

The Undertow of Parting: Mourning, Memory and Alienation in *Manchester by the Sea*

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ABSTRACT

Manchester by the Sea (2016) by Kenneth Lonergan, presents grief not as a transient emotional response but as a permanent psychological condition that serves the self from its past, its relationships, and its sense of belonging. This paper examines how parting in its many forms functions as a foundational experience of grief in the human psyche, arguing that every significant separation constitutes a kind of mourning. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's theorization of mourning and melancholia, Julia Kristeva's Conceptualization of melancholia as a collapse of self-hood and failure of language in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989) and Judith Butler's Conception of Ungrievable Loss, this paper reads Lee Chandler as a figure of permanent psychological exile. In his psyche grief, nostalgia and alienation do not operate as separate, distinguishable wave of feeling, where a street, a face, or the sound of the ocean collapses past and present into one unbearable moment. Through cinematic and narrative analysis, *Manchester by the Sea* captures a universal psychological truth that human existence is punctuated by parting, and that grief is not an exception to life but it's quiet, persistent undertow.

Keywords: Grief, Nostalgia, Alienation, Melancholia, Parting.

The film by Kenneth Lonergan, *Manchester by the Sea* (2016), is a very subtle but highly touching movie about grief in contemporary filmmaking. It does not display any dramatic performances but rather adopts a silent, often awkward realism, which reflects the typical way that loss manifests itself in life. It narrates the life of a withdrawn handyman, Lee Chandler, who needs to go back to his hometown after the death of his brother. The movie demonstrates how a tragedy in his past has made him incapable of fully engaging with his life, world and connections with people, so that he is always operating as a ghost, never attaching to any sense of identity or home. This paper states that in *Manchester by the Sea*, grief is presented as an undertow of separation. Every important separation, death, divorce, moving away, or the gradual loss of intimacy, turns out to be a source of sorrow. Grief, memory, and alienation are all mixed in the mind of Lee and it is a force that constantly draws him out of the present. Contemporary grief narratives often follow predictable redemption arcs—therapeutic breakthroughs, tearful reconciliations, characters "finding closure." *Manchester by the Sea* rejects this formula entirely. Instead, Kenneth Lonergan crafts a portrait of grief as unrelenting undertow, where loss doesn't resolve but restructures existence itself. This paper argues that Lee Chandler's tragedy reveals parting not as isolated events (death, divorce, displacement) but as the psyche's constitutive condition. Each separation reactivates mourning work, turning memory into wound rather than balm. Drawing from the conference's Nostalgia/Alienation/Grief cluster, this analysis bridges psychoanalytic diagnosis (Freud), linguistic collapse (Kristeva), and ethical relationality (Butler) to demonstrate how cinematic form externalizes internal devastation.

This paper is a qualitative study in which a close cinematic analysis of a film, *Manchester by the sea* by Kenneth Lonergan is done using the psychoanalytic approach. It combines the formal examination of non-linear plot and sensory concepts of the film with the analysis of grief, nostalgia, and alienation that directly intersects with the conference's human psyche theme. The approach is based on close

observations performed on the help of repeated watchings, and emphasizes on cinematic techniques that indicate the internal struggle of the character. Theoretical treatment compares the formal aspects, such as flashbacks and sensory stimuli, with the Freudian concept of mourning and melancholy, the Kristevan concept of symbolic breakdown, and the Butlerian ethics of grievability. It finds emotional connections as the main contribution of the paper.

The method of close reading is appropriate to this targeted study of psychoanalysis, in the process of following the patterns of narrative styles that indicate psychological conditions. The methodological weakness of the research is that it is only possible to analyze one film, but it also provides opportunities to conduct the research comparatively in the future.

To explain this background theme, distinctions between mourning and melancholia developed by Sigmund Freud are used in the paper. Mourning is the process of consciously breaking emotional attachments with something that has been lost and melancholy is when the loss is unhealthily internalized and the individual is left with continued feelings of self-blame and failure to complete the grieving process. In a Freudian perspective that Julia Kristeva would develop later in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989) she puts forth the melancholia as a failure of the self and language. The individual is unable to distribute what was lost, and he or she lives in a kind of black sun of a kind of sadness that cannot be named, only to some extent converted into art or poetry. Judith Butler contributes to this by arguing that grief is a cultural circumstance and moral in that mourning emphasizes how our own identities are formed through our dependence on others casting doubt on our perceptions of the lives and losses that can be defined as grievable in our culture.

The theorists aid in redefining our knowledge of the parting not only as a special occurrence but as an inseparable element of human life. Loss of caregivers, lovers, children, homes as well as parts of the

self are constant triggers of the grieving process. The life of Lee in the film *Manchester by the Sea* can be characterised by a number of departures. He literally loses his children in a house fire, his marriage fails, he leaves Manchester to Boston and cannot remain in town even to be with his nephew. These experiences bring out separation as a continuous psychological injury rather than a single trauma. The movie demonstrates the process of mourning moving to melancholy: Lee does not only mourn particular people but lives in a condition when parting is his primary mode of existence and therefore every encounter is burdened with understanding that he cannot overcome it and will never come back to himself.

This can be seen in the life of Lee in Boston at the start of the movie where he is forced into an exile of social and emotional isolation. He does minor repairs in houses of strangers, momentarily entering their personal spaces before retiring, living a life full of physical intimacy and deprived of real relationships. Critics point out that the lack of melodrama in the film, its lack of emotional grandeur (no booming music or rallying speeches) is indicative of the emotional detachment Lee feels, her grieving is more about a loss of speech than a shattering one. This description is in the same spirit as that of Kristeva who described melancholia wherein the language is useless, and the individual cannot describe his loss. This status is captured in a scene with his former wife; she cries out to him to communicate and tell her about their past yet Lee has difficulties trying to communicate and after some time he says, there is nothing there. This does not indicate indifference but it indicates somebody who cannot be self since he or she is engulfed by loss.

The non-linear story-telling of the film combining the current events with flashbacks on the life that Lee had lived before in Manchester depicts how memory intrudes on the present, which is typical in both a state of trauma and melancholy, without any prior warning or preparation. The first flashbacks are those of a warm, cheerful home life: children are playing, empty chatting with his friends, gentle teasing of his wife.

These joyful memories acquire a bitter meaning as the audience gets to know about the tragic fire. This change shows how locations and habitual places that once solidified an individual could turn into the locations of profound emotional suffering. Applying the viewpoint of Kristeva, this means that Lee does not want to go back to Manchester after the tragedy not merely to avoid the recollection of the tragedy but that the town is his black sun in itself. All the streets, all the voices and all the worn-out surfaces connect present emotions to an intolerable and unmentionable juxtaposition of the past joy and the loss that can never be regained.

Some popular conceptions of nostalgia are that it is somewhat a bitter yearning of an ideal past. Nevertheless, according to *Manchester by the Sea*, in the case of Lee, memories cannot help. On the contrary, they aggravate the wound, which makes the past brutally vivid, since it is beyond reach. Theses such as glimpses of the former home of his family, viewing his nephew in familiar locations, or going back to his boat in which he shared with his brother obliterate the barrier between past and present. These moments help to give life to the past, as well as point out its unreliability, which is compatible with melancholic time as an ongoing present of loss instead of a pathway to healing. In this case, nostalgia is not a separate emotion but the edge of the knife of grief: memory does not simply co-exist with sorrow but develops it, tinged with love, guilt, and self-blame into a painful emotional condition in which Lee cannot get out of.

The mental experience represented in the movie cannot be easily divided into the individual feelings of grief, nostalgia, or alienation. Rather, the movie again and again shows an instance when a sound, gesture, or environmental item provokes a mind-blowing combination of these emotions. As an illustration, the constant references to the cold, snowy New England coastline are intertwined with the recollections of lost happiness and present desperation, sensory impressions (the sea, the cold, the light)

are connected to a chimera of emotions which consists of longing, shame, tenderness, and isolation in a particular manner that is beyond the power of expression of Lee. The audience sees so to speak emotional bleeding or synesthetic overlay, boundaries between emotions become stirred to the point that they are perceived by the psyche to be one huge wave. This implies that one of the reasons why such grief is inappropriate to cope is not only the magnitude of the loss but also the complexity in disentangling which feelings exist. The resultant effect is that Lee finds it difficult to go through the symbolic grieving process as explained by Freud as a healing process.

The views on precariousness and grievability allow Butler to put the personal tragedy experienced by Lee in a broader ethical setting despite the fact that life of the film is concerned with individual and family lives. His community accepts his loss as something grievable, yet his continued fight to move on questions the cultural assumption that grief has a time limit and it eventually results in a healing process. Lee cannot get a redemptive journey in the story; he does not remain in Manchester, does not rebuild his relationships to the full extent, and does not forgive himself. This selection breaks the conventional movie and social beliefs, in which mourning is resolved in reconciliation. Rather it underpins critical opinions that assert that part of one loss transforms one forever rather than being phases of a healing experience. By depicting a man who chooses to control guardianship by distance, that he realizes that he also has emotional scars that make coexistence unsafe, the movie reminds us of a harsh moral truth repair does not always imply returning and sometimes taking care of others is to understand that one has damaged oneself permanently.

The combination of the difference between mourning and melancholia presented by Freud, the concept of a black sun introduced by Kristeva as a failure of self and meaning, and the fact that grief demonstrates how much we all rely on each other as presented by Butler allows viewing *Manchester by the Sea* as a film where the separation is an essential component of human experience rather than a significant

life event. The case of Lee Chandler demonstrates a case of perpetual exile wherein home, family, and memory no longer offer any solace, but it is where grief, nostalgia, and alienation converge into one disorienting emotional flow, and may be aroused by such mundane occurrences in his environment. The film avoids sentimental climaxes and total helplessness, offering a clear but understanding picture of the process of grief as the non-existent power that never ends, changing identity, language, and relationships. It does not ask the audience to ponder on how they are to cope with such suffering, but it makes them think how they can lead a truthful life and appreciate the losses that will never give up all the way.

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