

# Mark Watney's optimism in Andy Weir's *The Martian*

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## ABSTRACT

The aims of this study are to analyze and identify; (1) Mark Watney's optimism in the novel and (2) the impact of being optimistic as reflected in the novel. This study belongs to library research. To analyze the data, this study applies a psychological approach. The analyzed data are described by using the descriptive qualitative method, then. After analyzing the novel, it is found that; first, Mark Watney as the protagonist character is an optimist person proved by his goals and expectancy. Based on the types of optimism, Mark's optimism refers to the comparative optimism and situational optimism. Second, the impact of being optimistic for Mark Watney are; he has high self-efficacy and hopes that somehow leads him to find a way to communicate with people on Earth, growing food and eventually manages to find his way back to the earth.



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## 1. Introduction

Optimism is a very important thing for the development and progress of people to live the life. Optimism is one of the important personalities for someone because being optimistic makes the individuals know what they want and quickly change themselves to solve the problem easily. The term optimism (Hornby, 1995, p. 814) itself, literally means 'a feeling that positive things are going to happen and that will be successful, the tendency to have this feeling'. According to Bull (2008, p. 307), an optimist is a person who always believes that good things will happen. An optimist can be defined as persistent in trying to achieve objectives (Carver, 2010, p. 883). In other words, an optimist is a person who always expects the thing to happen or things to be successful.

Optimism and pessimism have historically been called psychological attributes that distinguish individuals and are described on the basis of the person's conviction that there will be positive or negative events (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Optimism can give us energy; it makes our struggle feel worthwhile. In the end, it is rewarded because even though some of these struggles will fail, others will succeed, and we cannot know ahead of time which is which. When we are optimistic, we are happier and we could help other people to be happy and hopeful.

Optimism is one of the positive psychological factors that could affect someone's life. According to Seligman (2006), optimism is a comprehensive perception that focuses on good things, positive thinking, and it could give meaning to others. An optimist person is capable of producing something better than what he has done before, he always fights back when something does go wrong, and he is never afraid of failure. Optimists always believe anything that happens is the best one.

According to Chang (2000, p. 31-32), the concept of optimism concerns the expectations of people for the future. Since optimists are individuals who wish great experiences in the future; they

must have goals and expectancies. Goals are abilities that individuals consider to be desirable or undesirable. Individuals attempt to adjust their manners to ideals as they understand the desirable. The more significant these objectives to the individual, the more prominent are the component of significant worth in the individual's inspiration for those objectives. Without having an objective, individuals have no motivation to act.

To an optimist, the second important thing is expectancy, a sense of confidence or doubt about the obtainability of the target. If the person lacks confidence, there will be no action again. That's why the term "crippling doubt" often applies to a lack of confidence. Doubt will hinder commitment both before and while the action begins. Only if people have confidence, they will step into practice and they will remain engaged in the initiative only if they have adequate confidence. If people have confidence in an eventual result, even in the face of adversity, their efforts will continue.

Behavioral genetic research has shown that about 25% of the variation in optimism can be attributed to genetic variances, while the remaining 75% can be attributed to environmental factors (Plomin et al, 1992). Those who experienced more positive events would show higher rates of optimism throughout adulthood, while those who witnessed more negative events would show lower degrees of optimism throughout adulthood.

However, several studies have explored how optimism can be used as a shield against life events or situations that are negative (Ridder, Schreurs, & Bensing, 2000; Taylor et al., 2012), little research has explored how environmental causes such as experiences of life can affect the development of optimism. The increasing optimism and wellbeing in older adults have been investigated in recent research by Chopik and colleagues (2015) and Chopik, Kim, and Smith (2018). They observed in one study that those whose functional wellbeing deteriorated also appeared to be less positive as well (Chopik, Kim, & Smith, 2015).

The impact of being an optimist is self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) stated that self-efficacy is a kind of conviction in an individual ability to manage and implement any required actions to get the expected result. When people have high expectations of self-efficacy, they are likely to believe that the result will be decided by their personal actions (or personal skills). The second impact is hope, according to Snyder (1994), hope has two aspects. The first aspect is the individual's view of the presence of pathways that are required for the individual to achieve his or her goals. Another aspect is the individual's level of confidence that the individual has in being able to use those paths to achieve the goals.

Optimism has been related in some traits of physical health to better emotional well-being, more effective coping mechanisms, and even better results. The benefits of optimism also seem to extend into the domains of interpersonal relationships: optimists are better liked than pessimists, they benefit from their natural tendency to see things in the best light, and they seem to be making more successful attempts to solve the kinds of problems that keep relations alive. (Carver, 2010, p. 887).

## 2. Research Method

This study belongs to library research. It means the researcher visited some libraries to get the data. The data are taken from the books and electronic sources that are relevant to the subject and object matter of this study.

This study applies a psychological approach to analyze the data. Wellek and Warren (1974, p. 75) mentioned that psychology of literature can mean the writer's psychological study, as type and as a person, or the investigation of the creative process, or the study of the psychological kinds and laws present inside literary works, or lastly, the influence of writing upon its readers (audience psychology). According to Abrams (1999, p. 247), psychological criticism deals primarily with the literary work as an expression, in fictional form, of the individual author's state of mind and personality structure.

Similar to the previous studies, Subhan (2015, p. 59) explained that psychology study is the understanding of individuals and the state of their personality traits. Meanwhile, literature has a connection in the context of literary work with human expression. Psychology can be used to describe, interpret, and assess literary works by a literary critic or a literary researcher.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

#### 3.1. Mark Watney's Optimism

An optimist is a person who is always hopeful and expects the best in all things (Hornby, 1995, p. 814). It is important to be an optimist person because optimism can bring hope or inner drive/motivation to do positive actions such as finding solutions for the problems, making efforts to gain success, and to help other people as well.

According to Chang (2001), there are some critical acts that influence the optimism of someone, such as goals and expectancy.

##### 1) Goals

Goals are the target of someone's effort (Hornby, 1995, p. 509). Goals are qualities that individuals consider to be desirable or undesirable. Individuals attempt to fit their manners to ideals they see as desirable. The more significant these objectives are to the individual, the more prominent is the component of significant worth in the individual's inspiration as for those objectives. Without having an objective, individuals have no motivation to act.

After being left out by his teammate on Mars, Mark finds himself in many difficulties. He has to survive in a place that has a different condition from the earth with limited numbers of food supply and water. Normally in this critical situation, people would lose their hopes, be frustrated, or even would kill themselves to end the misery, but not with Mark. After letting himself down for some time, Mark starts thinking about how to survive on Mars with limited numbers of food supplies and looking for ways to get back to the earth. Surviving on Mars and finding a way to get back home to the earth are Mark's goals at this moment, even if it means that he has to struggle and work harder to do something that looks impossible. It can be seen in this statement:

"Sigh... okay. I've had my tantrum and now I have to figure out how to stay alive. Again. Okay, let's see what I can do here." (Weir, 2015, p. 185)

"Mars and my stupidity keep trying to kill me. Okay, enough self-pity. I'm not doomed. Things will just be harder than planned. I have all I need to survive. And Hermes is still on the way." (Weir, 2015, p. 269)

The quotation above shows that Mark has a strong goal to survive. He has many plans in order to still be alive and hold on waiting for a rescue mission, even when his plans don't look promising and fail at some points, Mark never loses his hope and gives up with these conditions, he keeps trying with another plan.

"But I'm a botanist, damn it, I should be able to find a way to make this happen. If I don't, I'll be a really hungry botanist in about a year." (Weir, 2015, p. 15)

That quotation tells that Mark is an optimist person. He always tries to find a solution when he finds any difficulties. As a botanist, he has knowledge of how to plant and grow food. So he tries working on growing some potatoes to add his supply on a planet where nothing grows and eventually he makes it, Mark successfully grows some potatoes on Mars.

##### 2) Expectancy

According to Hornby (1995, p. 404) expectancy is the state of expecting or hoping. Expectancy is a feeling of certainty or uncertainty about the objective's feasibility. If the individual does not have certainty, once more, there will be no activity. It can be seen in this statement:

"Over the last few days, I got in all the dirt that I'll need. I prepped the tables and bunks for holding the weight of soil, and even put the dirt in place. There's still no water to make it viable, but I have some ideas. Really bad ideas, but they're ideas." (Weir, 2015, p. 28)

The quotation above shows that Mark has a strong faith to finish what he already started, he plans to solve the problem of lack of water, and he will not stop until he achieves that goal. During the time of surviving, he finds himself in trouble many times, but Mark always manages to hold on and believes in his own ideas.

"We'll need to talk faster than yes/no questions every half hour. The camera can rotate 360 degrees, and I have plenty of antenna parts. Time to make an alphabet. But I can't just use the

letters A through Z. Twenty-six letters plus my question cards around the lander. Each one would only get 13 degrees of arc. Even if JPL points the camera perfectly, there's a good chance I won't know which letter they meant. So I'll make cards for 0 through 9, and A through F. That makes 16 cards to place around the camera, plus the question card. Seventeen cards mean over 21 degrees each. Much easier to deal with." (Weir, 2015, p. 140).

The quotation above explains how Mark tries every way to communicate with NASA. He sends the codes that he made in a card, in every card has number and alphabets, he hopes by using this way NASA will be able to read the message. Mark is confident if he uses this way he can communicate clearly with NASA, and also he can reach his goal to get back to the earth.

According to Beazley (2009), there are eight various kinds of optimism; dispositional optimism, unrealistic optimism, optimism as attributional style, comparative optimism, situational optimism, strategic optimism, realistic optimism, and optimism bias. From eight types of optimism, Mark has four types.

### 3) *Comparative optimism*

Comparative optimism presents the uncertainty of expectation of good results for oneself compared with a similar result. Mark has comparative optimism because he compared his plan and NASA plans, but he still used his plan to do something. It can be seen in the statement below:

"I don't want to continue without a plan. I'm sure NASA had all kinds of ideas, but now I have to come up with one on my own." (Weir, 2015, p. 270)

"Even if I find a way to tell NASA I'm alive, there's no guarantee they'll be able to save me. I need to be proactive. I need to figure out how to get to Ares 4." (Weir, 2015, p. 77)

The quotation above explains Mark believes that NASA can help him with various ways and brilliant ideas, but he thinks he cannot wait for the plan from NASA. Mark tries to come up with his own plan or own ideas to get good outcomes.

### 4) *Situational optimism*

It refers to the general expectation of a decent result in a particular setting. Besides his goal to come back to the earth, Mark also has another goal that is more specific, he hopes he can communicate with NASA clearly. It can be seen in the statement below:

"I knew it was hopeless, but I tried firing up the communication array. No signal, of course. The primary satellite dish had broken off." (Weir, 2015, p. 8)

The quotations above explain that Mark is unconfident that he can communicate with his teammates or NASA after a sandstorm came because the sandstorm had been destroying everything. But, in this situation, he tries to be an optimist. He tries to re-operating the communication array, so he can communicate again.

### 5) *Realistic Optimism*

According to Degrandpe (as cited in Schneider, 2001), realistic optimism is the drive to keep up an inspirational viewpoint inside within the limitations of available observable phenomena in the physical and social life. Mark has this kind of optimism because he has the courage to do what it takes in order to achieve his goal. It can be seen in the statement below:

"Here the cool part: I will eventually go to Schiaparelli and commander the Ares 4 lander. Nobody explicitly gave me permission to do this, and they can't until I'm abroad Ares 4 and operating the comm system. After I broad Ares 4, before talking to NASA, I will take control of a craft in international waters without permission." (Weir, 2015, p. 304)

The quotation above shows that Mark has the courage to take a risky decision. He decides to leave the relative safety of the Hab to do a dangerous journey to Schiaparelli valley, a place where the next ARES mission on Mars would take place. Mark believes that if he manages to go to Schiaparelli valley he would be able to link up with ARES 4 mission crew that will increase his chance to get back home to the Earth.

### 6) *Dispositional Optimism*

According to Scheier and Chaver (in Peterson, 2000), dispositional optimism is characterized as a worldwide desire that the greater (desirable) things than terrible (unwanted) will occur later on as a characteristic of personality, is assumed to be steady with a little degree for change and is represented as a great optimism. We can conclude that dispositional optimism is a condition where a person has big hope for good things in the future. Mark has this character; he has a big hope that the greater things will occur in the future than the terrible one. It can be seen in the following statement:

“Sigh... okay. I’ve had my tantrum and now I have to figure out how to stay alive. Again. Okay, let’s see what I can do here.” (Weir, 2015, p. 185)

“Mars and my stupidity keep trying to kill me. Okay, enough self-pity. I’m not doomed. Things will just be harder than planned. I have all I need to survive. And Hermes is still on the way.” (Weir, 2015, p. 269)

The quotation above shows that Mark has a big hope that he will be able to overcome this situation. He believes that someday this nightmare would come to an end, and he would find happiness once more.

### 3.2. The Impact of Being Optimist

After being left out by his teammate on Mars, he finds many problems. He should survive in a place that has a different condition from the earth with limited numbers of food supply and clean water.

Normally, in this critical situation, some people will lose their hope, spirit, or even kill themselves to end the misery, but not with Mark. Mark is an optimist man, he believes that one day this nightmare will come to an end, and eventually, he will find happiness once more.

In these cases, there are two impacts of being an optimist. First is self-efficacy. It is a kind of conviction in an individual ability to manage and implement any required actions to get the expected result (Bandura, 2007). When people have high expectations of self-efficacy, they are likely to believe that the result will be decided by their personal actions (or personal skills).

Mark uses his ability as a botanist to survive on Mars. He believes that his personal skills can help. Mark tries to plant potatoes to add his food supply. It can be seen in the quotations below:

“But I’m a botanist, damn it, I should be able to find a way to make this happen. If I don’t, I’ll be a really hungry botanist in about a year.” (Weir, 2015, p. 15)

That quotation shows that Mark has high self-efficacy because he is confident with his ability as a botanist. He thinks his ability can help him from starving. He tries planting potatoes to add food supply, with a lot of food supply he can survive for some time while looking for ways to get back to earth.

The second impact is hope, according to Snyder (1994), hope has two aspects. The first aspect is the individual’s view of the presence of pathways that are required for the individual to achieve his or her goals. Another aspect is the individual’s level of confidence that the individual has in being able to use those paths to achieve the goals. From the theory above Mark’s hope belongs to the second explanation; the level of confidence. It can be seen in these cases when Mark tries to get communication or find a way to communicate with NASA. He believes that if he manages to do this, he can reach his goals to get back to the earth. It can be seen in the quotation below:

“I knew it was hopeless, but I tried firing up the communication array. No signal of course. The primary satellite dish had broken off.” (Weir, 2015, p. 8).

The quotation above shows how Mark was trying to discover a way to contact people on Earth. If he succeeds to do that he has a better opportunity of surviving and get back home to the Earth

## 4. Conclusion

Some acts of Mark Watney indicate his optimism. According to the theory of optimism by Chang, Mark has both the concepts of optimism namely; goals and also expectancy, whereas based



on the types of optimism, Mark's optimism refers to the comparative optimism and situational optimism.

In addition, Mark Watney had a strong faith in survival. He had to face a fact that he lives with nothing but his own on Mars, with limited numbers of food and without any way to communicate with Earth, even if he could it would take more than 4 years for the rescue mission to reach him. However, as the impact of being optimistic, he has high self-efficacy and hopes that somehow leads him to find a way to communicate with people on Earth grows food and eventually manages to find his way back to the earth.

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