



Uncovering Alternative Ways of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in Bessie Head's "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses"

Yosafat Andrew Gabriel Kameo^{1,*}

Universitas Sanata Dharma

*Corresponding author. Email: andrewkameo.001.001@gmail.com

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Abstract. This study explores the process of achieving self-actualization in Brille, a character in Bessie Head's short story "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" who manages to fulfill higher-order needs e.g., esteem, belonging despite being deprived of basic necessities e.g., physical security during his imprisonment. We utilize Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a framework, employing a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the short story and elucidate Brille's need fulfillment. By examining how Brille adapts and finds meaning in extreme circumstances, this research proposes an alternative perspective on self-actualization, potentially demonstrating that even without fulfilling basic needs entirely, individuals can achieve higher-level needs. This contributes to the understanding of human adaptability in psychology and literature, suggesting that extreme situations may not always hinder personal growth.

Keywords: *Maslowian needs; Brille; literary analysis; Bessie Head*

Abstrak. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi proses pencapaian aktualisasi diri dalam diri Brille, seorang karakter dalam cerita pendek "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" karya Bessie Head, yang berhasil memenuhi kebutuhan tingkat tinggi seperti harga diri dan rasa memiliki meskipun tidak memiliki kebutuhan dasar (seperti keamanan fisik) selama dipenjarakan. Kami menggunakan hierarki kebutuhan Maslow sebagai kerangka kerja, dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif untuk menganalisis cerita pendek dan menjelaskan pemenuhan kebutuhan Brille. Dengan meneliti bagaimana Brille beradaptasi dan menemukan makna dalam keadaan yang ekstrim, penelitian ini mengusulkan perspektif alternatif tentang aktualisasi diri, yang berpotensi menunjukkan bahwa bahkan tanpa memenuhi kebutuhan dasar secara keseluruhan, individu dapat mencapai kebutuhan yang lebih tinggi. Hal ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman tentang kemampuan beradaptasi manusia dalam psikologi dan literatur, yang menunjukkan bahwa situasi ekstrem mungkin tidak selalu menghalangi pertumbuhan pribadi.

Kata Kunci: *Teori Kebutuhan Maslow; Brille; analisis sastra; Bessie Head*

Introduction

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, a revered Indonesian author, and Nelson Mandela, a powerful anti-apartheid activist from South Africa, faced immense challenges in their fight for what they believed in. Both men challenged the political landscape of their times, leading to imprisonment for their actions. Pramoedya's association with communist ideals resulted in years of incarceration and house arrest under harsh conditions (Mrázek, 2000). Mandela, a leader in the fight against racial segregation, was imprisoned for over two decades (Sampson, 2016). Despite these hardships, neither man faltered. Pramoedya continued to write, and his books became immensely popular. Mandela, upon his release,

rose to become the president of South Africa and dismantled the apartheid regime. Their stories are a testament to the human spirit's ability to endure and achieve positive change even in the face of adversity.

The world of literature offers a vast landscape to explore this topic alongside real-life experiences. Literature, as Terry Eagleton (1976) suggests, acts as a lens through which we can examine the world and its complexities. Authors use their words to capture the essence of human lives and experiences, weaving them into narratives that spark new ideas and perspectives. As Mitravinda (2020) highlights, literature has the power to enrich and adapt our understanding of the world, depending on the story's context and the author's voice. This allows literature to be a powerful tool for depicting the intricacies of human behavior across all situations, even those filled with tension. A prime example of this can be found in "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses," a captivating work by the African writer Bessie Head.

Bessie Head's "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" (1973) tells the story of Brille, an unlikely political prisoner. Though his involvement was minimal, a stolen bunch of grapes landed him in jail. Despite his quiet and introspective nature, Brille is known for his sharp wit and strong moral compass. Symbolically, he's described as nearsighted, needing glasses to see clearly. Yet, within the prison walls, Brille finds a community—Span One, a group of unapologetic political prisoners considered the most dangerous. Fearless like his fellow inmates, Brille becomes an enigma by the story's end. He seems to possess both darkness and virtue, revealing a hidden power over the prison guard, Warder Hannetjie. The narrative cleverly explores Brille's complex needs. Though his basic necessities like food are met, they are tightly controlled. He has a form of protection from the outside world, but it's a world confined by prison walls. Interestingly, his self-esteem remains high, perhaps due to his newfound control over the prison's power dynamics. Brille's situation showcases the intricate interplay of human needs and the ability to find stability even in unexpected circumstances.

The ability to maintain stability in the face of adversity appears, from a layperson's perspective, to be a function of luck or bravery. However, this observation presents a potential challenge to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which posits a bottom-up progression towards self-actualization, the highest level of the hierarchy (Maslow, 1943). This hierarchy suggests that individuals must fulfill basic physiological and safety needs before progressing towards higher-order needs like esteem and self-actualization. Further research is necessary to explore how this observed stability in harsh conditions aligns with Maslow's theoretical framework. Notably, studies by Yunaidi et al. (2020), Ghazali (2020), and Truman et al. (2017) offer valuable insights into this topic.

Yunaidi et al. (2020) analyze the character Sophie from "The Rooftoppers" to argue for the necessity of fulfilling basic needs before progressing towards higher needs in Maslow's hierarchy. Separated from her mother in a shipwreck, Sophie seemingly lacks the ability to meet her own physiological needs. However, her guardian, Charles, ensures these basic requirements are met, such as providing food and shelter. The study suggests that Sophie ultimately achieves self-actualization, reuniting with her lost mother. Similarly, Ghazali (2020) examines Elinor in "Sense and Sensibility," who faces challenges in fulfilling physiological needs, particularly securing shelter, after her father's death. In this state of upheaval, Elinor prioritizes finding a home, highlighting the importance of safety needs as a foundation for addressing higher-order needs in Maslow's theory. Finally, Truman et al. (2017) explore Pi's situation in *The Life of Pi*, stranded on

an island with a tiger. Pi's struggle to meet his and the tiger's most basic physiological needs, such as finding food for survival, underscores the primacy of these needs in Maslow's hierarchy.

Several scholars have identified limitations in applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs to understand complex human behavior in all situations (e.g., Benson & Dundis, 2003). Maslow's theory proposes a linear progression, suggesting that individuals must fulfill basic physiological and safety needs before moving on to higher-order needs such as esteem and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). However, cases like Brille's in "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" challenge this linear view. This study aims to address this gap in current research by exploring alternative frameworks for understanding how individuals, despite unmet lower-level needs, might pursue fulfillment of esteem and self-actualization needs. Through an analysis of Brille's character, this paper investigates the question: If physiological and safety needs are deprived, what factors might contribute to the motivation to achieve esteem and self-actualization? By examining such complexities, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of human behavior and identity formation.

Methods

This study employs a three-step qualitative approach. First, following Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) as the theoretical framework, the story's elements will be categorized according to the five hierarchical levels: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Second, the identified data points will be examined for deeper understanding. Finally, based on the analysis, this paper will assess potential shortcomings in Maslow's framework within the context of the story and propose an alternative model for understanding the character's motivations.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs proposes a five-tiered model that explains human motivation. At the base of the pyramid lie physiological needs, the most fundamental requirements for survival like food, water, and shelter. These needs take priority, driving us to maintain homeostasis and satiate basic urges. Once these conditions are met, humans seek safety and security, encompassing physical protection, stability, and freedom from fear. The third tier focuses on love and belonging. We crave social connections, affection, and a sense of community, which can be fulfilled through romantic relationships, families, and friendships. Esteem needs emerge after love needs are addressed. These encompass feelings of self-worth, respect, accomplishment, and recognition, both from ourselves and others. Finally, at the pinnacle of the hierarchy lies the need for self-actualization, the desire to reach our full potential and realize our unique potential.

Maslow's theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human motivation. The theory suggests that individuals must fulfill their lower-level needs before they can progress to higher-level needs, following a somewhat linear progression (Maslow, 1943). Maslow also acknowledges that human motivation is complex and not always linear (King-Hill, 2015). For example, some people prioritize social connections and the need for love over their physiological needs. In other cases, individuals sacrifice their safety or security needs to achieve higher-level needs, such as self-actualization. But the general progression of needs remains, starting from the most basic and working its way up until the advanced needs.

Aside from the theoretical framework, as mentioned above, in collecting its data, this paper used the qualitative method. By definition, a qualitative method is a method that uses the perspectives from other data and context to understand an experience or event (Highnett

& McDermott, 2015). Since the objects of discussion are Bessie Head's short story, the qualitative method involves closely reading the primary data and later explaining it in better detail by referring to other parts of the story and its context.

Finding and Discussion

This section analyzes Brille's needs as depicted in the preceding narrative. Drawing upon the descriptions provided in the methods section, a table will be constructed to categorize evidence of Brille's needs based on Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1943). The categorized needs, now transformed into data points, will undergo further examination. This process may involve providing additional context to certain data points or clarifying implicit needs. A thorough analysis is essential to substantiate the arguments presented in the subsequent discussion.

1. Physiological Needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs identifies physiological needs as the most fundamental level, encompassing basic requirements for survival such as food, water, and shelter (Maslow, 1943). These needs share similarities with Freud's concept of the id, a reservoir of primal desires focused on satisfying biological urges and seeking pleasure (Tyson, 2023). However, a key distinction exists. Maslow emphasizes the importance of fulfilling physiological needs to prevent them from dominating an individual's purpose, which could become solely focused on acquiring food and meeting biological demands (McLeod, 2018). Conversely, Freud's Superego, representing internalized social values and morals, can act as a counterbalance to the Id's impulses, potentially preventing an individual from solely pursuing the gratification of physiological needs.

Table 1. Identified data related to the physiological needs

Setting	Brille's physical condition	Sentence
Brille's initial physical condition	Thin and seemingly malnourished	Sentence 4 -... <i>He was a thin little fellow with a hollowed-out chest and comic knobby knees.</i>
The Prison's food condition	Lack of food and nutrients	Sentence 39 - " <i>The whole span goes three meals off.</i> " – Hanneljie Sentences 85 & 86 - <i>For about two weeks Span One lived in acute misery. The cabbages, tobacco, and conversations had been the pivot of jail life to them.</i>
Result	Having 'alternative' food	Sentence 91 - <i>But when the last shred (tobacco) had disappeared, it occurred to the comrades that they ought to be puzzled</i>

From the evidence above, several factors can determine Brille's physiological needs, such as his physical appearance, the mistreatment effect, and its result. Starting from Brille's physical appearance before being imprisoned, he can be considered malnourished for a grown man. His condition worsened and became much worse because of the mistreatment he received from the warder. He was given very little food with low nutritional value, did not have access to a variety of food, and was often forced to go for days without any food. The effect is visible, as shown in Table 1, Brille and the other characters have an immense greed for food, resulting in them finding alternative food such as tobacco. It is common knowledge that people engage in activities that act as distractions from physiological cravings. In Ruiru, Nairobi, groups of children sniff glue

and petrol as distractions from hunger (Cottrell-Boyce, 2011). In “The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses”, they use tobacco. Therefore, physiological need is the first step towards what Maslow calls a healthy human being, yet it is not provided by prisons or the government.

2. Security and Safety Needs

As previously stated, safety needs pertain to the pursuit of safety and security in order to avoid fear, harm, and peril. In the specific case of Brille's circumstances, the institution that could potentially offer him physical safety is the correctional facility. In order to examine the various safety needs in greater detail, please refer to the table provided below.

Table 2. Identified data related to security and safety needs

The Prison's Safety Condition	Sentences
Constant violations toward inmates by the Warder	<p>Sentence 51 - <i>The next thing Warder Hannetjie whipped out a knobkerrie and gave Brille several blows about the head.</i></p> <p>Sentences 81, 82, & 84 - <i>In fact, Span One as a whole was in constant trouble. Warder Hannetjie seemed to have eyes at the back of his head ... He found out how tobacco smoke was beaten into the ground, and he found out how conversations were whispered down the wind.</i></p>

Based on the aforementioned table, the correctional facility, which is intended to serve as a center for rehabilitating individuals, instead becomes a stark contrast to its intended purpose. The prison staff, who should act as caretakers, consequently become the perpetrators of harm towards the inmates. This action directly disregards Article 2 of the Human Rights Act, which mandates that prisons bear the responsibility of ensuring the well-being and safety of individuals in their custody. The government and correctional officers are held accountable for maintaining your safety, particularly in situations that may jeopardize your physical and mental state (“Safety in prison,” 2023).

Moreover, it is worth noting that inmates who sustain injuries as a result of this violence may experience further deterioration in their health due to the absence of qualified medical personnel (African Watch, 1996). Even a minor scar left untreated could lead to infection, let alone being subjected to beatings with a knobkerrie, a type of short club. Such brutality has the potential to cause internal bleeding, as was the case with Brille. In spite of this, Hannetjie continued to assault Brille, thus placing him in even greater danger beyond the realm of physical pain. Consequently, when observing the violations against the inmates, it becomes evident that the penal institution fails to prioritize the safety needs of its prisoners. Instead, their safety needs are flagrantly disregarded.

3. Love and Belonging Needs

The third tier of Maslow's hierarchy focuses on love and belonging needs, encompassing the desire for social connection, affection, and a sense of community (Maslow, 1943). Maslow posits that these needs typically emerge after physiological and safety needs are met. However, in Brille's case, the thwarted fulfillment of lower-level needs raises questions about the applicability of this linear progression. While the harsh prison environment undoubtedly hinders the development of healthy social bonds, the

possibility remains that Brille's needs for love and belonging might be partially fulfilled through unexpected relationships within the prison (as evidenced by the table). This possibility challenges the notion that Brille is destined for psychological decline due to unmet needs.

Table 3. Identified data related to the love and belonging's needs

The Relationship between Brille and Span One	Sentences
Teamwork	Sentence 29 - <i>And since they moved, thought, and acted as one, they had perfected every technique of group concealment.</i>
Good Communication	Sentences 14-16: <i>"We're in for trouble this time, comrades." "Why?" rippled back up the line. "Because he's not human," the reply rippled down, and yet only the crunching of the spades as they turned over the earth disturbed the stillness.</i>
Affection	Sentences 107 & 108 - <i>"Forget it, brother. You'll get shot."</i> Sentences 56 & 57 - <i>"Never mind, brother," they said. "What happens to one of us, happens to all."</i>

The table's data suggests that Brille's love needs are partially fulfilled through his relationship with Span One. This group functions as a surrogate community within the prison, offering a sense of belonging and mutual support (Erikson, 1977). The narrative highlights their teamwork, as evidenced by their collective watchfulness and willingness to warn each other of dangers (e.g., "You'll get shot"). Additionally, their communication transcends mere self-preservation, with Span One using language that conveys genuine concern for Brille's well-being. This is exemplified in their direct warnings despite his physical limitations. Notably, they rely on persuasion rather than force to deter him from risky actions, suggesting a level of trust and respect within the group. These observations challenge the notion that a harsh prison environment necessarily precludes the development of social bonds.

4. Esteem Needs

Maslow's hierarchy also includes esteem needs, which encompass the desire for feelings of self-worth, competence, achievement, and recognition (Maslow, 1943). Fulfilling these needs fosters confidence and a sense of value within individuals. Conversely, unmet esteem needs can contribute to feelings of inferiority and inadequacy (McLeod, 2007). Turning to Brille's case, the following table will examine how his esteem needs are reflected in the data.

Table 4. Identified data related to esteem needs

Brille's Self-Esteem	Sentences
Low – Receiving no respect from someone who is younger than him	Sentences 44-48 - <i>Why don't you say Baas. I'm your Baas. Why don't you say Baas, hey?" Brille blinked his eyes rapidly but by contrast, his voice was strangely calm.</i> <i>"I'm twenty years older than you," he said.</i>

	Sentences 42 & 43 - <i>“Look ‘ere,” he said, “I don’t take orders from a kaffir. You don’t know what kind of kaffir you think you are.”</i>
High – Receiving respect from his children and the Span One and able to tame down the warder	Sentences 68-70 – He is the bogeyman... which his presence could change the savages into fairly human beings. Sentences 56 & 57 - <i>“Never mind, brother,” they said. “What happens to one of us, happens to all.”</i> Sentence 135 - <i>“I can give you anything you want,” Warder Hannetjie said in desperation.</i>

The table suggests a fluctuation in Brille's esteem needs throughout his imprisonment. Initially, his sense of self-worth appears diminished. The warder, Hannetjie, enforces a disrespectful hierarchy through the use of racial slurs and demands for subservience (e.g., insisting on being called “Baas,” Afrikaans for “master”). Brille attempts to appeal to traditional respect for elders, highlighting the age difference between himself and Hannetjie. However, this effort backfires, resulting in physical violence. Similarly, the prisoners are subjected to dehumanizing work and verbal abuse, further eroding their sense of self-worth.

A shift occurs when Brille draws upon past experiences of control and feelings of indebtedness to Span One. This newfound confidence empowers him to manipulate Hannetjie through trickery and blackmail, ultimately gaining a measure of control over the previously domineering warder. The evidence in the table, such as the “sentence proofs,” suggests a restoration of Brille's esteem by the story's conclusion. He appears to have regained respect, not only from Span One but also from his children and even Hannetjie.

5. Self-Actualization Needs

Maslow's hierarchy culminates in self-actualization needs, representing the desire to achieve one's full potential and realize personal fulfillment (Maslow, 1943). This need typically emerges after the lower-level needs are met. Given the harsh prison environment and the challenges Brille faces in fulfilling his basic needs, analyzing his self-actualization needs presents a more nuanced task. Here, we will employ a close reading approach to identify potential indicators within the narrative that might suggest Brille's self-actualization needs, even if they are not explicitly stated.

Table 5. Identified data related to self-actualization needs

Brille’s Self-Actualization	Sentences
The role of a good father	Sentences 36-39 – <i>“Who dropped that cabbage?” he thundered. Brille stepped out of line. “I did,” he said meekly. “All right,” said Hannetjie. “The whole span goes three meals off.” “But I told you I did it,” Brille protested.</i> Sentences 68-70 – He is the bogeyman... which his presence could change the savages into fairly human beings. Sentences 111-113 – <i>“I won’t.” That is what I mean about evil. I am a father of children, and I saw today that Hannetjie is just a child and stupidly truthful. I’m going to punish him severely because we need a good warder.”</i>



	Sentences 140-142 – Brille looked at him, for the first time struck with pity and guilt. He wondered if he had carried the whole business too far. The man was really a child.
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The data in the table suggests a potential link between Brille's self-worth and fulfilling a paternal role. This analysis emerges from three observations. First, the table highlights Brille's interactions with individuals younger than him, including his children and the warder, Hannetjie. Second, it appears Brille takes on a protective role towards Span One, even taking blame to shield them from Hannetjie's cruelty. Third, the table points to Brille potentially viewing his children and Hannetjie as needing guidance, evidenced by their perceived inability to control their behavior. While limitations exist in definitively classifying these behaviors as self-actualization needs, the data suggests a possible connection between Brille's sense of purpose and fulfilling these paternalistic tendencies.

Discussion

Brille's case presents a potential challenge to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). Maslow posits a linear progression, where the fulfillment of lower-level needs (physiological and safety) precedes the emergence of higher-level needs (love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization) (McLeod, 2018). However, Brille demonstrates development in love, esteem, and potentially self-actualization despite experiencing significant deprivation of physiological and safety needs. This is evidenced by the harsh prison environment, characterized by insufficient food and constant threats from the warden. Brille's experience suggests the possibility of alternative pathways to human development and psychological growth, not necessarily bound by a strict hierarchical order. While Maslow's framework remains valuable in highlighting the importance of basic needs, Brille's case underscores the potential for human resilience and the possibility of fulfilling higher-level needs even in exceptionally challenging circumstances.

Brille's case offers a potential example of how love and esteem needs can be met in unconventional ways, potentially contributing to self-actualization. Despite significant deprivation of physiological and safety needs, Brille develops strong bonds and a sense of belonging with fellow inmates (Span One). This suggests that love and belonging can emerge even in harsh environments. The group's teamwork, communication, and expressions of care within the prison create a semblance of family, potentially providing a foundation for Brille's later development.

Esteem needs also appear to be fulfilled in a non-traditional manner. Brille's experience of racism, violence, and disrespect from the warden and his children appears to have a paradoxical effect. Instead of diminishing his sense of self, these experiences become a catalyst for asserting his position within the prison (albeit temporarily). While the narrative suggests Brille was not initially inclined towards leadership and previously shirked his familial responsibilities (e.g., sentence 75 where he admits to running away from his family), his situation in prison compels him to take a more assertive stance. This experience highlights the possibility of esteem arising from negative interactions and a need for self-preservation, rather than conventional sources of achievement or recognition. The constant negativity from his children might have desensitized Brille to the harshness of the prison environment, contributing to his ability to adapt and

potentially influencing his self-actualization journey. It is important to note that Brille's pre-prison life suggests a potential predisposition towards following rather than leading. However, within the prison environment, he adopts a more paternalistic role with Span One. Whether this represents a true fulfillment of self-actualization needs or a temporary adaptation remains unclear.

Brille's case deviates from the linear progression Maslow proposes (Maslow, 1943). Despite unmet physiological and safety needs, Brille appears to develop resilience and a newfound sense of purpose within the prison. The strong social bond he forms with Span One, his fellow inmates likely plays a significant role in his ability to cope with harsh conditions. Furthermore, it seems that positive memories of love from his children prior to imprisonment serve as a powerful motivator. This may contribute to his self-perception as a parental figure, a role reflected in his interactions with Span One and even the warden.

Brille's perception of the warden's cruelty as akin to childish behavior suggests a potential reframing of his own experiences. He may view the hardships of prison life, including the lack of basic needs, as challenges to be endured with a parental sense of responsibility. The extent to which this newfound sense of control represents a true fulfillment of self-actualization needs or a coping mechanism remains unclear by the story's end.

Conclusion

This study explored the fulfillment of Maslow's hierarchy of needs for the character Brille in Bessie Head's short story "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses." Using a qualitative approach, the analysis examined how Brille's physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs were met within the prison environment.

The findings reveal that Brille lacked basic physiological and safety needs but found a sense of love and belonging through his connection with his brothers in "Span One." Furthermore, Brille derived esteem from his interactions with his children and the warden and achieved a sense of self-actualization through his identity as a father.

It is important to acknowledge that Maslow's hierarchy is a simplified model, and applying it to a fictional character has limitations. However, this analysis highlights the potential importance of love needs in motivating Brille's behavior and identity formation within the story. Future research could explore the concept of love needs in more depth, investigating its role in human motivation across various literary works or real-world contexts. Additionally, this study suggests the value of examining how characters in literature navigate their needs hierarchies in complex situations, potentially revealing limitations or nuances in Maslow's framework.

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