

Ambition and Self-Actualization of Modern Women in *The Queen's Gambit*: A Hierarchy of Needs Perspective

Nadya Malika Putri¹

M. Suryadi²

Ken Widyatwati³

Annisa Rinjani⁴

123⁴ Magister of Literature, Universitas Diponegoro, Semarang

Corresponding Autor: nadyamalika05@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the ambition of the main female character, Beth Harmon, in *The Queen's Gambit* series through Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. This study analyzes how the main character's journey reflects the fulfillment of five levels of human needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. This study contributes to broadening the insight into modern women's ambitions through the representation of fictional characters in popular media. The method used is descriptive-qualitative with a character analysis and narrative approach. Data are analyzed based on the psychological development of the character and the social challenges she faces in the male-dominated chess world. Each level of need shows complex emotional and social dynamics. Beth successfully demonstrates perseverance, courage, and a competitive spirit that reflect women's ambition today in pursuing education and careers amidst gender challenges. This study found that modern women's ambitions relate to achievement and seeking identity and recognition in social and professional spaces.

Keywords: *ambition, hierarchy, self-actualization, The Queen's Gambit, women*

Introduction

Film is an audio-visual medium that provides entertainment and represents psychological, social, and cultural realities that feel more real. Giannetti explains that film can externalize the character's inner conflict through strong visual and narrative elements (Giannetti, 2014). *The Queen's Gambit* series is a clear example of how the journey of the female protagonist, Beth Harmon, reflects the dynamics of ambition and self-discovery through the male-dominated world of chess (Lect & Abdulhasan, 2024). In the series, Beth Harmon is portrayed as an orphan girl who discovers her extraordinary talent in chess at an early age in an orphanage. Fueled by her genius intellect and competitive spirit, Beth became a professional chess player with ambitions to become the best in the world (Amanda, 2025; Prasetyaningrum & Ahdiani, 2024). However, despite her genius, she also faced emotional challenges such as childhood trauma, drug and alcohol addiction, and the social pressures that come with being a woman in a very masculine world. Beth's career and personal life journey shows how a woman tries to fulfill various basic human needs, from the most basic to self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). Thus, this theory of Maslow makes the series relevant to be analyzed through a humanistic psychology approach, especially Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory.

This study focuses on the main character, exploring how each phase of Beth's life reflects the struggle to meet physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization

needs. Beth's journey can be analyzed through Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, which outlines five levels of basic human needs. When these needs are unmet, an individual's psychological and social development can be significantly hampered, as fundamental aspects such as safety, love, and self-esteem are essential foundations of growth and self-maturation (Desmet & Fokkinga, 2020). Women's ambitions show a broader development of meaning. Ambition is no longer limited to material or professional achievements but reflects the psychological drive to gain social recognition and form a complete self-identity (Lung et al., 2022). The findings show that a person's ambition is influenced by internal factors such as emotional needs and external factors such as social pressure and power relations.

This spirit is symbolically reflected through the character of Beth Harmon, who represents many Indonesian women struggling to establish their existence in a patriarchal social structure (Amanda, 2025). This research is essential because it offers an approach that combines humanistic psychology with gender studies and popular culture. In addition, this study has urgency because it raises psychological and social aspects integrated into one female figure in popular culture. According to Abraham Maslow's theory, this study broadens the reading of Beth Harmon's character not only as an ambitious woman but also as a figure who steps on every stage of human needs development (Maslow, 1970). Therefore, this study fills the gap by applying a more systematic humanistic psychology approach.

In the previous study, the author found a scientific article entitled "The Intersectionality of Gender Discrimination Impact on Beth Harmon's Identity Development in *The Queen's Gambit*" by Prasetyaningrum & Ahdiani (2024), which highlights the influence of gender discrimination on the formation of character identity using Erikson's intersectionality and identity development theory, this study emphasizes the internal dynamics of the character from the perspective of human motivation and needs (Prasetyaningrum & Ahdiani, 2024). The primary focus is on how women's ambitions, as depicted through the character of Beth, are formed through a complex process of fulfilling psychological and social needs. Thus, the main gap that this study seeks to fill is the absence of a survey that explicitly links the journey of Beth Harmon's ambitions with the five stages of Maslow's hierarchy of needs in a complete and structured manner while also reflecting its relevance to the dynamics of women's careers and self-actualization today. This study combines character analysis, developmental psychology approaches, and contemporary socio-cultural contexts that have not been the primary focus of previous studies.

Method

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method to examine the journey of ambition and self-actualization of Beth Harmon, the main female character in the series *The Queen's Gambit* (2020), based on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. This research method includes three main aspects: data sources, data collection techniques, and data analysis techniques. The primary data source in this study is the television series *The Queen's Gambit* (2020) directed by Scott Frank and released through the Netflix platform. All of seven episodes in the series were thoroughly observed to identify scenes that reflect the fulfillment of Maslow's five human needs: physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. According to the research topic, supporting data were obtained from the literature and previous research. This study expands on this

study by linking the psychological development of the characters directly to each stage of need in Maslow's theory.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth observation of the serial. Observations focused on visual and narrative elements that marked changes in the characters' psychological condition and motivation. Qualitative film analysis was conducted by close reading of scenes, dialogues, expressions, and character dynamics related to the study's focus (Giannetti, 2014). The researcher noted relevant episodes and the time the scenes appeared and analyzed the characters' behavior and interactions, which described Beth's struggle to achieve her ambitions and self-actualization needs.

The analysis process uses Maslow's humanistic psychology theory as a framework. Each character development phase is categorized based on the five motivational needs proposed by Maslow to understand how the character's ambitions and self-actualization achievements develop over time. In addition, this study also explores how Beth's journey reflects the aspirations of today's women in building identity, gaining recognition, and asserting existence in professional and social spaces.

Results

The character journey of Beth Harmon in *The Queen's Gambit* illustrates the complexity of her psychological needs as an individual and a woman living in a male-dominated social space. Based on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, Beth's experience can be studied as a gradual process of fulfilling five basic human needs, from physiological needs to self-actualization (Rojas et al., 2023). As emphasized by Maslow, Dar & Sakthivel (2022), This process not only reflects the character's internal dynamics in achieving her ambitions but also shows how personal motivation is shaped by the social context surrounding her.

"It is so easy to accept basic need gratification as an a priori determinant of the opposite of hostility, i.e., friendliness" (Maslow, 1970).

In addition, he emphasized that dissatisfaction with basic needs, such as safety, love, or self-esteem, will cause serious obstacles in psychological development.

"If we accept the concept of gratification health (or happiness health), we implicitly align ourselves... with those who postulate some positive growth tendency in the organism which, from within, drives it to fuller development" (Maslow, 1970)

The quote emphasizes that Beth's struggle shows career achievements and the inner battle to fulfill emotional and existential needs in the search for identity as an ambitious woman. To understand these dynamics in depth, this discussion will answer two main focuses. First, the process of self-actualization of the character Beth Harmon is analyzed through the five levels of needs in Abraham Maslow's theory of needs by looking at how each stage of need affects the development of her ambition. Second, how the reflection of today's women's ambitions is depicted in Beth's character, especially about the struggle to gain recognition, build identity, and assert existence in a professional and social space full of gender challenges. These two formulations are the basis for analyzing Beth's character journey as a reflection of the spirit of modern women who strive for success and become the best version of themselves in a world full of limitations.

Beth's Self-Actualization Process Based on Maslow's Five Stages of Needs

The main female character, Beth Harmon, is known to be quiet and a genius. She has a personality that tends to be withdrawn due to childhood trauma, including the loss

of her mother in an accident she witnessed herself, which can be seen in picture 1, which is a scene in episode 1, minute 03:43.



Picture 1. Beth survived the accident



Picture 2. Providing sedatives

While in the orphanage, Beth began to learn the game of chess from a janitor, Mr. Shaibel, and since then, Beth has shown extraordinary intelligence in the game. She practiced using her imagination and the help of sedatives given routinely by the orphanage, which can be seen in Figure 2, Scene Episode 1, minute 37:37. At the age of 9, Beth could play chess and fight adults. Beth played chess in her imagination, and she took sedatives given by the orphanage at night. By practicing using her mind, she was able to fight adults. It can be seen in the dialogue at minute 37:37-37:44, episode 1.

Mr. Ganz: Mr. Shaibel said you play a few games every Sunday. What do you in between?

Beth: I play in my head.

(Frank, 2020, 37:37-37:44, episode 1)

In the dialogue in episode 2, minutes 27:14-27:26, Beth conveys her intention to work, even if it means washing dishes, to earn an income.

Beth: I could work in a store or washes dishes somewhere.

Mrs. Wheatley: Wash dishes?

Beth: I'd like to make some money.

Mrs. Wheatley: Oh, to buy clothes with, I suspect.

Beth: To enter chess tournaments.

(Frank, 2020, *The Queen's Gambit* 26: 14-26: 26, episode 2)

Within Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory framework, Beth Harmon's journey can be seen as a gradual process of realizing her ambition to fulfill basic human needs. One of the earliest forms of Beth's ambition is seen in her desire to earn money to enter her first chess tournament. This desire reflects the fulfillment of physiological needs and the beginning of the need for financial security, which Maslow believes is the primary foundation in the development of human motivation. Maslow believed that physiological demands such as food, shelter, and economic stability drive human behavior at its most fundamental level (Desmet & Fokkinga, 2020).

Beth, as an orphan living in an orphanage, has no access to economic resources. Therefore, when she wants to join a tournament, she expresses her desire to work, even washing dishes, to collect money. This action shows that Beth's motivation in the early stages is not merely an abstract drive but is also closely related to real-life needs that form the basis for the formation of ambitions that are in line with Maslow's assumption that unmet basic needs will become the primary focus of an individual's attention, before moving on to higher needs. Her adoptive mother, Mrs. Wheatley, thought the money would be used to buy clothes. Beth firmly stated that her goal was to register for a chess tournament. However, her adoptive mother did not financially support her wishes.

Beth did not give up. Instead, she wrote a letter to Mr. Shaibel, the orphanage caretaker who first introduced her to chess, and asked for financial assistance to enter the

competition, which was granted. In the scene in Figure 3, minute 31:17 of episode 2, shown with a close-up shot technique, Beth opens a reply envelope containing money from Mr. Shaibel. She utilizes the money to register for her first chess competition. This move demonstrates that meeting fundamental needs in the form of cash is a necessary step for Beth to realize her chess dreams and potential.



Picture 3. Get some money from Mr. Shaibel



Picture 4. Beth has sex with a stranger

Beth Harmon's ambition is also reflected in her efforts to have a permanent and decent place to live, especially after she had to live alone. As an orphan who previously only depended on her adoptive mother, Beth did not have a private home. After the death of her adoptive mother, she took the initiative to contact her stepfather, the only relative who might still be able to help Beth confirm the ownership status of the house they once lived in. Beth's efforts paid off when her stepfather said the house was entirely his. This success became an essential point in Beth's life because, besides fulfilling the need for a place to live, it also provided a sense of security and stability that she had not previously had. According to Maslow's theory, after physiological needs are met, humans will naturally try to fulfill the next need, namely, the need for security. This need includes protection, stability, order, and freedom from fear and anxiety. Maslow emphasized that the need for security is critical because if not met, individuals can develop negative views of the environment and experience instability in their behavior. As emphasized by Desmet & Fokkinga (2020), the need for safety includes physical safety, financial security, social stability, and conservation; its fulfillment makes individuals feel that their environment is free from threats and risks.

Beth gains physical protection by having her own home and builds a solid psychological foundation to support her development to higher levels of needs, such as love, self-esteem, and, ultimately, self-actualization. In a brief phone conversation at 43:34-43:36, her stepfather states that Beth can have the house completely.

Mr. Wheatley: "Say you can have the house. He knows how to reach me."

(Frank, 2020 43: 34-43: 36, episode 4)

One form of Beth Harmon's ambition in fulfilling Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is seen at the level of physiological needs, especially related to sexual drive. In *The Queen's Gambit* series, Beth is depicted as a young woman who begins to show interest in exploring her sexual desires, as seen in the scene when Beth asks her adoptive mother for permission to go home late at night on the grounds of attending an event with her friends from her Russian language class. Beth's interest in sexual experiences as an adolescent stems from a desire to meet basic biological demands. Maslow defines physiological needs as the primary necessities, including food, water, sleep, and sexual urge. He claimed that these requirements are critical and, if not addressed, can take over an individual's attention and behavior. Under certain conditions, humans will use all their energy and capacity to meet these basic needs before moving on to higher needs. Physiological needs are the basic needs of any living organism: the requirements for the body to survive, such as water, oxygen, food, and sleep. Physiological needs influence behaviour through direct

desires or cravings (Desmet & Fokkinga, 2020). It can be seen in the dialogue when Beth asks her adoptive mother for permission to come home late at night on the grounds of attending an event with her friends from her Russian language class.

Beth: Hey, I just wanted to let you know that I'm with some friends. From my Russian class.

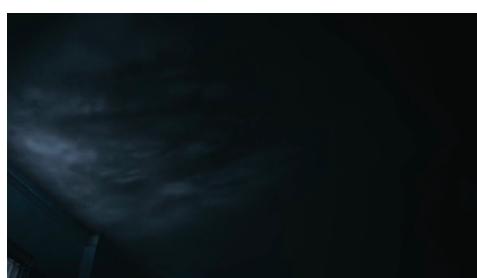
Mrs. Wheatley: Oh.

(Frank, 2020, 2: 45-2: 47, episode 4)

The permission shows that Beth is starting to enter the world of adult relationships and feels the need to undergo experiences that are considered common among teenagers her age. Furthermore, Beth's sexual urges are increasingly apparent when she decides to have sex with someone she has just met. In Figure 4, at minute 4:07 of episode 4, Beth is depicted as having sex without any clear emotional attachment or relationship. This scene uses a medium shot technique that shows that the action is driven by Beth's curiosity and desire to fulfill her sexual desires, not because of love. This behavior reflects Beth's search to fulfill her most basic needs before moving on to higher needs in Maslow's hierarchy.

Beth Harmon's ambition to fulfill her need for security is shown through her efforts to overcome anxiety and past trauma. One way she does this is by relying on sedatives that were introduced to her as a child while living in an orphanage. The use of these drugs is a form of Beth's mechanism to create inner peace and a sense of control over situations that threaten her emotional stability. In several scenes, Beth uses sedatives to calm her mind, especially when experiencing stress or uncertainty. According to Maslow (1970), after physiological needs are met, humans will try to fulfill the need for safety, which includes physical security, order, protection from fear, and psychological stability. Maslow emphasized that if the need for safety is not met in the long term, individuals can develop a pessimistic perspective on the environment and experience instability in their behavior and emotions. Beth's behavior in relying on sedatives can be understood as her attempt to fulfill the need for safety that has not been met naturally in her life.

The medication was initially administered regularly as part of the daily routine at the shelter, but later became a tool for Beth to calm her mind, especially when she felt emotionally unsafe. The influence of Beth's past, especially traumatic memories of her parents, caused her to experience anxiety that often occurred before going to bed. In these situations, Beth used the sedative to create visual illusions that gave her a sense of control and calm. Figure 5, minute 11:44 of episode 1, shows her staring at the ceiling of her room and imagining abstract patterns.



Picture 5. Beth's vision of abstract thought patterns on the ceiling



Picture 6. Beth's vision of abstract thought patterns on the ceiling

The medium shot technique in Figure 5 shows Beth's bedroom, which is the background for the emergence of the imagination. The abstract pattern is not just an imaginative visualization but a form of Beth's escape to calm her mind from the shadows of a frightening past and a symbol of an effort to create a sense of security within herself.

According to Maslow, the need for love and belonging is a human need different from physiological needs, such as sex, because it relates to emotional attachment and warm social interactions. Love includes giving and receiving affection, forming meaningful relationships, and being part of a group or family. As Desmet & Fokkinga (2020) explain that relatedness means having warm, mutual, trusting relationships with people you care about, rather than feeling isolated or unable to make personal connections.

In this context, Beth Harmon shows her ambition to fulfill these needs through her relationship with her adoptive mother, Mrs. Wheatley. After losing her biological parents, Beth slowly finds a new form of affection in this relationship, which gives her a sense of acceptance and love. Maslow explains that after physiological and safety needs are met, individuals will be motivated to fulfill the needs for love and belonging, such as having family, close friends, and being part of a community (Maslow, 1970). He emphasizes that individuals who do not have strong emotional relationships tend to feel isolated and experience disturbances in their psychological development. Therefore, Beth's emotional bond with Mrs. Wheatley is essential in fulfilling one of the main layers in the hierarchy of human needs.

After losing her parents, Beth slowly finds a different form of love in her relationship with her adoptive mother. This form of affection is depicted in Figure 6, in the scene at minute 8:59 of episode 4, which shows Beth receiving a watch bracelet gift from her mother. The close-up technique in the shot highlights the words "WITH LOVE FROM MOTHER" on the bracelet, which symbolizes that Beth receives affection and begins to feel a genuine emotional attachment. Through this moment, Beth is no longer just an orphan living alone but a woman who begins to feel the importance of emotional closeness and care.

Esteem needs are the next stage in Maslow's hierarchy of needs after the love and belonging needs are met. These needs include the desire to receive appreciation, recognition, self-confidence, and personal achievements that are recognized by others. In *The Queen's Gambit* series, Beth Harmon shows a strong ambition to fulfill these needs through various brilliant achievements in chess. Beth Harmon's ambition to be recognized as a professional chess player and her efforts to continue growing her skills demonstrate a strong desire within her to be recognized for her ability and potential.

Maslow explains that self-esteem needs are divided into two types: self-esteem from within oneself (such as self-confidence and independence) and recognition from others (such as status, prestige, and appreciation). Desmet & Fokkinga (2020) support this by stating that esteem needs fall into two categories. The first contains needs for validation from others, such as status, respect, recognition, and reputation. The second includes needs for positive self-evaluation, such as competence, confidence in ability, accomplishment, and skills mastery. He states that individuals who can fulfill these needs tend to be more independent, confident, and motivated to achieve self-actualization. Therefore, Beth's success in chess is not only evidence of her intellectual ability but also part of fulfilling her psychological needs for self-esteem and social recognition. Self-esteem is the next stage in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This need is related to self-recognition and achievement, which can increase self-confidence. In *The Queen's Gambit* series, Beth Harmon shows a strong ambition to fulfill this need through achieving accomplishments in chess. From the beginning, she shows a desire to win and a reluctance to give up. The following dialogue explains when Beth still wants to continue the game even though she has technically lost.

Beth: Mr. Shaibel: Yes, you have resigned the game.

*Beth: You didn't tell me that un the rules.
Mr. Shaibel: It's not rule, it's spormanship.
Beth: I wanna finish.*

(Frank, 2020 25: 15-25: 23, episode 1)

The dialogue reflects that since early on, Beth was driven to complete something perfectly and show her full abilities. She wanted to prove that she was not just an ordinary orphanage child but someone with great potential. This dialogue shows Beth's competitive spirit and her desire to be recognized as a tough player who does not give up easily. Her ambition for recognition became clearer when she appeared in various tournaments, including when she defeated a world grandmaster and won the top title in chess.



Picture 7. Beth has become a chess grand master



Picture 8. Beth cleaned the blackboard eraser every lesson to observe Mr. Shaibel playing chess

In the image, the medium close-up technique shows Beth's happy and proud expression, indicating that her need for recognition has finally been met. This victory not only brought her international recognition but also confirmed her position as a young woman who has successfully conquered a male-dominated world.

According to Abraham Maslow, self-actualization is the highest peak in the hierarchy of human needs. It is the drive to realize one's full potential and become the best version of oneself. (Kaufman, 2023). Self-actualization describes the level of psychological maturity in which a person acts based on meaningful interests, values, and life goals. In *The Queen's Gambit* series, Beth Harmon's drive to achieve self-actualization is seen since childhood, when she routinely cleans the chalkboard eraser just to be able to watch Mr. Shaibel play chess. Although she did not fully understand the game at that time, her curiosity and great enthusiasm for learning showed the seeds of self-actualization growing within her.

Maslow explains that self-actualization is the highest stage in human development, which can only be achieved if the previous basic needs have been met relatively stably. At this stage, individuals are driven to seek meaning, express creativity, and use their full capacity to develop. Desmet & Fokkinga (2020) explains that the need for self-actualization includes the drive to achieve one's maximum potential, including the need for personal growth, creativity, morality, and the search for meaning in life. If these needs are not met, individuals can experience psychological conditions such as boredom, loss of enthusiasm, and feelings of emptiness. By continuing to develop herself in the world of chess and trying to become a grandmaster, Beth not only fulfills her ambition professionally but also realizes her deepest potential as a form of self-actualization. It can be seen in Figure 6, in the scene, minute 15: 27, episode 1, which uses the medium shot technique to show Beth's habits after every lesson. She always offers to clean the eraser

to be able to observe Mr. Shaibel's game. Her friend at the orphanage then tells Beth about the sedative usually taken before bed.



Picture 9. Beth was taught to keep a sedative pill before bed



Picture 10. Beth's imagination about playing chess with the help of sedatives

Based on picture 9, scene minute 16:13, episode 1, the medium close-up technique shows how Beth stores the medicine for later use. She pretends to swallow the medicine in front of the caretaker of the orphanage when, in fact, she stores it. This sedative turns out to help Beth visualize a chess game in her mind. The ceiling of her room turns into a chessboard, as shown in picture 10, scene minute, 16:59, episode 1. Using the long shot technique shows how Beth's imagination helps Beth concentrate fully on chess.

Beth's ambition to realize self-actualization in chess is also depicted through her dialogue with Mr. Shaibel.

Beth: I'm not a stranger. I live here. I already know some of it.. from watching.

Mr. Shaibel: Girls do not play chess.

Beth: That one moves up and down, or back and forth, all the way, if there's space to move in. But that one only goes up. That tall one can go any way it wants.

Mr. Shaibel: And this one?

(Frank, 2020 20: 57- 22: 03, episode 1)

The dialogue shows that Beth wants to learn and has a big ambition. Even though she is a girl, she wants to be able to play chess well. She convinces Mr. Shaibel that she can play chess based on her observations. Beth continues to practice imaginatively, even defeating Mr. Shaibel often. Beth's ambition to explore her potential continues to grow. Even when she has become a champion, she continues to practice to face the next opponents. Explained in the following dialogue.

Mrs. Wheatley: What are you doing?

Beth: Replaying my earlier games.

(Frank, 2020 6: 27-6: 32, episode 3)

Despite experiencing defeat from Grandmaster Borgov, as told at minutes 38:58-39:22 of episode 4, Beth did not give up.

Beth: "From that point on, the whole game was like a foregone conclusion. I.. I couldn't fight this feeling that I'd already lost."

(Frank, 2020 38: 58-39:22, episode 4)

In her sadness, Beth lost her stepmother, which is seen in picture 9, using the medium close-up technique. However, although she lost her stepmother, she loved her stepmother very much and was still disappointed in her defeat against Grandmaster Borgov, Beth still got up and continued her struggle.



Picture 9. Beth's stepmother died moments after she had just suffered a defeat to a chess grandmaster
(Frank, 39 43, episode 4)

In picture 10, Beth continues to use sedatives to help her focus on practicing chess at night. Even so, she slowly begins to find a way out of her addiction. When she returns home, she is approached by Harry, who is shown in picture 11 using a medium shot technique, her opponent in Kentucky, who brings her a chess strategy book as a form of support.



Picture 10. Beth with the shadow of the chess pieces in her imagination
(Frank, 28: 23, episode 5)



Picture 11. Harry visits a depressed Beth and brings her a chess strategy book
(Frank, 4 38, episode 5)



Picture 12. Beth reads a chess strategy book by Benny Watts while going against Benny Watts
(Frank, 31: 17, episode 5)

Beth also shows her efforts to understand her opponents. In picture 12, Beth reads a strategy book by Benny Watts before competing against Benny. She prepares herself with confidence, as Benny emphasizes in the following dialogue.

*Benny: The key is not to be tentative. You have to play with absolute confidence.
(Frank, 2020 3-46-31: 53, episode 5)*

Beth goes to Benny's house to practice and begins socializing with other chess players, leaving her introverted nature behind. In the following dialogue, she begins to understand the importance of teamwork in the game.

Benny: And you know why they're the best players in the world?

Beth: They have the best suits?

*Benny: It's because they play together as team, especially during adjournments.
(Frank 2020, 8: 54-9: 05, episode 5)*

Working together made Beth realize that to defeat Borgov, she had to learn to work together and not rely entirely on herself. Beth finally chose to live a healthy lifestyle, quit alcohol and drugs, and began to prepare herself thoroughly by relying on her talents and herself healthily and correctly in a press conference before the international tournament, which can be seen in the following dialogue.

Reporter: Miss Harmon, do you feel good about rematch with Grandmaster Borgov?

Beth: Very good. I slept on the plane, so I arrived in Paris without jet lag. I'm very well rested. At night, I stay in my room, and study Mr. Borgov's old games.

(Frank, 2020 21: 09-21: 29, episode 6)

Through her long struggle and hard work, Beth proved she could actualize herself, develop her talents, and become a better person. Beth was free from dependency and more emotionally mature. Beth Harmon managed to fulfill all levels in the hierarchy of needs, according to Abraham Maslow, from the most basic needs to self-actualization. (Mustofa, 2022). Her struggle began with fulfilling physiological needs such as food, shelter, and sexual satisfaction to achieve the needs for security, love, self-esteem, and, ultimately, self-actualization as a chess grandmaster. Her success in participating in her first chess tournament with money borrowed from Mr. Shaibel reflects her determination to realize her potential, even without family support. Beth also managed to become financially and emotionally independent after having her own house and feeling the love of her adoptive mother, which shaped her identity as a woman who not only struggled to overcome past trauma but also rose to become an intelligent, independent woman and was recognized internationally for her achievements in the world of chess. With all these achievements, Beth not only succeeded in fulfilling her ambitions but also proved that women can fight for their careers to the top while representing the achievement of self-actualization, as explained in Maslow's theory.

Reflection of Modern Women's Ambition in the Character of Beth Harmon

The character of Beth Harmon in *The Queen's Gambit* is a symbolic representation of the ambition of modern women who refuse to submit to traditional gender boundaries (Wolf, 1991). Since childhood, Beth has been depicted as a woman with extraordinary intelligence and a strong determination to penetrate the masculine world of chess. Beth challenges male dominance in the challenge and shows that women can create a space for success based on capacity, not gender. This reflection is relevant in the social context of today's women, where women still face various forms of structural barriers in developing their careers (Dewi & Pratama, 2023). Although gender equality policies have been introduced, women's career development patterns in Indonesia and other countries still show structural vulnerabilities in the labor market (Bridges et al., 2021). And, this is reinforced by Giligan (1982) who stated that Women not only define themselves in a context of human relationships but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care.

When women hold lower positions, earn lower wages, and have fewer prospects for advancement than their male colleagues, it constitutes injustice, including horizontal and vertical discrimination (Breda et al., 2020). Beth's character, who continues to thrive in the face of personal trauma, social pressures, and an unequal work environment, reflects similar struggles experienced by many women today. Beth shows that women's ambitions are not just about economic achievement but also about their existential fulfillment to be recognized, valued, and given space to shape their own identities and futures.

In *The Queen's Gambit* series, In Beth's case, characters like Mr. Shaibel and Benny Watts act as bridges in her career and identity development, demonstrating the importance of support systems in shaping a woman's success. This is in line with Tabassum & Nayak (2021) findings that social context, environmental support, and real opportunities play a significant role in overcoming structural inequalities and enabling women to reach their full potential.

Thus, Beth Harmon is not just a fictional figure struggling on a chessboard but a symbol of today's women. A woman who wants to design her own life, free from the constraints of patriarchal norms, believes that success is not determined by gender but by her determination and ability.

Conclusion

Beth Harmon's character in *The Queen's Gambit* shows a life journey that reflects Abraham Maslow's theory of needs, from basic needs to achieving self-actualization. Beth struggles to survive and tries to find meaning, identity, and purpose in her life through the world of chess. This study shows that achieving self-actualization is not instant, especially for women facing various social and psychological pressures. Through Beth's character, we can see how the struggle to deal with past trauma, the search for identity, and the determination to grow can be essential to personal growth.

The important conclusion of this study is that Beth Harmon represents a woman who dares to determine her direction in life. She illustrates that women have the ambition, capacity, and right to realize their best potential. This story is about chess and the strength to rise and overcome the limitations often attached to society. By viewing the character of Beth through the lens of humanistic psychology, this study confirms that fictional characters can be a medium for reflection on human challenges and strengths, especially in the context of today's women. This study also opens opportunities to see popular works as sources of psychological and social understanding relevant to real life.

Suggestions

Future research could expand this study by exploring the ambition and self-actualization of female characters in other literary or cinematic works to provide a more comprehensive understanding of modern women's representation. Comparative studies between *The Queen's Gambit* and similar narratives focusing on women's pursuit of ambition and identity in different cultural contexts would also be valuable. Additionally, further research could investigate how social structures and gender expectations influence women's psychological development and self-actualization in fiction. For practitioners and scholars, it is recommended to integrate feminist and psychological perspectives in literary studies to encourage more inclusive discussions about women's empowerment and self-development.

Acknowledgment

The researcher would like to express sincere gratitude to the supervisors and lecturers of the Master's Program in Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Diponegoro, for their continuous guidance, constructive feedback, and academic support throughout this research. Special thanks are also extended to the academic community of the Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Diponegoro, for providing facilities and a supportive environment that made this study possible.

References

Amanda, N. Z. (2025). Bidak Ratu dalam Catur Patriarki: Analisis Psikoanalitik Feminis Terhadap The Queens Gambit (2020). *Jurnal IMAJI*, 16(1), 24–32. <https://doi.org/10.52290/i.v16i1.257>

Breda, T., Jouini, E., Napp, C., & Thebault, G. (2020). Gender Stereotypes Can Explain The Gender-Equality Paradox. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 117(49), 31063–31069. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2008704117>

Bridges, D., Wulff, E., & Bambrry, L. (2021). Resilience for Gender Inclusion: Developing a Model for Women in Male-Dominated Occupations. *Work and Organization*, 30(1), 263–279. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/gwao.12672>

Dar, S. A., & Sakthivel, D. P. (2022). Maslow's Hierarchyy of Needs is Still Relevant in the 21's Century. *Journal of Learning and Educational Policy*, 2(5), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.55529/jlep25.1.9>

Desmet, P., & Fokkinga, S. (2020). Beyond Maslow's Pyramid: Introducing a Typology of Thirteen Fundamental Needs for Human-Centered Designed. *Multimodal Technologies and Interaction*, 38(4), 1-22. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/mti4030038>

Dewi, A. A. S. N., & Pratama, A. D. Y. (2023). The Analysis of Sexist Language in the Queen's Gambit Drama Series. *LINGUA: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Pengajarannya*, 20(1), 127-160. <https://doi.org/10.30957/lingua.v20i1.815>

Frank, S. (2020). *The Queen of Gambit*. Netflix.

Giannetti, L. (2014). Understanding Movies. In *Pearson Education, Inc.*

Giligan, C. (1982). *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge. <https://archive.org/details/indifferentvoice0000unse/page/n5/mode/2up>

Kaufman, S. B. (2023). Self-Actualizing People in the 21st Century: Integration with Contemporary Theory and Research on Personality and Well-Being. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 63(1), 51-83. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0022167818809187>

Lect, A., & Abdulhasan, Z. (2024). *A Marxist Feminist Study in Walter Tevis 'The Queen 's Gambit*. 24(February), 33-42.

Lung, D., Maru, M. G., & Rorimpandey, R. S. (2022). Ambition As Seen in Robert Louis Stevenson'S Themaster of Ballantræ: a Winter'S Tale. *Kompetensi*, 2(02), 1143-1153. <https://doi.org/10.53682/kompetensi.v2i02.4742>

Maslow, A. (1970). *Motivation and Personality* (2Har ed.). Harper and Row. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.198216>

Mustofa, A. Z. (2022). Hierarchy of Human Needs: A Humanistic Psychology Approach of Abraham Maslow. *Kawanua International Journal of Multicultural Studies*, 3(2), 30-35. <https://doi.org/10.30984/kijms.v3i2.282>

Prasetyaningrum, D. A., & Ahdiani, U. (2024). The intersectionality of gender discrimination impact on Beth Harmon's identity development in The Queen's Gambit. *NOTION: Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Culture*, 6(2), 171-189. <https://doi.org/10.12928/notion.v6i2.10522>

Rojas, M., Meendez, A., & Watkins-Fassler, K. (2023). The Hierarchy of Needs Empirical Examination of Maslow's Theory and Lessons for Development. *World Development*, 165. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106185>

Tabassum, N., & Nayak, B. S. (2021). Gender Stereotypes and Their Impact on Women's Career Progressions from a Managerial Perspective. *IIM Kozhikode Society and Management Review*, 10(2), 192-208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2277975220975513>

Wolf, N. (1991). *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Agants Women*. New York:W.Morrow. <https://archive.org/details/beautymyth0000naom>