

Cultural Rituals and Personal Mourning: A Comparative Analysis of Grief in *The Book of Life* and *Manchester by the Sea*

Anabelle Angelica Dora Pangaribuan¹, Dhita Hapsarani^{2,*}

¹English Studies Program, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia, Depok 16424, Indonesia

²English Studies Program, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia, Depok 16424, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Although grief as a narrative trope is widely circulated in media intended for both children and adults, a gap remains in how contemporary grief models, particularly Continuing Bonds and the Dual Process Model, are represented in movies intended for different age groups. This study aims to provide insight into the differences and similarities in grief depictions in *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) and whether these portrayals can be attributed to the intended age groups of the films, where the former is aimed at children and the latter is targeted toward general audiences. Using textual analysis, this research explores how contemporary grief theories manifest in the two films' narratives and cinematic elements, and the implications for the differing perspectives on grief. The findings reveal that while *The Book of Life* (2014) approaches grief symbolically by framing loss through communal rituals to offer hope amid loss, *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) presents grief as solitary and unresolved, highlighting emotional fracture and cultural complexities. Reading them together shows that the narratives of grief are shaped by cultural values and by assumptions about who the story is for.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Amid the wide range of human emotions and experiences, grief is among the most commonly depicted narratives in media, despite its complex and deeply personal nature. After a beloved's death, a person must go through grief, which is unavoidable; it is a natural part of life, and no one can escape it (Salah et al., 2018). Positive portrayals of the grieving process in media, especially in children's media, help address difficult and taboo topics (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). In children's literature, depictions of death have changed over time. In the nineteenth century, authors avoided confronting children directly with the topic of death by incorporating magical elements into their stories. This is evident in Grimm and Andersen fairy tales, where death was often moralized, distant, or softened through magical and spiritual framing (Xu, 2023). As social circumstances shifted, authors began to acknowledge death as an unavoidable reality, often portraying it as a form of release from suffering. Later in the twentieth century, as child mortality rates decreased, writers started

*Corresponding Author: Dhita Hapsarani  dhita@ui.ac.id

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to include the topic of death in various literary works and children's books (Xu, 2023). It became necessary for death to be discussed with children to help them understand how to cope with it. In the present, modern society no longer shies away from discussing death, though it remains a sensitive topic (Xu, 2023).

The Book of Life (2014) and *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) are two films that use grief as a central force driving their narratives. *The Book of Life* was chosen for its unique approach to grief in Mexican culture, illustrating the role of tradition in transforming grief into a source of strength and connection. Additionally, *The Book of Life* was chosen for its relative underrepresentation in academic studies, especially compared to *Coco* (2017), which has received more attention due to its greater commercial success. In contrast, *Manchester by the Sea* was chosen for its intense, realistic portrayal of loss, focusing on the devastating effects of grief on individuals. *The Book of Life* is a 2014 animated film directed by Jorge R. Gutierrez. It tells the story of Manolo, a young man torn between fulfilling his family's expectations as a bullfighter and following his passion for music. On the Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos), Manolo embarks on a journey through the Land of the Remembered and the Land of the Forgotten. This journey is fueled by his love for Maria, whom he mistakenly believes to be dead. Through his journey, Manolo learns to confront his fears, face loss, and understand the true meaning of love and remembrance. *Manchester by the Sea*, a 2016 drama film by Kenneth Lonergan, is a story about Lee Chandler, a brooding, irritable loner who works as a handyman in Boston. After his brother's death, Lee Chandler is named guardian to his 16-year-old nephew, Patrick. This forces Lee to confront his past and return to his hometown, Manchester, where he lost his three children in a fire he accidentally caused. Flashbacks in the film reveal that an intoxicated Lee forgot to screen the fireplace, leading to a house fire that killed his children.

Previous studies have explored how the concepts of grief, death, and loss are portrayed in children's media. According to Tenzek and Nickels (2017) and Fitzgerald et al. (2020), children's media tends to simplify the death of a character by their archetype (e.g., hero or villain). The portrayal of a hero's downfall carries immense importance, whereas the downfall of a villain elicits a feeling of satisfaction. In most stories' endings, the antagonist always faces their defeat, while the protagonist somehow manages to survive, no matter how severe their injuries may be. As a result, it presents an unrealistic portrayal of death and grief in children's films, which do not reflect real-life experiences. However, Graham et al. (2018) and Salah et al. (2018) have an interesting opposing perspective. They discovered that children's animated films began to resemble adults' films as they featured more realistic portrayals of death, reflecting common scenarios such as illness, old age, and tragic accidents. Both works of literature also mention how these characters' deaths are inevitable. Not only that, Salah et al. (2018) added that the characters' acceptance is crucial in transforming grief into a more rational state. Furthermore, Graham et al. (2018) and Tenzek and Nickels (2017) examined the use of coping mechanisms in children's films. They found that contemporary animated film characters generally depict more effective coping mechanisms than their predecessors.

Characters who had support from family or friends showed healthier coping mechanisms, emphasizing the importance of support systems in a person's ability to navigate challenging situations. Another study by Izod and Dovalis (2014) approaches cinema as a therapeutic medium by becoming a space for people to alleviate their grief or personal suffering. The study grounds its understanding of grief on Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis, Bowlby's attachment theory, and Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief.

Studies on the film *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) have revealed an exploration of the complexities of isolated grief, mainly through Lee Chandler's character. Manoogian and Chabot (2017) and Wang and Wang (2021) both emphasize how Lee's traumatic past, including the accidental deaths of his children, leads to a deep sense of isolation and an inability to connect with others. Manoogian and Chabot (2017) also added how Lee's grief is compounded by societal expectations, which discourage emotional expression and result in his withdrawal from family and community. Furthermore, Angeli (2017) examined Lee's emotional numbness and immobility, suggesting that his grief is so deep that it prevents him from moving forward or finding a resolution, therefore reinforcing his isolation.

Although there has been extensive research on grief in both children's and adult-targeted films, there remains a notable gap in our understanding of how grief narratives are constructed and represented within films created for different age groups. Specifically, there is limited exploration of how children's films use contemporary models of grief compared to adult-targeted films with contrasting cultural contexts. While prior scholarship has examined grief in films intended for children and films for adults, few have explored a cross-age film comparative analysis grounded in contemporary grief theories. This study offers a novel contribution by integrating the analysis of contemporary grief models in films targeted at different age groups within a comparative framework. By comparing an animated film for children and a realist drama for adults, this research investigates how non-linear, relational, and oscillatory models of grief are adapted into narrative forms that align with the audience's age context and cultural frameworks. To achieve this, the study reframes grief in films not as a thematic element but as a narrative construction shaped by audience age and cultural context.

By comparing *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Manchester by the Sea* (2016), this study aims to provide insight into how grieving is depicted through the lens of contemporary grief models, and how these depictions are influenced by the films' intended age groups and distinct cultural perspectives. First, the narrative and cinematic portrayals of bereavement in the two films are compared through the lens of contemporary grief theories. Second, these portrayals are analyzed to uncover what they reveal about the films' intended audiences and cultural perspectives on grief.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Continuing Bonds

The Continuing Bonds theory was introduced in 1996 by Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman, and Steven Nickman in their book, "Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief." This model proposes that maintaining a relationship with the deceased can be a healthy and integral part of coping with loss, challenging earlier grief theories that emphasized detachment and "moving on" as central to the healing process. Continuing bonds may take various forms, such as memories, rituals, or ongoing dialogues that keep the deceased present in the lives of the bereaved.

2.2 Dual Process Model

The Dual Process Model theory was developed by psychologists Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut in the late 1990s as an alternative to earlier stage-based models of grief. Rather than viewing grief as a linear process through set stages, the Dual Process Model conceptualizes coping with loss as an oscillation between two contrasting states: loss-

oriented and restoration-oriented processes. Loss-oriented processes involve activities and thoughts that directly engage with the reality of the loss, such as remembering the deceased, experiencing sadness, and expressing emotions associated with the death. It includes the traditional "grief work" idea involving rumination and longing for the deceased (Schut, 1999).

Loss-orientation focuses on the deep emotional attachment to the deceased, emphasizing the inability to detach from the deceased fully (Schut, 1999). On the other hand, restoration-oriented processes include activities that allow the bereaved to distract themselves from their grief and focus on rebuilding aspects of daily life, such as taking on new roles, adapting to changes, and seeking normalcy. "Restoration" here does not mean achieving a final result. Instead, it refers to dealing with additional stresses that come with grief (Schut, 1999).

The model suggests that healthy coping involves a dynamic movement between these two processes, as individuals periodically shift focus between mourning the loss and adjusting to life without the deceased (Schut, 1999). This non-linear approach reflects the complexity of bereavement and acknowledges that individuals may oscillate between the two states in response to situational needs and emotional states. However, unlike the normal grief described above, traumatic loss presents a different experience. Within the Dual Process Model, this type of grief can be seen as a disruption of the oscillation process itself (Schut, 1999). Loss-oriented activities may be more intense and uncontrollable, such as nightmares about the loss, occurring at unpredictable times. Similarly, extreme avoidance may manifest as restoration-oriented processes. This dynamic is evident in the protagonist in *Manchester by the Sea* (2016), Lee Chandler.

The two theories are chosen because they provide a comprehensive framework for understanding grief in *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Manchester by the Sea* (2016). Continuing Bonds is particularly useful for *The Book of Life* (2014), as it explores how characters maintain connections with the deceased through cultural rituals. The Dual Process Model helps analyze how grief oscillates between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented processes, which aligns with *Manchester by the Sea* (2016).

3. METHOD

This study employs a deductive textual analysis to examine how grief is portrayed in *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Manchester by the Sea* (2016). Textual analysis allows for the systematic examination of how grief is represented in both films through their narratives and cinematic elements. Using a deductive approach, this study applied contemporary grief theories to identify and interpret how grief is portrayed in the films.

The primary data consist of purposively selected scenes from *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) that depict characters' responses to loss. Scenes were chosen for their representation of bereavement-related experiences, including emotional or behavioural responses to loss, participation in mourning or remembrance practices, symbolic connections to the deceased, and avoidance or confrontation of grief. Dialogue, plot development, and visual or cinematic elements of grief were included for analysis.

These scenes were analysed using two contemporary theories of grief: Continuing Bonds and the Dual Process Model. Continuing Bonds theory was employed to examine *The Book of Life* (2014), which portrays grief through culturally embedded mourning rituals and symbolic practices that maintain an ongoing connection between the living and the

deceased. The Dual Process Model theory was applied to *Manchester by the Sea* (2016), as the protagonist's coping reflects oscillation between grief-oriented and restoration-oriented modes. Narrative elements such as character actions, dialogue, and plot development, alongside cinematic elements including colour palette, costume design, and lighting, were analysed in relation to these theoretical frameworks to interpret how grief is culturally mediated within each film.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the analysis of *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) is presented separately to thoroughly examine each film's approaches towards grief, highlighting both their distinct and shared thematic elements. This separation allows an in-depth exploration of each film's narrative and cinematic elements. Both bodies of analysis will be presented in the order of grief models, the role of memories, and cultural-communal support or its absence. Particular attention is given to the protagonist of *Manchester by the Sea* (2016), Lee Chandler, whose grief is uniquely complicated by guilt and trauma, therefore disrupting his ability to navigate grief effectively. The discussion of the films' endings is combined to highlight both endings' continuation of contemporary grief theories, namely the Continuing Bonds and Dual Process Model theories.

4.1 Collective Remembrance and Ongoing Bonds in *The Book of Life*

4.1.1 Depictions of Grief Model: Continuing Bonds

4.1.1.1 Day of the Dead Ritual

The Book of Life (2014) is deeply rooted in Mexican cultural elements, especially Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), a Mexican holiday dedicated to honoring deceased loved ones. The belief in feeling the presence of the deceased challenges a view that considers contact with the dead as imaginary. Instead, they may play a significant role in the grieving process for many people (Rosenblatt, 2017). At the beginning of the film, viewers are shown the vibrant tradition of the Day of the Dead in the San Angel town. Families gather around the *ofrendas* (altars) decorated with candles, photographs of their loved ones, and offerings (Gutierrez et al., 2014, 05:52). Marigolds, sugar skulls, cherished belongings, and favorite items of the deceased are placed on these *ofrendas* while people come together to dance, sing, and play games in joyful remembrance (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Ofrenda for Manolo's mother on the Day of the Dead (Gutierrez et al., 2014, 08:40)

This ritual aligns with the Continuing Bonds theory, where the living actively participates in keeping the deceased "alive" in memory and ritual, emphasizing relationship preservation rather than severing ties (Klass & Steffen, 2017). Rituals offer a structured way for people to adjust to changes in social roles, maintain ongoing bonds with the deceased, and preserve the memory of the deceased within the community (Silverman et al., 2021). By building *ofrendas* and celebrating with dance and music, the living ensure that their loved ones remain a part of daily life. This can be a healthy part of the grieving process.

Moreover, this scene highlights a community-centric approach to grief. The presence of family and friends who gather to share memories and honor the deceased emphasizes that grief is a collective experience that strengthens communal ties. This communal approach allows grief to be expressed openly. In Continuing Bonds, this approach reduces feelings of isolation and provides social support for those grieving (Klass & Steffen, 2017). Engaging in these shared rituals reminds the characters that they are not alone in their sorrow; instead, they are part of a collective experience within their community. Bonds that individuals maintain with those who have died do not exist in isolation.

These bonds are deeply connected to the bereaved's relationships with the living (Klass & Steffen, 2017). In the following scene, Manolo's father tells Manolo about how his mother, who has passed away, is right there with them. They can feel her presence even if they cannot see her (Gutierrez et al., 2014, 08:47). Oral tradition, like what Manolo's father did, is another integral part of communal mourning in *The Book of Life*. Families share stories of the deceased, passing down memories and legacies that reinforce the deceased's presence within the family. Storytelling allows each person to share their unique memories about the deceased. This act of sharing helps the community to grow closer and individuals to find meaning in their grief.

4.1.1.2 Afterlife Vibrant Depiction

"The Land of the Remembered was vibrant and joyous. Everything was like the land above, but it was more colorful. It was more beautiful. It was more festive. And on the Day of the Dead, that place was bursting with endless parties and spectacular parades." (Gutierrez et al., 2014, 48:41)

This voice-over narration is delivered when the Land of the Remembered, which represents the afterlife, is first introduced in *The Book of Life* (2014). It is portrayed as a lively and festive realm filled with music, dancing, and celebration. This joyous portrayal helps to reshape grief from a painful experience to a comforting and communal one. In the Land of the Remembered, the dead continue to dance, sing, and enjoy life, showing that they are still part of a community. The afterlife is imagined as aligning with daily life, where the deceased continues to engage in familiar everyday activities (John & Soni, 2020). It reflects the idea of Continuing Bonds, which proposes that loved ones do not truly "leave" after death but instead transition to a new, interconnected existence where they continue to influence and support the living (Klass & Steffen, 2017). The living can also be comforted by the idea that their loved ones exist happily in a safe and joyful place.

4.1.2 Memory and Mythology: La Muerte and Xibalba

In *The Book of Life* (2014), La Muerte and Xibalba are mythological figures representing remembrance and forgetting, respectively. These two aspects of memory are

closely tied to the grieving process depicted in the film. La Muerte, the goddess of the Land of the Remembered, rules over a realm where souls remain living and joyful as long as they are honored and remembered by the living. As seen in Figure 2, La Muerte is adorned in a vibrant red dress with glowing candles on her hat, symbolizing warmth, celebration, and the continued presence of loved ones in memory. Her appearance embodies the idea that communal rituals, such as the Day of the Dead, offer a means to preserve bonds between the living and the deceased while celebrating death as an integral part of life. On the other hand, Xibalba, ruler of the Land of the Forgotten, is covered in dark colors, such as black and green, with skeletal, decaying details around him (Figure 2). This portrayal symbolizes those who are no longer remembered and the isolation that comes from ungrieved or forgotten loss. The two mythological figures show how memory is central to sustaining connections with the deceased. La Muerte's influence over San Angel's traditions encourages the living to celebrate and remember their ancestors together, which aligns with Continuing Bonds theory. It transforms grief into a shared, ritualistic experience rooted in continuity rather than finality (Klass & Steffen, 2017).



Figure 2. La Muerte (left) and Xibalba (right) (Gutierrez et al., 2014, 06:37)

In contrast, Xibalba represents the consequences of isolation in grief. When the living forgets their memories of the deceased, the deceased will experience a second and permanent death. This "second death" can also be applied to the living, as being isolated in grief can lead to loneliness and emotional suffering. The distinction between the two realms ruled by La Muerte and Xibalba emphasizes that remembering the dead is not a passive act. It is a relationship that the living actively maintains and nurtures. It is also a way for people to keep the deceased present in their memories and, in turn, for the deceased to continue offering guidance and strength to those still alive.

4.1.3 Cultural Frameworks in Grieving

Culture plays a key role in shaping the mourning experience, influencing the processes of finding meaning and transforming relationships with the deceased (Silverman et al., 2021). *The Book of Life* reflects this, as cultural frameworks help to shape the characters' grieving process. Manolo's grieving process in the film is closely connected with his relationship with Maria, who plays a central role in his grieving journey. When Maria is presumed dead, Manolo's isolating feeling amplifies his grief. Manolo's surrender to grief is

symbolized by his willingness to face death via the snake bite, consciously letting it bite him. This act reflects his overwhelming despair, vulnerability, and inability to process Maria's death. The snake is a metaphor for his desire to follow Maria in death, a decision partially rooted in his love for Maria and his guilt for failing to protect her. Out of love and determination, Manolo embarks on a journey to the Land of the Remembered on the Day of the Dead. This journey serves as a pivotal moment in his grieving process, as it allows him to reconnect with his deceased mother and ancestors. These reconnections with his family also reduce the alienation that initially amplified his grief. This shows how the Day of the Dead's cultural framework helps Manolo navigate his grief within a supportive communal context.

Manolo's background further contextualizes his grief. As the last descendant in a long line of bullfighters, Manolo is expected to continue his family's legacy. However, Manolo's unwillingness to embrace violence, such as killing bulls, combined with his passion for music, creates an internal conflict as it clashes with his family's expectations, leaving him feeling disconnected from the legacy they have set for him. This sense of alienation is further compounded by the absence of his mother, who passed away when he was young, and the temporary loss of Maria, the only other person who understands and supports his dream besides his mother.

After searching for Maria with the help of his deceased family and discovering that Maria is still alive, Manolo realizes that he no longer wishes to die. This marks a shift in his perspective as his grief transforms into a renewed sense of purpose. To earn the chance to return to the Land of the Living, Manolo must confront his greatest fear, manifested in the form of a giant bull. The bull represents the violent legacy and intergenerational burden that clash with Manolo's true nature and moral values. By choosing to overcome the bull through music rather than violence, Manolo breaks the cycle of inherited aggression and transforms his grief and fear into a resolution that honors his family's legacy on his terms.



Figure 3. Manolo's deceased family helping him search for Maria (Gutierrez et al., 2014, 57:06)

This reflects the Continuing Bonds theory, as it recognizes that the deceased still influences the living, and grieving is about maintaining a connection that fosters meaning in the lives of the bereaved (Klass & Steffen, 2017). Even though Maria is presumed dead and supposedly exists in a different realm, she still affects Manolo by being his motivation to follow her to death. Reconnecting with his deceased family helps to shape Manolo's grieving process in a healthier and more constructive way (Graham et al., 2018; Tenzek & Nickels, 2017), emphasizing the importance of support systems in dealing with grief. It also shows

how personal grief can evolve into a communal experience, as grief can become a space where personal emotions interact with the responses from others, forming a mutual understanding and support system to cope with loss (Klass & Steffen, 2017). In this way, *The Book of Life* portrays cultural values and rituals as structures needed for individuals to process grief in a way that fosters personal growth while strengthening cultural identity.

4.2 Navigating Grief in *Manchester by the Sea*

4.2.1 Depictions of Grief Model: Disturbed Dual Process Model

The previous analysis discussed the portrayal of grief in *The Book of Life* (2014), where grief is depicted as ongoing bonds with the deceased in a communal setting through cultural traditions, such as the Day of the Dead celebration. Meanwhile, *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) introduces the grieving process of the main protagonist, Lee Chandler, whose loss and guilt are reflected in recurring memories of his children. According to the Dual Process Model, grieving individuals will oscillate between confronting their loss and handling the life stressors that arise from it (Schut, 1999). However, in cases of traumatic loss, the oscillation process may be disturbed. The disturbance includes the intrusion of loss-oriented activities, which would be less under voluntary control, often accompanied by extreme avoidance in restoration-oriented coping (Schut, 1999). In Lee's case, this oscillation is fraught with emotional suppression and unprocessed trauma and guilt, which prevent him from engaging effectively in both loss-oriented and restoration-oriented tasks. His lack of success in these activities also highlights the effect of isolation on his grieving journey.

Throughout the film, Lee Chandler's loss-oriented coping becomes extreme, manifesting through flashbacks that force him to relive memories of his loved ones. These intrusive moments occur at the most inconvenient times, and they reflect the overwhelming burden of unresolved grief. Lee's grief is deeply affected by his sense of responsibility for the fire that took his children's lives. Similarly, Manolo in *The Book of Life* (2014) experiences intense guilt after Maria is bitten by the snake. Similar to how Manolo lets himself be bitten to follow Maria to the Land of the Dead, Lee nearly shoots himself in the head at the police station. Both characters express a strong desire for death to reunite with their loved ones, not only because of grief but also guilt for failing to prevent the tragic loss. Manolo and Lee's griefs are rooted in their overwhelming attachment to their loved ones, which makes them more vulnerable to despair. It shows how profound attachments to the deceased can intensify one's emotional collapse during loss and significantly shape the grieving process (Schut, 1999).

Additionally, Lee experiences extreme avoidance behaviors as a form of restoration-oriented coping. Following the tragic death of his children in a fire incident, Lee withdraws both physically and emotionally. He left his hometown, Manchester, and moved to Boston, away from all of his family and friends. This decision reflects a desire to separate himself from memories and reminders of his past life, which he finds unbearable. From the flashbacks in the film, viewers can see Lee's once-fulfilled life with family and friends, highlighting their importance to him. As the story progresses, it is visible how Lee has lost his role and identity in the community (Manoogian & Chabot, 2017). By distancing himself from Manchester and his remaining family members, he attempts to separate himself from the roles he once had as a father, husband, and community member. These roles that once defined him are now sources of deep pain. This self-imposed isolation allows Lee to avoid

confronting his past. At the same time, it prevents him from forming new, meaningful connections or restoring any sense of normalcy. For example, Lee struggles to engage in current or new relationships, as shown by his discomfort when Patrick's girlfriend's mother shows interest in him (Lonergan, 2016, 01:14:51).

4.2.2 Role of Memory

Manchester by the Sea (2016) uses a stream of consciousness in its storytelling, shifting between times and places based on the protagonist's continuous thoughts, presenting the story from a deeply personal and subjective perspective (Zhang, 2020). Lee Chandler's memories are central to his grief, as flashbacks repeatedly interrupt the present narrative in the film. Time is compressed through these frequent flashbacks, blending the past and present throughout the film (Angeli, 2017). At the same time, the film uses color to distinguish between Lee's past and present, maintaining a clear visual separation while intertwining the two timelines. At present, Lee's clothes are primarily gray, navy blue, and black, reflecting his detached, expressionless self. In contrast, flashbacks to his life before the fire show him wearing vibrant colors, such as an orange jacket, a yellow T-shirt, and a green sweatshirt (Lonergan, 2016, 29:19; 31:21; 51:48). These bright colors symbolize a warm, love-filled life, contrasting his past self with his present existence. In this case, color visualizes a combination of Lee's emotions and thoughts (Zhang, 2020).



Figure 4. The film uses vibrant colors for Lee's flashbacks (left) and muted colors for the present (right) (Lonergan, 2016, 31:21; 02:05:12)

For Lee, time feels circular, reflecting his psychological state and anchoring him to a moment in the past he cannot escape. Lee often recalls joyful family moments, such as being on the boat with his brother and nephew (Lonergan, 2016, 26:29) or at home with his ex-wife and children (Lonergan, 2016, 29:09). These memories contrast sharply with the present Lee and his current state of emotional numbness. This non-linear narrative structure, which keeps cycling back to Lee's past, illustrates how trauma can prevent individuals from establishing a clear boundary between the past and present. Lee is trapped in an endless present where he constantly relives that defining loss. For him, there is no difference between ten minutes and ten months ago; time stretches without change or progress (Angeli, 2017).

The lack of closure with his children's deaths contributes to the intrusive nature of Lee's flashbacks. Unlike with his brother Joe, whose body he was able to see and say goodbye to, Lee was denied a similar opportunity with his children. In a flashback scene where Lee watches firefighters carry his children's bodies out of the burned house, there is no chance to say a final goodbye. The condition of his children's bodies is also left ambiguous (Manoogian & Chabot, 2017). This reflects how Lee Chandler's grieving process was hindered from the beginning by the lack of closure with his children's deaths. According to the Dual Process Model, in a typical grieving process, people primarily focus on the loss aspect in the beginning phases of grief. As time passes, their attention gradually shifts to dealing with other challenges and stresses in their lives (Schut, 1999). However, Lee was not given this initial time to grieve his children's deaths fully. This lack of farewell marks a profound absence in Lee's grief as it leaves an open wound that intensifies his trauma, making it harder to cope and move forward. Just like in *The Book of Life's* (2014) Xibalba's depiction of isolation and the "second death," Lee's struggle with intrusive flashbacks and his inability to find solace in communal support prevent him from navigating his grief effectively, which will be further explored in the next section.

4.2.3 Lack of Cultural Rituals or Communal Support

Unlike the grieving process in *The Book of Life* (2014), which is facilitated by cultural frameworks, *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) depicts grief in a more isolated context, with minimal focus on structured rituals or community practices. The lack of communal mourning practices reinforces Lee's physical and emotional isolation, depriving him of the structured support that might otherwise help him channel his grief constructively. In some cultures, like Mexican culture in *The Book of Life* (2014), grief is managed through communal rituals that provide a framework for both loss-oriented and restoration-oriented processes. However, in *Manchester by the Sea's* Western and individualistic context, grief is often a private matter. Almost no rituals or traditions are available except for Lee's brother's funeral, which was pre-arranged due to his medical condition. This leaves Lee to navigate his pain alone, reinforcing the cyclical nature of his grief and his inability to find closure. Without a structured pathway to move through grief, his attempts at restoration are fractured and ultimately ineffective, as he repeatedly retreats into isolation.

4.2.3.1 Social judgement

Lee's interactions with others in his hometown also show the harsh judgment that he faced after the fire incident. Lee's hometown community has surrounded Randi (Lee's ex-wife) with support as a grieving mother, but has turned against Lee, blaming him for the children's deaths. They do not recognize his grief over losing his children, and his involvement in the fire makes his loss stigmatized, which isolates him further (Manoogian & Chabot, 2017). This is evidenced in a scene where a woman tells her coworker, "I do not want to see him in here again," after seeing Lee in her workplace (Lonergan, 2016, 01:39:05). This highlights the town's judgment and rejection of Lee, without realizing that he is also unable to forgive himself for his negligence. With no communal acceptance or sympathy, Lee struggles to process his pain and finds it increasingly difficult to navigate his way toward healing in his grief. It also shows how stigma can deepen isolation and complicate the mourning process.

This mirrors a scene in *The Book of Life* (2014) where, after Maria temporarily dies, a friend of hers sarcastically suggests that Manolo should be the one getting bitten, followed by everyone else staring at Manolo judgmentally. It reflects that, at some point, Manolo also feels isolated due to society's judgment. However, this feeling of isolation is mitigated by the structured communal support of his family, preventing it from becoming overwhelming and helping him navigate his grief healthily. As Graham et al. (2018) and Salah et al. (2018) argue, children's films increasingly incorporate realistic elements of grief. While *The Book of Life* (2014) is rooted in myth, certain aspects of its grief portrayal, such as isolation, parallel those in *Manchester by the Sea* (2016). This suggests an overlap in grief depiction across narratives aimed at different audiences.

4.2.3.2 "Shared grief" Avoidance

A pattern of avoidance is also seen in Lee Chandler's conversation with Randi (his ex-wife) for the first time after years, where she expresses regret and forgiveness, hoping to reconnect with Lee (Loneragan, 2016, 01:55:25). Rather than reciprocating or accepting Randi's words, Lee cuts her off mid-conversation by saying, "There is nothing there. You do not understand" (Loneragan, 2016, 01:58:13). His response reflects both his commitment to carrying his grief alone and his inability to express his genuine emotions. Lee is socially and physically isolated because of his losses, yet loss is usually a shared experience that connects people rather than leaving them alone (Manoogian & Chabot, 2017). Instead of finding comfort in shared experiences of loss, Lee retreats (Wang & Wang, 2021). He tries to avoid anything that can trigger the thoughts and memories of his loss, reinforcing his isolation and unresolved grief.

Even though both Randi and Lee lost their children in the incident, the film focuses more on Lee's grieving process. Randi's grieving journey is less explored, but it is shown that she has chosen to rebuild her life. She remarried, is expecting a child, and is starting a new family. In their conversation, rather than engaging with Randi's words as part of a healing process, Lee remains emotionally distant and unresponsive. This highlights a key difference between them: while Randi chooses to move forward and leave the past behind, Lee decides to carry his grief as a permanent part of his identity.



Figure 5. Lee's first conversation with Randi after years since the fire incident (Loneragan, 2016, 01:55:47)

The film's winter setting further adds to Lee's isolation. Winter symbolizes Lee's emotional paralysis, which stunts growth and progress. It becomes clear from the setting that Lee's state is frozen and still after his children's death. The trauma from the fire leaves a deep, unhealed wound that constantly haunts him. Despite any warmth around him, nothing can ease his inner pain or melt his emotional suffering (Zhang, 2020).

4.3 Comparative Analysis of *The Book of Life* and *Manchester by the Sea*

4.3.1 Cultural Representations of Grief

Silverman et al. (2021) stated that while death universally transforms the state of the deceased, the ways cultures interpret and cope with this transformation are uniquely shaped by their values and traditions. In *The Book of Life* (2014), the Day of the Dead ritual and the Land of the Remembered are depicted with bold, lively color schemes. This vibrant imagery reflects Mexican cultural views of death as a continuation of life, where mourning becomes a communal, joyous process. Rituals reinforce the belief that the deceased remains part of the living world, fostering collective resilience and acceptance (John & Soni, 2020). On the other hand, *Manchester by the Sea* emphasizes individual emotional struggles and unsupported mourning, aligning with Western perspectives on loss (John & Soni, 2020). The film employs a mainly muted color palette of greys and blues, reflecting the protagonist Lee's isolated grief. These visual elements highlight the two films' differing cultural perspectives on grief. *The Book of Life* (2014) embodies a communal and ritualistic approach rooted in Mexican traditions, while *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) portrays a solitary, internalized Western experience. They reveal how cultural frameworks either foster collective support or emphasize personal endurance in mourning.

4.3.2 Target Audience

The Book of Life (2014) and *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) approach grief in ways that reflect their distinct target audiences: children and adults. In *The Book of Life*, grief is introduced in a more accessible, comforting way for children through the vibrant portrayal of death rituals. The rituals transform grief into a communal experience centered on honoring the deceased. Rather than focusing on the finality and sorrow associated with death, the film celebrates life and the afterlife. This portrayal encourages young audiences to view grief as a meaningful process and provides a hopeful understanding of loss.

In contrast, *Manchester by the Sea* is intended for adult audiences. Therefore, it offers grief in a more raw, unfiltered manner. The film highlights the isolating psychological burden of profound loss, depicting grief as an often unresolved process. This portrayal contrasts sharply with *The Book of Life*, which offers a hopeful view of supported grief targeted towards children. The adult-oriented narrative of *Manchester by the Sea* reflects the complexities of real-life grief, where emotional closure is neither simple nor guaranteed.

4.3.3 Endings: Continuation of Contemporary Grief Models

Both *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) are similar in how they present endings that reflect the continuation of the grief theories with which they are aligned. The final scene of *The Book of Life* (2014) is a wedding between Manolo and Maria set on the Day of the Dead. After they exchange vows, the scene is filled with bright colors, music, and singing, capturing the spirit of life and death's celebration (Gutierrez et al., 2014, 01:24:29). Viewers can also see Manolo's deceased family members smiling and watching

over Manolo at the wedding. This visual representation of the dead attending a joyous occasion alongside the living continues to reflect the Continuing Bonds theory, where the dead remain an integral part of the living's lives (Klass & Steffen, 2017).

In *Manchester by the Sea* (2016), after the heartfelt conversation with his ex-wife, Randi, in which she expresses regret and sympathy for his suffering (discussed in the 'Shared grief avoidance' part), Lee is confronted by a dream of his children (Lonergan, 2016, 02:03:08). This time, they ask Lee why he cannot see them burning, as seen in Figure 6. This dark and haunting dream emphasizes Lee's inner turmoil and forces him to confront the suppressed pain of his complicated grief. These two vulnerable events solidify his decision to leave Manchester once again, as he realizes he cannot reconcile with his past in this town. The ending of *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) shows that Lee finally decides to pass guardianship of Patrick to a close friend of his family, George (Lonergan, 2016, 02:04:03). He cannot bring himself to stay in Manchester, as the place holds too many painful memories. The film concludes with Lee's return to Boston, once again choosing isolation over familial connection.



Figure 6. Lee dreams of his daughters while sleeping on the couch. One of them asks, "Daddy, can't you see we're burning?" (Lonergan, 2016, 02:03:08)

The ending of *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) reflects Lee's inability to move past the trauma, particularly the profound guilt he feels for the death of his children. Unlike what society expects, the film suggests that not all bereaved can find growth or resolution from their grief, especially when no cultural or communal framework guides them. For Lee, the only way to live with his grief without being overwhelmed by it is to leave Manchester behind. He is not moving on but rather allowing himself the freedom to remember his loved ones on his terms, without the constant reminders of his guilt and loss (Angeli, 2017). Furthermore, this ending reflects the continuation of the Dual Process Model, where Lee, like at the beginning of the film, continues his daily routines back in Boston as a form of avoidance (restoration-orientation) while maintaining his memories of loss (loss-orientation), leaving his grieving process unfinished. However, his unprocessed trauma and guilt continue to hinder his ability to engage in these processes effectively.

By comparing films across different ages and cultural contexts, this study re-examines how movies help people make sense of grief. The findings indicate that films do not merely depict sadness but transform contemporary grief models into stories tailored to the audience's age. In children's films, grief is portrayed through collective rituals, bright colors, symbolic imagery, and resolved narratives. These elements show that loss does not mean separation from loved ones. Instead, children's film narratives offer connections that can be

maintained through memory, tradition, and emotional bonds. Conversely, adult films tend to emphasize psychological pain, separation, and unresolved grief. Grief is not portrayed as a structured, finished process, but as an ongoing state that often disrupts daily life. These narrative differences demonstrate how films construct cultural ideas about acceptable and recognizable grief.

More broadly, this study shows that contemporary grief models, though originally developed within psychology, now shape the way loss is told in popular media. Grief concepts such as Continuing Bonds and the Dual Process Model do not remain abstract theories as they can be traced in the narrative patterns of these films. Meanwhile, the contrast between the two films makes it clear that such models are not applied in the same manner; instead, they are interpreted differently depending on cultural context and intended audience. Grief, therefore, emerges not only as a personal emotional experience but also as something socially and culturally framed and performed. Film becomes a space where societies negotiate and affirm what they believe about memory, guilt, belonging, resilience, and what it means to live with—or move beyond—loss.

Ultimately, this study suggests that contemporary grief models are not just ideas in the background of films, as they shape the way stories about loss are told. They do so in ways that reflect cultural context and assumptions about the audience's age. By comparing a children's animated film with an adult realist drama, this research shows that each film presents grief differently, depending on what is expected from its viewers in terms of emotional strength, sense of community, or closure. The two films show that grief narratives do not comprise a single, universal process. They are shaped by cultural values and age-specific storytelling conventions. Therefore, the study contributes to discussions in film studies and grief research by showing how films adjust contemporary grief theories into forms that speak differently to children and adults. Unlike prior studies that analyzed grief in children's and adult films separately (e.g., Tenzek & Nickels, 2017; Wang & Wang, 2021), this comparative analysis applies a singular modern framework to both. It expands on earlier findings regarding coping and isolation by demonstrating how the Dual Process Model and Continuing Bonds are adapted within diverse narrative and cultural settings.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to address the gap in understanding how grief narratives are constructed in films created for different age groups. The findings show how *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) utilize contemporary grief models, shaped by their cultural contexts and intended audiences. *The Book of Life* presents a vibrant depiction of grief centered on collective remembrance through Mexican cultural rituals, particularly the Day of the Dead, reflecting Continuing Bonds as an ongoing relationship between the living and the deceased. In contrast, *Manchester by the Sea* highlights the isolating nature of grief through Lee Chandler's overwhelming loss and guilt. The absence of communal rituals reinforces his solitary burden, while the Dual Process Model appears in his disrupted oscillation between loss- and restoration-oriented coping.

The comparison reveals how cultural frameworks and target audiences shape grieving narratives. *The Book of Life* offers ritualistic and celebratory grief for children, emphasizing meaning and continued bonds, whereas *Manchester by the Sea* presents solitary and unresolved mourning for adults. Although overlaps exist—such as moments of isolation in both films—their endings sustain different grief models: ongoing relational

continuity in *The Book of Life* and unresolved oscillation in *Manchester by the Sea*.

Ultimately, this evidence suggests that a film's portrayal of loss is shaped by its cultural environment and its target demographic's age. Rather than simply mimicking established grief theories, cinema "filters" these models through age-specific narrative lenses. This research, therefore, expands the field by demonstrating that age is not merely a label but a structural force that shapes the limits and possibilities of grief representation. This study successfully developed a framework for comparing films on grief. However, its focus on two vastly different case studies of a children's animation and an adult drama movie limits the scope of the conclusions. Since the adult-targeted film centers on a narrative of extreme trauma, it may not reflect how most people experience loss. This opens the door for future research to examine a broader range of films within the same genre or to investigate audience reception of grief representations. Such a study would connect the gap between grief narratives in films and the lived experience of mourning.

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Authors' Information

Anabelle Angelica Dora Pangaribuan is a graduate of the English Studies Program, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia. Her research interests include children's literature and grief studies.

Email: anabelleangelica24@gmail.com

Dhita Hapsarani is a lecturer at the English Studies Program and the Postgraduate Programs in Literature Studies Program. Her research interests include children's literature, biographies and autobiographies, and adaptations.

Email: dhita@ui.ac.id; ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2624-7162>

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