

# THE CHARACTER THEORY ON ONE OF US IS LYING: AN ANALYSIS

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## Abstract

Twenty first century is bundled with the development of science along with the challenges faced in a fast-paced lifestyle. While this lifestyle is embraced, it has become evident that a self-centred approach has become predominant. Not only the psychology of the individuals is affected due to abuse of technology, but also the characteristic of a person is moulded at times based on the digital world they are engulfed with. Awareness on the mental health of an individual is rising along with the focus on physical health. Independents' sound in physical and mental health will be a great asset to the nation. Moreover, cordial, caring, empathetic individuals in a society will enhance the growth of the society. The scientific tool used is Erich Fromm's concept 'The Character Theory', as stated in his work *The Courage to be Human*. He succinctly distinguishes between 'forms of behaviour' and 'character traits' and emphasises on 'relatedness' in an individual's character formation and focuses on productive and non-productive orientations. Scrutinization is done through applying this theory to the novel, *One of Us is Lying* by Karen M. McManus. This endeavour is an attempt to examine the psychology of the characters, the impact of technology, self-centeredness reaching to the level of self-obsession and thus becoming harmful for the self and the society.

**Keywords:** character theory, character traits, forms of behaviour, mental health, productive orientation, non-productive orientation

## INTRODUCTION

Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.

-John Wooden

The above said quote by famous basketball coach John Wooden speaks on the importance of an individual's character. Great personalities like Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and many more are remembered by the whole world for their characteristic traits. Kind, helping minded, empathetic people in a society, work for the betterment of the society, thus directly and indirectly they strive for enhancing mankind. Erich Fromm discusses the indispensable nature of character and its types contradicting some notions of his predecessors Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.

In the book, *The Courage to Be Human* (1942), Erich Fromm confers on temperament, character and orientation. According to Fromm, temperament is innate and constant while character formation is influenced by external factors. Character is formed by relatedness with the society and one's experiences which Erich Fromm calls it as 'orientation'. He further states that character and behaviour are identical. Sigmund Freud who affirmed that libido is the channelled psychic energy in the development of life. In contrast to the above said view, Fromm declares that an individual's occurrences with the society, others and one's own self forms the basis of his or her characteristic traits: "... character traits are not the sublimations or reaction formations of various forms of the sexual drive but rather a syndrome which results from a particular organization or ... orientation of character." (29).

An individual is a blend of different emotions and characteristic traits. One is classified into a particular group based on the traits that play a significant role in most of their expressions. Based on this assimilation Erich Fromm differentiates between productive and non-productive orientations. Further, he promulgates five orientations as non-productive, "the receptive, the exploitative, the hoarding, the marketing, and the necrophilic-destructive." (32). A person who has 'receptive orientation', always expects everything to be provided to him by an external source. One who is dominated by 'exploitative orientation' too expects everything from outside but doesn't wait till it is offered, rather they use power, cunningness, or force to fulfil their desires. Specific individual who is dominated by 'hoarding orientation' has the tendency to preserve everything for themselves, unwilling to answer any questions raised against them or change anything. In

‘marketing orientation’ the individual insists on being accepted, i.e. marketing themselves and strives to regulate the ways to be accepted by others. The last non-productive orientation is ‘necrophilic-destructive’. Individuals with this dominant nature would be inclined towards dirt, decay, violence, death, etc. This research article attempts to analyse the characters by Karen M. McManus in *One of Us is Lying* that narrates the life of teenagers in an educational institution.

### RECEPTIVE ORIENTATION

Addy Prentiss relies on one or the other for any decision that she has to make. Her act of thinking about Jack who would have helped to answer the questions when detective Laura Wheeler questions her for more information to find out the truth. Instead of answering the questions and clarifying her non-participation in this heinous act she complicates the situation by opting not to answer the questions posed to her. Further, she calls her sister Ashton to come and support her to get rid of this difficult situation. She is so dependable that she was not even able to head home but had to be picked up by her sister. When Simon suffered the allergic attack too, she was unable to control herself and had to be helped by Cooper. Similarly, at the time Jack was accompanied by TJ Forrester, she was nervous, incapable of controlling her restlessness, until TJ Forrester assured her that he would not reveal the past between them. Addy’s submissive nature towards Jake in their relationship is evident through TJ Forrester’s statement, “Sorry, But I could never figure out why you’d fade into the background that way.”(190).

After deciding to inform Jake about her intimate night with TJ Forrester before the policemen do so, she again wants her sister to drop her at Jake’s house and confirms of being picked up after their meeting. The decision to inform Jake was also not taken by herself but based on Ashton’s advice. All these indicate her lack of confidence to act independently at any given situation. She rightly fits into the classification of Erich Fromm as an individual who is dependent.

### EXPLOITATIVE ORIENTATION

Character Jake stands as an epitome of exploitative orientation. His careful planning without hurting himself or getting involved directly, but control thinks as he wants to run it denotes his dominating nature. When he is still a teenager, he manages to ensure that everything happens as per his plan to spoil Addy’s life. His act of going to the extent of blackmailing Janae and Simon validates his cruel nature. Later too when he attempts to murder Addy when she endeavours to unveil the real culprit so that Nate could be saved showcases that he can reach to any extreme. He makes use of the emotions of TJ Forrester, Addy, Janae and Simon so that he can avenge Addy. Initially, Jake in the name of being in a relationship with Addy, coerces her to dress up in the manner he wants her to be. He is neither concerned about the chill weather out nor her comfort. At the same time, he is unwilling to fulfil any similar wishes that Addy may have. He exerts his control on Addy in all possible ways. He questions but does not like to be questioned by anyone else.

Simon’s behaviour rightly fits into the details listed by Erich Fromm. Last words of Simon, “I’m the omniscient narrator” (11) indicates his attention seeking nature and self-obsession. Simon never thinks that his action of posting about the secret lives of his peers may affect, hurt or harm them mentally. He does not bother about the physical, mental and social wellness of his peers; rather he is obsessed with fame and wants to leak out information on their personal lives. Even though he was under depression, and wanted to end his life, he did not leave that opportunity to use it against others. Despite being at self-loss, he wanted to drown his peers who all have wronged him or wished something against him. Without a second thought, he plans to nail them all down by framing them as his murderers is horrendous. The reasons that he must spoil their lives are also too silly. In Addy’s words, “[...] he thought we’d taken away from him things that everybody wants: to be successful, to have friends, to be loved. To be *Seen*. (340). This also indicates that these youngsters are so materialistic that they are unable to understand the value of life and importance of things that need to be earned and cannot be bought.

Bronwyn Rojas, though good in all other perspectives, she exploited the negligence of her professor with a solipsistic motive. She did not think twice before downloading the question papers or using it to get the perfect score. It indicates that the younger generation people are not firm to be honest, follow the rules, or lead life ethically. It also indicates the degradation of values in the society. At the same time, by accepting her mistake and openly apologising for the same, throws light upon the fact that she is ready to face the consequences and accept her errors.

## PRODUCTIVE ORIENTATION

Nate Macauley deals with drugs, but at the same time, his character has a 'symbiotic tie'. When all his classmates' gossip about Addy for not being truthful to Addy, he identifies their hypocritical nature and attempts to comfort her. Similarly, when he speaks with Bronwyn, he respects her opinions and always gives her the space that is needed for an individual. This is stated as: "... to share in its power and superiority and thus to become equally powerful and superior, ..." (39). He helps Bronwyn to relax and be out of the pressure of her parents, comforts and consoles her. Even when they both watch Netflix, he tells her to also choose one of her choices thus giving her equal opportunity and not trying to be bossy. Nate had the courage and the strength to stand against all the students during the lunch time when many of them intimidate and humiliate Cooper for being a gay. Additionally, even after being arrested as the prime suspect in the murder of Simon, he refuses to meet Bronwyn since it might be harmful for her. Even after clearing all the charges against him as a murderer, he thinks about the future of Bronwyn, keeping aside his feelings for her. Nate's real personality is revealed by these actions, as a person who is concerned about his peers who prefers to keep the welfare of others ahead of the benefits he might reap out of those actions.

Ashton fulfils her responsibilities as a dutiful sister when Addy was in trouble. Not only she obliges to her mom but also requests Charlie to arrange for a lawyer to save Addy. With her kindness and being well-aware of her younger sister's nature, she rushes on time to provide moral and emotional support. Though she herself is in pain due to her broken marriage, still she hides all her suffering and stands as a strong pillar of moral support for Addy. Additionally, she encourages Addy to overcome the difficulties to face the real world; coaxes her to confide the truth. After the shocking life-threatening experiences met out by Addy, she stands by her as a pillar of support and relocates to Bayview High so that Addy would be able to live with her. All her activities throw light upon the fact that she is concerned about her family members and at the same time has the courage to overcome the obstacles she faces in her personal life. Additionally, she is still able to mend her life and lead a peaceful life too.

Advancement of science and technology which is the innovation to help and improve the facilities of mankind is abused by Simon and Jake. Both of them use it against the people who have gone against them. Neither empathy nor kindness is there in any of their actions. When they both are ready to bring others' life to broad light, they don't have the courage to openly speak about their own secrets. This displays their hypocritical nature. The painful words from Addy to Jake, "About That hurt a lot of people. I don't understand why he kept it up for so long. Did he like people being afraid of him?" (207) showcases the real mindset of the students who are studying with Simon. The whole narrative to frame all the four Addy, Bronwyn, Nate and Cooper are done in a calculative manner by revealing the secrets of their personal lives through the app and the Tumblr Posts by Simon and after Simon's suicide by Jake. This compels one to check the other side of human mentality to abuse technology and harm others.

Kris who met them all for the first time was able to connect with them easily, since he was clear in his mind by being empathetic towards the person in front of him. Additionally, he also understood Cooper's difficulties and emotions to inform his conditional to his family members.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, it is evident through the above analysis that in this modern world, the longing for materialistic benefits and the wish to have a luxurious life has increased to a significant level. In relevance to the entire plot by Karen McManus it is vividly portrayed that technology, precisely, social media is used by majority to spread the messages without any thought whether it is going to be fruitful for the receiver or not. This novel is an eye-opener to be cautious in the usage of technology in a productive manner and emphasises to be aware of one's mental health. All the types of characters according to Erich Fromm's concept are present in an individual which enables us to be productive and at times non-productive. Despite Bronwyn, Nate, Addy and Cooper tried to connect the dots for identifying the real culprit they could not do so since they were looking at it emotionally, but it was only Kris who was not emotionally attached to the incidents could look at it from different perspective narrates that at times it is important to look logically and not being overwhelmed. Individuals dominated by 'exploitative orientation' ended up in losing their life and future whereas those who were with a 'productive orientation' though struggled and had to face embarrassments, hardships, could slowly overcome and lead a better life.

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