
STAGES OF GRIEF DEPICTED IN THE AMAZING DIGITAL CIRCUS: PILOT MAIN CHARACTER

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Abstrak

Duka dan kematian merupakan salah satu isu dalam hidup manusia. Perasaan sedih dan sakit dalam duka akan selalu dirasakan manusia karena pada dasarnya kematian adalah hal yang pasti. Isu duka dan kematian tak hanya muncul pada dunia nyata, tapi sering dimunculkan dalam karya sastra dengan tujuan agar pembacanya dapat memahami perasaan tersebut tanpa harus mengalaminya. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisa perasaan duka serta alasan - alasan dari perasaan duka yang dialami oleh karakter utama dari film pendek The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot oleh Gooseworx menggunakan teori lima tahap kesedihan yang dikemukakan oleh Elisabeth Kübler-Ross yang kemudian disempurnakan oleh dirinya dan David Kessler. Dengan teori lima tahap kesedihan, studi ini menggunakan 10 data, yang terdiri dari (2) penyangkalan, (2) amarah, (2) tawar – menawar, (2) depresi, dan (2) penerimaan. Setiap tahap kesedihan yang dilalui oleh karakter utama dalam film ini dipengaruhi oleh masalah internal dan eksternal. Dari studi ini, dapat disimpulkan bahwa sang karakter utama mengalami semua tahap kesedihan.

Kata Kunci: Kematian, Duka, Tahapan Duka, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

Abstract

Grief and death are one of the issues in human life. Humans will always feel feelings of sadness and pain in grief because death is a certain thing. The issue of grief and death not only appears in the real world but is often raised in literary works with the aim that readers can understand these feelings without having to experience them. This study analyzes the feelings of grief and the reasons behind the grief experienced by the main character in the short film The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot by Gooseworx. It employs the 5 stages of grief theory proposed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross which was later refined by herself and David Kessler. With the theory of the 5 stages of grief, this study utilizes 10 data, consisting of 2 denial, 2 anger, 2 bargaining, 2 depression, and 2 acceptance. Each stage of grief that the main character goes through in this film is influenced by internal and external problems. From this study, it can be concluded that the main character experiences all stages of grief.

Keywords: Death, Grief, Stage of Grief, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

INTRODUCTION

Literature is inherent in a particular interpretation of mimesis or replication, and in concepts related to realism, naturalism, representation, and metaphors that imply literary works provide insight into the world or, as Hamlet expressed it, reflect nature like a mirror (Bennet & Royle, 2016, p. 56). They mirror each other as a whole, including the intricacies of humans feeling and emotion. By utilizing literature narrative and language as a medium, they have successfully depicted the core of the society. The characters portrayed in literary works serve as direct reflections of real-life humans, frequently delving into the depth of their behavior, nature, and issue. All of which falls into the psychology of human.

Literature and psychology, while distinct disciplines, are deeply intertwined. Both examine the complex relationship between the human mind and written expression. According to Indrarti (2018, p. 12), "Literature and Psychology, both social sciences, investigate human behavior: Psychology looks into the reasons behind human actions, while literature portrays these behaviors through fictional stories." Psychologists often use literature to examine and demonstrate psychological concepts through characters and scenarios, whether they are real or imagined. Engaging with literature enables people to understand various perspectives with empathy, and to delve into the intricacies of the human mind, encompassing views of the world, grief, dreams, desires, anxieties, conflicts, and resolutions (Ardyandika, 2023, p. 2).

Grief is a feeling of sadness, often described as numbness, shock, anxiety, denial, and loneliness after losing a loved one (Indrarti, 2018, p. 1). Grief can be described as profound sorrow, a heavy heart, and soul-deep agony, as well as mental anguish and emotional suffering. While certain aspects of grief are universally familiar, it also remains surprisingly unfamiliar and mysteriously strange on a deeper level (Abi-hashem, 1999, p. 310). No one is immune to grief, and just like death it is inevitable.

Death and grief have been addressed into countless works of literature. According to Nurjanah in her thesis (2023, p. 11), "Death and grief in literature present a variety approach to death and allow readers to see it from different angles." Just like in real life, death and grief in literature represent sadness, but because literature use language as a medium, reader can easily relate and console themselves; or at the very least knows the concept of death itself. Therefore, literature plays a crucial role as a way to comfort the reader (Nurjanah, p. 11).

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced the Kübler-Ross model, also known as "The Five Stages of Grief," in her book entitled *On Death and Dying* (1969). This model is used to determine and divide the stages that individuals go through when facing death or the loss of a loved one. The stages include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. However, Kübler-Ross focused on interviewing those with terminal illnesses, shaping her model based on individuals facing death rather than those dealing with the loss of someone or something. She also specifically mentioned that these stages do not always occur in a fixed order, and some people may skip or move through the stages (Kübler-Ross, 1969, p. 23)

One of the literatures that depicted death and grief in the story is an animated web series – though so far during this research, the creator of the show has not published the full series yet – by Gooseworx which entitled *The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot* (2023). This short-animated movie tells a story about a human who trapped inside a virtual world after putting on a virtual reality headset. She is placed in the avatar of a jester and met five other people who shares the same situation, but has been there long before the protagonist arrives.

Though the story itself does not look like it revolves around death and grief, throughout the show, it can be seen that Pomni has entered the five stages of grief during her journey. This is perceptible by judging from her behavior, expression, and dialogue. Pomni at some point starts telling herself that this whole digital world is just a dream and she just needs to wake up. Not only that, near the end of the animated movie, Pomni is locked in place and her expression suddenly changes as she understands that this is all real and she needs to accept that she is now stuck in the virtual world. From these two examples, it can easily be seen that Pomni went into a series of stages, which is denial and acceptance.

The main reason for selecting the topic of grief using Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief model in literature is the absence of previous studies discussing "abstract death." Most of the research that this study has found primarily addresses a literal death and grief, which differs from the chosen subject. This topic is undoubtedly significant and can fill a gap in the field of grief in literature.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study methodology is based on qualitative research techniques, which provide a detailed and nuanced examination of the subject matter being studied. The study intends to capture a variety of experiences, viewpoints, and circumstances by delving into the nuances and complexity of the research issue through the use of qualitative methodologies. According to Cropley (2023, pp. 18-19) the objective of qualitative research is to uncover and understand how individuals perceive and interpret reality in their everyday lives, including their interactions with others.

Qualitative research methodology is chosen for this study due to the nature of the subject being analyzed, which consists of scenes, scripted dialogues, and various audio elements such as background music, sound effects, and spoken lines within the film. Additionally, relevant information sourced from fan internet blogs and wikis discussing *The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot* will be utilized to support the study. Through this approach, the study aims to gather comprehensive and nuanced insights into the portrayal of the five stages of grief depicted in the subject material.

According to Cropley in his book (2023, p. 122), qualitative data collection primarily revolves around individuals, referred to as "cases," who share their perceptions of the world through narratives, typically conveyed through spoken or written communication, though other forms of expression may also be considered. The data of this study is mainly taken from the short-animated movie *The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot*, which has the length of 25 minutes and 45 second, and available on YouTube for free. Additional data will be obtained from the fan internet blog and wikis that is relevant to the object. The collected data then will be gathered and used to determine the five stage of grief that present in the movie.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. The Stages of Grief in The Main Character of *The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot*

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969, p. 50) mentioned that in term of facing death and grief, human have their own coping mechanism that will appears in response to the shocking news. This coping mechanism has been classified by Kübler-Ross into five different stages, that often referred as the Five Stage of Grief. Therefore, this section focuses on providing, listing, and analyzing the Stages of Grief that occurred on the main character of *The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot* using Kübler-Ross' model of grief. There are 17 data that being

analyzed in this part which consist of 3 Denial, 2 Angry, 3 Bargaining, 5 Depression, and 4 Acceptance.

1. Denial

Denial is the first stage in facing dying and grief that functions as a blockade against the strong emotions associated with the situation, acting as a psychological defense mechanism (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 24). The denial stage on the main character are as follows:



Image 1 Pomni denying the truth (The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot, 03:05 – 03:15)

Pomni: “Oh, okay, now I get it. **This is a dream** and I should just play along until I wake up, right!?”

The image showed above is classified as the first stage of the Five Stages of Grief, the denial stage. When Pomni first arrived and trapped in the digital world, Pomni met several other people that claims that they are also the victim and they have been there long before Pomni arrives. When Pomni tried to ask them how to leave from this digital world, Jax and Ragatha boldly claim that she cannot leave and instead suggested her to accept her new “life”. In response, Pomni slowly start fell into depression (which will be discussed in the depression stage section) and losing herself, until suddenly came into a conclusion that this is just a mere dream and she should just play along with it.

Additionally, it can be seen that the grief manifest through the verbal and physical response in Pomni. The smile that Pomni shows is not just a smile, but a forced one where deeply inside, she tried to comfort herself thinking that this is not real; it is just a dream, which led us to her verbal response of the situation.



Image 2 Pomni once again saying this is a dream (The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot, 08:25 – 08:33)

Pomni: “Well, I think I'd like to ask him about it, uh, if this was real, **which it isn't, because it's a dream.**”

The image above shows the denial stage. After being told by Kinger that Kaufmo is rambling something about a door to exit, Pomni is intrigued to ask him about the exit door. Jax and Kinger then mention that this could also mean that Pomni is slowly going insane, to which Pomni response that she just wants to make sure if this exit door is real. However, in this scene, Pomni still insisted that this whole world is just a dream, meaning that she still denies the existence and the reality of the digital world, thus it can be concluded that this datum shows the denial stage of the Five Stage of Grief.

2. Anger

Anger is the second stage of the Five Stage of Grief, which is the emotion explosion that individuals keep from the denial stage. The anger may manifest in various ways. For instance, individuals may direct it towards themselves for not spending more time with their loved one, or towards the doctor who failed in saving them or their loved one (Kübler-Ross, 1969, pp. 62–63). The anger stage in the main character of The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot are as follows:



Image 3 Pomni angry as she keeps seeing another room (The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot, 20:24)



Image 4 Pomni angry as she keeps seeing another room – Long Shot (The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot, 20:24)

During Pomni's journey on finding the "real" exit, she came across multiple door which led to the same thing; an office type of room and corridor. As Pomni keep encountering another room with a door at the end of it every time she opened the door, Pomni denial stage (see denial section) turns into anger in the slightest second, until finally jump back into the previous stage while searching for the true exit. The manifestation of her anger stage can be seen by her physical response, as Pomni show annoyed and frustrated face, followed by a grunt or a scream.



Image 5 Pomni angry as she keeps seeing another room (2) (The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot, 20:43)

Pomni anger stage still continue as she opens another door that led to the same thing. This eventually made her frustrated, proven by her physical response of sighing, screaming, and hand gesture.

3. Bargaining

According to Kübler-Ross (1969, pp. 91–93) during the bargaining stage, individuals experiencing grief or loss try to negotiate or strike deals as a way to deal with the reality of their situation. They may seek to negotiate with themselves, a higher power, or others involved, aiming to regain a sense of control or acceptance. The bargaining stage in the main character of *The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot* are as follows:



Image 6 Pomni asking about the exit door (*The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot*, 04:42 – 05:11)

Pomni: “Wait, wait. **Was that an exit door I saw out there? Is that a way to leave?**”

Jax : “What exit? If there was a way to leave, I’m pretty sure we’d have all left by now.”

Zooble: “Yeah, what are you talking about?”

Caine : “...Uh, I assure you there is no “magical exit door”. You’re probably just experiencing DIGITAL HALLUCINATION! From your mind’s transition to the digital plane.”

Pomni : “**But I- I swear I saw-**”

Caine : “Digital hallucinations!”

After Caine shows Pomni all of the location that she can visit in the digital world, Pomni saw a strange orange exit labeled door for a split second until Caine took her back into the tent. Pomni then tried to ask about this “exit door” even though it is stated repeatedly that there is no exit and everyone has already tried to find one. This whole scene and the datum above are classified as the Bargaining stage. The exit door that Pomni saw is the form of her bargain with herself, hoping that she can leave the digital world. The bargaining stage of Pomni can be seen by her verbal response, as she shared her discovery of this exit to everyone, to which everyone denies. This continues on until the next datum.



Image 7 Pomni insisted that the exit may be exist (The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot, 08:16 – 08:20)

Kinger: “No, not really. I think Kaufmo's gone insane. Last time I spoke with him, he was rambling endlessly about some exit. Kind of like you, Pomni, you might be going insane, too.”

Pomni: “But wait, wouldn't that more likely mean **the exit does exist?**”

Jax : “Could also mean that you just have a jumpstart on losing your mind?”

As the story progress, Kinger mentioned that one the inhabitant of the digital world, Kaufmo, has gone insane and endlessly rambling about an exit, similar to what Pomni believed. This made Pomni continue to “bargain” and knowing that someone else also talking about the exit, she is more convinced that it does exist. Pomni then wanted to meet Kaufmo to ask him about the exit that he saw, as way to add fuel to her hope.

4. Depression

The depression stage is where nothing matters, everything is hollow, and it is the deepest sadness that one can felt (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 34). Depression is the fourth stage of the Stage of Grief model.



Image 8 Pomni slowly losing her sanity
(The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot, 03:01
– 03:04)

The image shown above classified as the depression stage. After hearing that there is no way for her to exit the digital world, Pomni immediately enter the state of depression; a mass explosion of emotion and an ultimate breakdown. Interestingly, this is the first stage that Pomni has entered in term of the Five Stages of Grief although the depression stage is the fourth stage. This variability is to be expected, as stated by Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2005, p.23) that it is important to know that the Five Stage of Grief model were never meant to be a direct progress, or a scattered emotion that packed into one, meaning that any individuals may experience all of the Stages in order or in different order, or even skip and jump around the Stages.

After going through door after door, Pomni finally reached the last door, which then



Image 9 Pomni slowly losing her sanity (The
Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot, 03:01 –
03:04)

revealed that the exit door that she always saw and hope for lead to the nothingness, an empty

void. Since this exit door is her form of bargain and hope (see bargaining section), Pomni was dumfounded by the discovery. She then fell into a great depression, realizing that everything she did was pointless and futile. This proven by her expression and her empty eyes.

5. Acceptance

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler in their books (2005, p.37) stated that acceptance is not a form of happiness nor the feeling of “okay” toward the grief. It is the final stage of emptiness, where one could cope with themselves accepting the new reality as a permanent reality. The acceptance stage in the main character of The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot are as follows:



Image 10 Pomni realization after brought back to the tent (The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot, 22:38)

As Pomni roam through the void, flying endlessly, Caine the Ringmaster came to pick up Pomni and bring her back to the the tent. After couple of second, Pomni expression turn sad, providing a non-verbal response as she realizes that the exit door led to nowhere but to emptiness. From here, it can be seen that Pomni is on the acceptance stage, as she accepts that there is no escape from this world, and the exit is nothing but a false hope.



Image 11 Pomni final realization (The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot, 24:34)

The team finally completed their quest and were rewarded with a feast. Pomni, seated in the middle, was left baffled as she tried to comprehend the situation. As the camera zoomed in on Pomni's face, her expression gradually changed from a neutral one to a smile, though not a happy one. This moment signifies the final stage of her journey—the acceptance stage—where she fully embraces her new reality.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

This study focuses on analyzing the Five Stages of Grief model by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross that present in the main character of a short-film titled *The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot* by Gooseworx. Additionally, this study also provides the progression and changes of each stage chronologically as the movie progresses. From the analysis in the fifth chapter, this study has drawn a conclusion.

The conclusion is based on 10 data that taken from the short-film *The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot*, this study managed to analyze and established that every stage of grief is present in the film. The stages consist of 2 denial, 2 anger, 2 bargaining, 2 depression, and 2 acceptance. These stages can be identified by examining the character's expressions and the dialogue presented.

Suggestions

This study successfully found the Five Stage of Grief that present in main character of a short-film titled *The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot* by Gooseworx. Furthermore, this study also successfully addresses the progression and the change of the Five Stage of Grief that occurred on the main character. However, this study has several suggestions for future research in similar topic or same object.

First, *The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot* episode has a various of wonderful characters that might undergoes the Five Stage of Grief or perhaps each character symbolizes each stage of grief. It is highly recommended to analyze this matter on any future studies.

Additionally, *The Amazing Digital Circus: Pilot* is the Pilot episode of the series, meaning that in the future, the creator will publish the full series of this short-film. The pilot episode can be considered as the first episode of the series. It is highly recommended for future studies to analyze the whole series when it is released.

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