor they cannot make logical thinking. Len's personality proves this despite her struggle. The study also asserts the importance of friendship and family members besides the psychotherapy for the protagonist to overcome her disability.

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