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Thesis: Grief's Depth

Exegesis: Exegesis

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fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing

Centre for Creative Writing,
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Candidate’s signature

SHANNEL MILNE

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Ethics Approval

This research project did not involve human participants or any other potentially contentious elements, and as such did not require approval from the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEK).

Abstract

EXEGESIS

The exegesis, Exegesis discusses the development of Grief's Depth from genesis to thesis completion, as well as examining the influence of multiple texts which I engaged with, as a means of inspiration and influence, as I informed the progression of the creative work.

THESIS

The thesis, Grief's Depth, is a young adult (YA) novel that follows the lives of a group of young characters as they journey through life experiencing and overcoming grief and guilt. The novel centers upon Ellie, a young, academically gifted student trying to get into a prestigious educational institution, St Matthews. Ellie's journey intersects with others, such as her brother, Cam, and friends, Ethan, Lucien and Panda. Guilt is a major theme in the novel and is especially associated with Ellie's feelings in light of how Cam loses his scholarship and in her relationship with her mother. Cam's mother pushes her own guilt onto her daughter so that Ellie begins to believe she is to blame for parental inadequacies and shortcomings. When Ellie attempts to leave her house for the memorial, Cam's jacket with her, her mother again tries to control Ellie with guilt. However, in the end Ellie confronts her mother and banishes guilt from her life. Grief's Depth deliberately includes a multiple narrative to expand the representation of grief in literature.

Grief's Depth deliberately includes a multiple narrative to expand the representation of grief in literature. The texts that I drew inspiration from the most were *We Were Liars* by E.L. Lockhart (2014), *The Betrayal of Natalie Hargrove* by Lauren Kate (2009), *A Court of Mist and Fury* by Sarah J. Maas (2016), *Entangled* by Cat Clarke (2011) and *13 Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (2007).

Exegesis

By Shannel Milne

Masters of Creative Writing 2018

Introduction

Grief's Depth was inspired by the growing recent trend of darker themes in young adult literature. I chose to base my thesis on the aftermath of a death to display the range of grief responses amongst teenagers after the initial trauma had passed. I wanted to investigate a multitude of dark and difficult themes to show the responses of the characters, to show how the characters interact with their own grief and with that of those around them. I wanted to write a story that joined the conversation but focuses on the outcome, the aftermath. I feel the world sees teenage emotions through a filter of stigma; if a teenager/young adult shows negative or dark emotions it is coined as teenage angst or dramatics. Grief's Depth attempts to challenge that view and validate how teenagers feel. I wanted to portray grief in all its facets and expressions and most of all to write about it in a mature manner that encourages readers to see the gamut of emotions in teenagers as valid responses to grief, death and loss.

Grief's Depth is a multiple narrative novel that follows each character's journey with grief and guilt and the intricately thin line that divides them. Using alternating point of views provided a wider perspective and allowed me to go deeper into each of the main characters. I also played with the idea of using safe spaces for each character where they felt comfortable to show their vulnerabilities and this is where I introduced the idea of using masks, public and private: the persona we show the world and the other one we keep hidden to ourselves.

My thesis tackles life and death, and the learning curve that leads to accepting things we cannot change and knowing when to let go. Teenagers and adults in both literature and life correlate closure with forgiveness, and I chose to challenge that mindset by leaving some relationship lines incomplete at the end of Grief's Depth to

display how difficult and messy life truly is and how somethings cannot be put to rest. In her novel *We Were Liars*, Lockhart (2014) says, “See the world as it is, not as you wish it would be.” A story can still come to an end despite not all the characters miraculously finding peace, as in life. When writing about something as difficult as loss, grief and death it is more realistic and relatable if things do not come to a full circle, the story is not tidy, and everyone is still in pain. The story is about how the characters choose to handle these emotions and how they allow them to affect their lives.

Grief’s Depth is the outcome of teenagers realizing their own mortality the hard way. Cam’s death is a cruel divide between childhood and adulthood; the transitional phase between the two, where the world expects the characters to handle the situation like adults but at the same time continuing to treat them as children. A year after the accident we see those that had been closest to Cam still harbor an abundance of pain as they fester in their grief, the characters blaming themselves and others and the situation.

Thematic Framework: Manifestation of grief

Personal guilt

With grief there is a modicum of guilt, the guilt of survival in Grief's Depth. Both Ellie and Ethan struggle with this. Lost opportunities such as the loss of Cam's scholarship haunts Ellie as she sees it as a gesture of pity. Ellie feels guilty at taking Cam's scholarship and place at St Mathews. Guilt has people second guessing what they deserve in life as we see in Lucien and Panda.

In contrast however to the other characters Ellie, the protagonist, manages her guilt better. The loss of her brother Cam hits her hard. Feelings of guilt and self-assurance is played out in scenes between her and her mother. Her mother pushes her own guilt onto Ellie until Ellie begins to believe she is to blame. When Ellie attempts to leave her house for the memorial, Cam's jacket with her, her mother again tries to control Ellie with guilt. However, in the end Ellie confronts her mother and banishes guilt from her life.

“Cam's dead, dead and buried, he has been for a while now. I'm still here. But I won't beg you to love me or even speak to me. Cam wasn't an only child and it's about time you realized that, because I won't be here for you much longer, not if this is the life you expect me to live.”

One character that has more difficulty with this is Panda. Panda has played a part in the accident leading up to the death of Cam, later in the novel Panda admits to having been on the phone to Cam during the crash, having heard the accident and done nothing about it. The distinction between her emotions is harder to separate, but mostly she feels guilt for the part she played.

I didn't call for help and I should have, maybe then you would still be here today.

Ethan has kept my secret for over a year, but I can't do it anymore.

You're dead and I'm to blame.

Every time I look at Ellie, I can see you, see what I've done to your family.

I can't do it anymore.

I'm sorry, so so sorry for what I've done.'

Panda confesses the guilt she feels for the part that she played in the accident, she writes down her turmoil in the form of a letter addressed to Cam and leaves it at his memorial. For Panda, her grief and guilt are interchangeable, one stems from the other; if there was no reason to feel grief there would be no reason for her guilt. She punishes herself regularly through her art, painting constantly as if the only way to get Cam out of her head is to put him on the canvas, her behavior obsessive. In *The Betrayal of Natalie Hargrove* by Lauren Kate (2009) we see another popular character, Natalie, confronting guilt after a prank she conducts goes askew and a boy dies. She denies any part in the accident, but her guilt begins to take a toll on her life. Natalie sees control as comfort from the start of the novel and begins to obsess over it as her life unravels due to guilt. 'How hard you worked for what you wanted. How cruelly fate betrayed you I the end.' Like Panda's compulsion to paint both girls use these vices as a means of escape from the torment inside their heads.

Ellie does not know what happened the night of the accident, yet Panda is constantly trying to make it up to Ellie by enveloping her into the St. Mathews life because of Panda's guilt. The need to give Ellie the life she feels she has taken from Cam.

In the novel *Entangled* by Kat Clarke (2011) Grace, struggles with the life she has lived and the person she has become, her behavior becoming more erratic to the point that she no longer recognizes herself. She slowly watches as her life unravels

and she scrambles to keep all the strings together, flashbacks haunting her every second of the day of the way she let her life go and the people she has lost. Grace is trapped in a loop of grief and guilt, blaming herself for everything that has gone wrong. 'I remember. All of it. And it hurts. More than I'd ever thought possible. I know where I am and what I've done and why I can't move or speak or open my eyes. And I'm scared. It was all a terrible mistake. I'd like not to be here. I'd like to go home now. Please. Please.' She most closely resembles Ellie's mother in Grief's Depth.

Mental Health/Depression/Isolation

Grief and guilt have a way of affecting people in minor and major ways, to the point of people completely shutting down part of their mind and isolating themselves from loved ones. Self-mutilating can also be a coping mechanism as can doubting one's beliefs.

Panda's obsession with what happens eventually leads her to self-mutilation in order to deal with the past. However, the magnitude of this obsession is only shown in the art studio where paintings of Cam haunt her, every wall if full of pictures of Cam. 'Dirty water dripped from Panda's brush onto her thighs, absently Panda swiped it off and watched the watery red smear across her skin. Slowly Panda drew her paintbrush back and forth, line after line of blood red appearing, the color cutting through silver scars. If she pulled her skirt up higher the scars grew deeper, darker. Fresher.'

Ellie's mother uses her vices like drinking to manage her more conscious episodes but remains a shadow figure throughout the thesis. Her grief displays itself as isolation and outbursts of anger directed at Ellie.

““What have I told you about going to parties?” her mother asked patronizingly, the slow build up was her favorite part. "Did Cam dying teach you nothing? Or did you forget about that?””

Ellie’s mother takes her pain and suffering out on Ellie, but most of the time she is unconscious due to alcohol abuse and Ellie is forced to care for her mother. Meanwhile, Cassidy goes as far as to reconsider the very beliefs she had been brought up upon, how can there be a God if this kind of thing happens regularly? Having an unexpected death in someone her own age has put distance between Cassidy and God.

““And I try not to doubt my faith, but I-I don't understand why you do the things you do... I tell myself that you must have had a reason, one that I can't understand but that doesn't make it easier.””

For once Cassidy does not have religion to fall back on and this leaves her isolated and lost.

Outcomes of Grief:

Personal Growth

Grief has a way of making people feel desperate, eager for love and affection because they know what it feels like to lose it, making this change as a character shows the healing process of seeing past grief into the future and wanting the best for themselves.

One of Ellie’s final steps to getting over the first stage of debilitating grief and seeing a future after Cam, is rejecting the abuse and neglect from her mother. Ellie hopes that her and her mother's relationship eventually gives way to forgiveness and love. Ellie owns her grief and tells her mother that it does not belong to her. Ellie confronts her mother in the hopes that she would finally see sense, see the error of her

ways and that they can fix what had been broken between them. But this is not answered by the end of the novel.

‘Ellie turned with her head held high and ice in her voice, strength in her veins. “He didn’t belong solely to you. I am sick and tired of pretending that you’re in more pain than I am. I won’t let you push me away from Cam anymore. I’m hurting, do you get that? I’m not a fucking machine, I’m hurting.”’

As mentioned, Ellie’s mother however is one of the only characters who does not grow when offered the chance, Ellie asked her mother to attend the memorial and does not show up.

“If any part of you cares even the tiniest bit about me, about my life, then you’ll come to school today and be my mum. I don’t expect you to miraculously be better or less sad, I just want you to try.”

This is a massive personal growth for Ellie as she has let her mother's pain eclipse her own to the point of ruining their relationship. By standing up to her mother and expressing herself Ellie forces the narrative to change, Ellie will not tolerate their relationship as it is anymore. In the novel, *A Court of Mist and Fury* by Sarah, J. Maas (2016). Feyre the main character has always had a strained relationship with her sisters, her only remaining family, which leads her to seeking comfort from a man. She mourns the life she has never had and accepted his mistreatment as part of love. After going through the war and seeing death, she suffers, and part of her healing process is cutting out toxic people from her life. She sees her lover as he is and rejects him, finding her own worth.

‘I was not a pet, not a doll, not an animal. I was a survivor, and I as strong. I would not be weak, or helpless again. I would not, could not be broken.’

In *We Were Liars* by E. L. Lockart (2014) the protagonist says, “We believe that time heals.” and while I agree with this to a degree, I enjoyed showing that it is not time alone that heals but a decision that each character makes, to move on with their lives or stay as they are.

For example, Cassidy starts to see the pain in others and begins to ease it whether that was her original intent or not.

“For now, you should go find out the truth.” Cassidy forced her voice to soften, she didn’t want to force Lucky back into that place, not after he’d fought so hard to get better. “And then, you go find your girl because if she hasn’t seen it yet then she will soon. And I don’t know how much more she can handle, Ellie’s strong but she’s not invincible and this will crush her. Panda’s her friend and Ethan’s like family...”

Cassidy wants the truth to be known but she has grown to care for everyone involved and does not want to open old wounds, so she is conflicted.

All the characters go through a positive personal change in Grief’s Depth and a large display of this is in Cassidy and Ellie, the two characters that start off the most angry and isolated begin to care for the people around them instead of getting trapped inside their heads in the same loop of grief. They open themselves back up to the possibility of getting hurt again but are brave enough to try.

Panda also allows Ellie into her space to an extent. She lets Ellie take paintings and browse through them all. This is Panda’s way of asking for help and forgiveness. Her final step is the revelation of her note attached to the back of her painting, as discussed previously. Panda’s guilt is evident within the letter, however, writing the note is also a relief for her, as she can admit to her part and take

ownership. It helps her begin to move past the trauma. Although her journey away from guilt will be long and hard.

‘Panda didn’t know what she expected to feel after telling the truth, there was relief for admitting it but nothing else. Her guilt and grief stayed put, suffocating her.’

Narrative Devices

Third Person Limited Narrative

Most of Grief’s Depth is written in third person so that the readers have someone to care for and follow on the journey from pain to healing.

Ellie is grieving both her mother and Cam, the life she had and her family. I showed glimpses of Cam as a child through photographs, Ellie’s memories and the videos playing in the lounge to give the readers insight to what their lives used to be like, to amplify just how much Ellie had lost and what Cam had meant to her.

Throughout Grief’s Depth Ellie has Cam’s voice in her head, commenting on her life as if he was still alive and part of it, offering her advice and telling her when she was wrong.

‘He made a mistake, Ellie. You’ve made plenty of those in the past. Get over yourself, he needs you.’

Multiple narrative; the faces of grief

However, a dominant theme throughout Grief’s Depth is grief itself and the way each individual deals with it and adapts to it. And to show this there needed to be multiple perspectives, each of the core characters were allocated time for themselves and their grief, to display how it is experienced differently and expressed. There is not just one version of grief but multiple and as not everyone grieves the same this thesis shows only a few expressions but allows the bigger picture to be seen. I included a range of

reactions to grief to portray the severity the impact can have as well as the small, less noticeable affects.

The private scenes of the core characters are quiet and reflective, forcing the readers to get fully inside each of their heads by removing the outside world and the expectations of what grief should look like. In *Grief's Depth* I threaded grief and guilt into all the characters not just the protagonist.

Cassidy deals with grief even though she knows she played no part in Cam's death and there was nothing she could do to change what happened she just misses her friend and it is as simple as that. Cassidy is the typical high school mean girl. However, when she interacts with Ellie and in her own scene, we see that she is so much more than that.

Cassidy's public mask:

"I'd probably be pissed if I was you, Panda." The other girl started, her voice sickly sweet, it made Ellie's hair stand on end. "Little Reds been here for two days and she's already got your man wrapped around her little finger. I mean, you did just see him, he's messed up. She did that."

And then her private mask as mentioned previously:

"Every day I wake up and remind myself to be grateful for my life." Cassidy spoke softly, her emotions tearing her apart from the inside as she tried to organize them into words. "And I try not to doubt my faith, but I-I don't understand why you do the things you do. I stand for what I believe in and accept that people can be cruel, I am cruel, but then you took Cameron. He was my friend. The only person in this school that liked me, that was kind to me, and you took him. I tell myself that you must have had a reason, one that I can't understand but that doesn't make it easier."

Panda is another character whose public and private masks are completely opposite from one another, Panda tells Ellie that she never had the closure she needed, and we see throughout the novel that she likes to be vocal about her pain to a degree, the extent of her grief is only shown in her own scene.

‘Panda stood up and paced the limited floor space left inside of the studio, she hated this place with a passion that threatened to swallow her whole. The creepy, judging eyes that stalked her every move always kept her on edge, like a sinner in Church. Panda tripped over a fallen easel and stumbled into the wall of artwork and she snapped. Everything closed in around her, pressing painfully close to her already fragile nerves, fraying the very edges of her sanity. Panda began to yank the canvas down, one after another after another. Cam's face watched her from a million different directions as she tore him down. Panda collapsed into a gasping mess amongst the abused work and let the silence eat her up. She made a plan in her head to stand up, clean up and to work out her life sentence.’

Like *13 Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (2007) *Grief's Depth* dabbles with an array of characters to show the audience a kaleidoscope of viewpoints on the incident that took place. The novel follows the protagonist, Hannah, and recites the experiences she had in the past through tapes. The other characters involved in her recollections then have their opportunity to explain the part they played to Clay, the boy trying to understand the past.

Space as Triggers for Trauma

As well as using multiple point of view I was drawn to the idea of using a specific space and narration for each of the main characters because it provided two views on the story: the public and the private. The contrast in how the main characters behavior in public compares to their individual scenes, offers a deeper perspective into the facade we all present to the world.

Howard's Bridge is a space that Ellie associates with negative connotations, this is where Cam died, and she nearly lost her life. It symbolizes fear and trauma. Ellie cannot face water, the lake where Cam died especially. But it is not the fear of water that has her terrified but what happened beneath the murky water. However, I made this even more confusing for Ellie as she only feels close to Cam when she's by the lake. It was the last place she had been with Cam when he was alive.

““This was the last place he was alive.” Ellie whispered, tears streaking down her face, for once she didn't turn away to hide it. “Ethan said they were laughing about something stupid. He died instantly... when the car hit the water. I don't know why but it hurts more knowing how happy he was only seconds before. It's not fair.””

Past and present emotions overlap as if they have never gone away. I never have Ellie identify her trigger, she is not consciously aware of her fear, but she felt unease at the very mention of water. Ellie conquers this fear and slowly sees the correlation between Cam and the lake as a positive one. I did this to display her grief. By facing the water, she faces death, she faces a world without her brother, Ellie is connected to the water – she blames the lake for all the problems in her life but this perspective changes throughout *Grief's Depth*.

Maas dabbled with triggers beautifully in *A Court of Mist and Fury* (2016). She uses only a single color; red. Using this color alone completely flips her character

upside down and triggers instant change in behavior as they are thrown back into the past, reliving the moment of trauma all over again.

‘...I stepped onto the soft grass, white rose petals scattered down it – And red ones. Like drops of blood amongst the white, red petals had been sprayed across the path ahead.’

The passage continues to compare normal objects to those that she used for war.

In *We Were Liars* (2014) Lockhart's main character only begins to remember the accident she and her friends were involved in when she returns to the summer beach house. Being back in that place slowly unlocks a part of her memory that she had not been ready to face before. Lockhart goes so far as to have her protagonist hallucinate that her friend group is alive, the setting triggering her memory muscles continuously throughout the novel until the main character is ready to face the truth.

In *13 Reasons Why* (2007) Asher's protagonist Hannah uses space to cause trauma to the core characters by using video tapes.

“When you're done listening to all thirteen sides – because there are thirteen sides to every story – rewind the tapes, put them back in the box, and pass them on to whoever follows your little tale. And you, lucky number thirteen, you can take the tapes straight to hell. Depending on your religion, maybe I'll see you there. In case you're tempted to break the rules, understand that I did make a copy of these tapes. Those copies will be released in a very public manner if this package doesn't make it through all of you. This was not a spur-of-the-moment decision. Do not take me for granted...again.”

In *13 Reasons Why* (2007), we see each of the characters deal with their apparent part in Hannah's death through Clay's eyes and we watch as he goes into each of their spaces and to an extent their heads by listening to the tapes left behind.

Space a tool to deal with grief, the safety to be oneself

Throughout *Grief's Depth* I played with the interaction of space and point of view to portray the difference in masks characters wear both publicly and privately, how being alone in a specific place draws the characters out of their shells where they can be their true selves. I incorporated this ideology into *Grief's Depth* by letting the characters open themselves up outside of the school setting, giving each of them a safe space to deal with their grief.

For each of the main characters (Ellie, Ethan, Lucien, Panda and Cassidy) I attached a place to them, where they feel safe to be themselves and open with their grief; Ellie's place is her bedroom, the only haven she has house in her house, a place of refuge against her mother, Lucien has his bike and the open road, where he is not expected to play his role as a Mathews, Panda has her art studio, where she is free to express her guilt and paint obsessively as her emotions eat her up, Cassidy has the Church where she seeks comfort in religion while under duress and we see her struggling with her beliefs as her world collapses around her. And Ethan has The Hole café where he plays his music, where he can be alone without the pressure of hiding his emotions from Ellie.

Howards Forest plays a significant part in the story as it combines public and private masks, and is a neutral space that all the core characters feel comfortable to own their grief as well as displaying their public mask. It is a place of healing, of balance. Nearing the end of *Grief's Depth*, the core characters frequent Howards

Forest as they become comfortable living with their grief and loss, especially Ellie. While setting up for the memorial we have a scene where the core characters drop their facades and enjoy each other's company, talking briefly of their grief.

““Thanks for including me, I didn’t realize how much I needed this.” Cassidy admitted as she stretched out, gazing up at the stars. “You know, to be sad for a little while.”

Panda chimed in, “Not having to hide it for once.”

Both girls looked at each other with respect and understanding.’

Allowing each other to see beneath the armor, to the truth and the pain they all share.

Another novel that toys with the connection of space and revelations is *Entangled* by Cat Clarke (2011). The main character in her novel, Grace, attempts to commit suicide and in order to save herself her subconscious traps her in a white room until she finds a way to heal. In *We were liars* (2014) Lockhart’s main character returns to the summer beach house where Cadence watched all her friends die. This helps her regain her repressed memories of the incident that killed her friends, the people she had spent the summer with were nothing more than hallucinations to help her handle their deaths. Similarly, *A Court of Mist and Fury* by Sarah. J. Maas (2016) has the court of dreams and the inner circle of friends, those who were not touched by the war, and this pure place soothes Feyre, the main character who had seen so many terrible things. *Entangled* by Cat Clarke (2011) has the white room Grace invented inside of her head. *13 Reasons Why* (2007) uses tapes, allowing the protagonist Hannah to trap listeners into her space, inside her head.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Grief's Depth required an abundance of research and inspiration through a range of texts to create a well-rounded depiction of grief in its many forms. This thesis experiments with emotions in teenagers, the spaces they require to deal with these situations and the overall acceptance that there is no specific way for grief to be shown or felt. The multiple narrators offered different viewpoints on the other characters, how they viewed grief in others and how their own grief affected them. Grief's Depth also shows the slow and tedious road to living with grief and beginning to accept it.

If I were to revisit this project again, I would focus on the relationship between Ellie and her mother, I would give her mother a voice and a chance to express her own grief and how her life changed after the loss of her son. Although I am unsure as to whether I would fix the mother-daughter relationship I believe seeing life through Ellie's mother's eyes would offer a perspective on grief I had not approached yet.

I would also write further on how the revelation of how Cam's accident happened affected the relationships within the core characters, specifically, Ellie and Panda's friendship and how they would proceed now that the truth has come to light. I would explore whether Panda has found the peace she has been searching for and can forgive herself.

I would invest more time in making Ellie's relationships stronger, digging deeper with connections so that more than grief and healing ties the group together.

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