



Interpreting Grief as A Child's Life Experience: Children's Film Analysis

Ruth Shieren Buntoro¹, Nopita Trihastutie*²

Widya Kartika University^{1, 2}

nopita@widyakartika.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to examine how the process of growing in grief affects the personality of the main character in "When Marnie Was There" film. This study employed a descriptive interpretive method to get a descriptive exposure in writing from the film. The findings show that "When Marnie Was There" film depicts a child who is experiencing feelings of alienation and disconnection. A variety of emotions, such as grief, are real-life experiences that are portrayed in the dialogue between the characters and in incidental events. This life experience is mirrored in the four stages of the multifaceted grieving process. In conclusion, as the main character passes through the four stages of personal growth and healing—which are represented in the scenes and utterances—and experiences a spectrum of emotions, the main character's journey demonstrates the complexity and multi-dimensional of grief. "When Marnie Was There" film offers a moving examination of identity, loss, and the role that acceptance and friendship may have in a child's grieving process.

Keywords: children's film, grief, life experience

To cite this article:

Buntoro, Ruth Shieren and Trihastutie, Nopita. (2024). Interpreting Grief as A Child's Life Experience. *Journal of Research on Language Education*, 5(1), 9-18.

INTRODUCTION

A film is a form of visual literature that reflects the problems and issues that exist in human life. A film is a moving image produced by recording images of the world with a camera, or by creating images using animation techniques or special effects (Sari, 2009). Films are divided into two categories: theatrical and non-theatrical, theatrical movies include action, psychodrama, comedy, and musical movies, while non-theater films are documentaries, educational, and even animated films (Mudjiono, 2011).

This study explores the children's film "When Marnie Was There" which reflects the issues related to sadness, pain, loss, and betrayal. Of the types of grief above, loss is the most common grief in life (Maranda and Wahyuni, 2019). Grief is a normal emotion of loss that is both universal and individualized. It is a complex emotional response to loss that includes physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, cultural, spiritual, and philosophical aspects (Prosser-Dodds et al., n.d.). The death of a loved one, the end of an important connection, job loss, theft, or loss of freedom are all examples of loss. It is a term used to describe the feelings you have following the death of a loved one, including thoughts and emotions that you are unable to control (Maranda and Wahyuni, 2019). Periods of sadness and grief can turn into trauma and personality changes. During times of extreme stress or trauma, the personality switches to the less dominant function, known as the inferior function, and decisions are made through that lens (Prosser-Dodds et al., n.d.). Personality is the dynamic organization inside a person of those psychophysical processes that impact his traits, conduct, and cognition (Prosser-Dodds et al., n.d.). Eysenck identified the three personality qualities of extraversion-introversion, Neuroticism, and Psychoticism (Eysenck, 1946).

Studio Ghibli produced "When Marnie Was There" in 2014. The film is based on Joan G. Robinson's book with the same title. This movie tells the story of a 12-year-old girl, Anna Sasaki, who has asthma and is haunted by her dark past which affects her current life without any sense of socializing with other people, even her adoptive parents. Her condition was considered bad enough, mentally and physically, she moved to a rural area where she finally met the mysterious figure of Marnie. "When Marnie Was There" takes a deep and controversial theme amongst children's films which drives the interest of the researchers to analyze. The theme of grief is generally not a theme for children's stories.

This study aims to analyze how the main character's personality in the "When Marnie Was There" film changes through the process of growing in grief. This study is significant to provide an understanding of the

development of children's visual literature, a characteristic that points to the realism added to children's literature. The analysis exercises Tonkin's theory of grief.

Facts about the changing and developing personality of the main character can be found in Tonkin's theory of grief which is a process of living in grief, in which individuals who grieve begin to move from their slump and grow to move on with life while still harboring existing sorrow. Based on Tonkin (1996), grief is a multi-dimensional process that involves four stages: numbing, yearning, disorganization, and reorganization. Numbing refers to the initial shock and disbelief of the loss. Yearning is characterized by intense emotions of sadness and longing for the lost person or thing. Disorganization involves a sense of confusion and disorientation as the individual tries to adjust to life without the lost person or thing. Finally, reorganization involves finding meaning and purpose in life without the lost person or thing. Grief will remain, but life will grow around it, leading to new experiences, friendships, and enjoyment (Tonkin, 1996). Grief is a universal expression of loss, expressed through oral and nonverbal communication. To heal from depression, a psycho-dynamic notion of letting go took the role of grief. Successful grief is measured through five stages: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Holland, 2014). Grief is a normal process for bereaved people that ends when they reach the acceptance stage. There are several studies on grief that focus on how a person deals with their grief through the 5 stages of Kubler-Ross.

Previous studies explain how grief reflected in literature connected to life experience and meaning. Maranda and Wahyuni's study (2019), titled "Grief Journey in Bill Cegg's Novel *Did You Ever Have a Family*", stated that bereaved people need to be given time to accept their grief and find meaning in life. By looking at various perspectives from other characters going through the 5 stages of grief, one can determine the stage that is most highlighted and presented in the work towards the main character's grief. The denial stage is the most common grief experience, seen from many perspectives to deflect reality. After the stage of acceptance, someone will achieve serenity through discovering the meaning, which might alter over time. Finding Meaning means finding hope, it does not adhere to the premise that grief occurs in phases, it views the grieving process as one of constant adaptation, which helps save us from being stuck in our pain (Kessler, 2019). In "Analyzing The Grief of Naomi in *The Book of Ruth*", Sin (2022) explained that the character's grief was characterized by anger, depression, and silent acceptance, and with this sixth stage, the character does not only accept the grief that is in her but also finds hope from God and the people around to move on. Grief is a difficult process, and the length of recovery depends on experience. Another study by Azzahra et al. (2022), "Analyzing Grief in 'Setelah Dia Pergi' Documentary Film" provides an overview of the differences experienced by everyone in dealing with loss and to ignite empathy for those grieving. This refers to the sixth stage of grief which refers to finding meaning and focuses on the people around who help characters who are experiencing grief to be able to rise from adversity and continue their life.

Two previous studies on "When Marnie Was There" examined how the main character has an introverted personality and her psychological in her life throughout the film. A study by Effendy et al. (2023) investigated how the film plot describes the stages of the main characters' social development and revealed that the main character experiences four stages of social development: Trust vs. Suspicion, Autonomy vs. Shyness, Initiative and Error, and Craft vs. Inferiority. Another study by Utami (2018) examined how introverted attitudes of the main character and how her surroundings respond to this personality and revealed that the main character's introvertedness is detected in four functions of the introverted personality, including thinking, feeling, sensing, and intuitive functions which is correlated with a child's life experience of being orphan. This current study explores more than Utami's study of the main character's introversion. Unlike Utami's study which excludes the issue of grief and its relationship with introversion personality, this study explores the connection of the personal life growth and a grieving process which is attached to a child's life experience.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a descriptive interpretive method to obtain a descriptive exposure in writing from the film. The data were film text (utterances and scenes) taken from "When Marnie Was There" film. Three stages of data collection procedure include observing the main character's behavior, taking certain utterances reflecting grief and scenes supporting the utterances, and making a narrative list of conversations between the main character and the supporting characters and the narratives of behavior. The data analysis procedure was identifying a correspondence between utterances and behavior with the main character's decision-making process, describing the main character's tendency toward grief experiences based on Tonkin's theory, and interpreting the process of the main character's personality changes through the process of growing in grief.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings show that “When Marnie Was There” film portrays a child struggling with feelings of isolation and detachment. A range of emotion, including grief, is a life experience which unfolds in the utterances of the characters and supporting scenes. This life experience is reflected in a multi-dimensional process of grief that involves four stages.

The first stage is numbing stage. In the beginning of the film, the main character is sitting alone on a bench, staring off into the distance, is surrounded by other children who are laughing, and playing while she sits alone and draws with her pencil. This scene conveys a child’s sense of isolation and disconnection from the world. According to (Kokou-Kpolou et al., 2020), isolation from public life is one of the factors that can lead to emotional numbing. When individuals are cut off from social connections and support systems, they may become desensitized to their emotions and the emotions of others. This can lead to a range of negative outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and a decreased ability to empathize with others.



Picture. 1 *Anna sits alone and draws with her pencil*
(01:43)

The loss of someone loved affects a child’s fear of vulnerability. When the main character lost her grandmother, she became a sad and quiet girl and only hug her doll. She hates her grandmother for leaving her alone in this world and hates herself because she thinks she is the reason everyone left her. This scene reflects a child’s fear of vulnerability and her tendency to withdraw from others, even when she forms a connection with them.



Picture. 2 *Anna hugs her doll*
(28:30)

The film texts show some utterances which support this stage. First, “I don’t need friends. They only hurt me in the end.” This utterance reveals a child’s guardedness and reluctance to form attachments due to past emotional trauma. Second, “I don’t think I belong anywhere.” It reflects a child’s feelings of isolation and disconnection from the world around her. Next, “Why does it feel like everyone is lying to me?” reflects a child’s sense of betrayal and confusion as she tries to make sense of her own identity. In addition, “I wish I could just disappear” reflects a child’s deep-seated feelings of hopelessness and despair. Lastly, “I’m scared of being hurt again” reflects a child’s fear of vulnerability and her reluctance to trust others.

These utterances illustrate how a child’s past traumas have affected her ability to form connections and trust others. Throughout the movie, the main character learns to confront her fears and embrace her emotions, ultimately leading to a cathartic resolution. “When Marnie Was There” film is a poignant exploration of loss, identity, and healing, and a child’s journey serves as a powerful reminder of the resilience of the human spirit.

The scenes and some of the utterances above show how a child lost the figure that made her identity whole and after that incident turned herself into a closed and unhappy person. It reveals the stage of the main character’s numbness to her grief at the loss of someone loved. Even though the flat facial expression denies the feeling of lost, the behavior acknowledges the wound.

The second stage is yearning stage. The film narrates a child’s yearning for a sense of adventure and exploration. The arrival to a new environment drives a child’s exploration. The beauty and the mystery of a new environment affect a sense of adventure.



Picture. 3 *Anna discovers the house*
(13:39)

A child finds a sense of detachment from the world during the arrival to a new environment. During the yearning stage of grief, individuals may experience a sense of detachment from the world around them. This detachment can manifest as a feeling of disconnection from others, a lack of interest in once-enjoyable activities, and a sense of numbness or emptiness. Expressing these feelings of detachment can be an important part of the grieving process, as it allows individuals to acknowledge and process their emotions (Stroebe et al., 2010). A scene shows the main character standing outside a festival, watching the crowds of people without feeling like she belongs. This scene conveys a child's yearning for a sense of belonging and acceptance.



Picture. 4 *Anna attends a festival in a crowded*
(24:55)

The encounter with someone who brings joy and acceptance support a child's sense of purpose. During the yearning stage of grief, individuals may experience a strong desire for emotional fulfillment. This yearning can manifest as a longing for the person who has been lost, a desire for comfort and support, or a need for a sense of purpose or meaning in life (Stroebe et al., 2010). Expressing this yearning for emotional fulfillment can be an important part of the grieving process, as it allows individuals to acknowledge and process their emotions. The following scene conveys a child's yearning for emotional fulfillment and a sense of purpose.



Picture. 5 *Anna gets discomfort in the crowded (illusional)*
(47:44)

A deep friendship fulfills a sense of permanence and stability. The main character yearns for a sense of permanence and stability and her fear of losing the connection found in a deep friendship. The following scene conveys a child's yearning for a sense of security and stability.

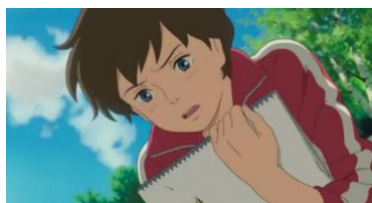


Picture. 6 *Anna and Marnie express the connection in friendship*
(40:50)

Through visual imagery and emotive storytelling, the film effectively conveys a child's yearning stage and her journey toward a deeper sense of self-discovery and emotional fulfillment. Several utterances refer to the main character's yearning stage she experiences. First, "I want to disappear" conveys a child's yearning for a sense of identity and purpose. Second, "I'm looking for somewhere to belong" reflects a child's yearning for a sense of connection and community. Third, "I've always felt like I'm on the outside looking in" conveys a child's yearning for belonging and acceptance. The next, "I want to be happy" expresses the main character's desire for happiness and her uncertainty about achieving it. This utterance reflects a child's yearning for emotional fulfillment and a sense of purpose. In addition, "I feel like I'm dreaming" reveals the main character's vivid dreams and flashbacks that blur the line between reality and imagination. This utterance conveys a child's yearning for a deeper sense of meaning and understanding, as she tries to make sense of her memories and emotions. Finally, "I want to stay here forever" expresses her desire to stay in the mansion across the marsh forever. This utterance reflects a child's yearning for a sense of permanence and stability, as well as her fear of losing the connection found in friendship.

The scenes and utterances above reveal that what a child needs is to find her identity again with someone who can understand her. She realizes when she is in a crowd that she needs socialization and especially needs friends, but at this stage the feeling of numbness still dominates her.

The third stage is disorganization stage. In the beginning of the film, the scene shows the main character struggling to breathe and experiencing a panic attack. This scene conveys a child's sense of disorganization and emotional turmoil as she tries to cope with her feelings of isolation and disconnection from the world around her.



Picture.7 *Anna got a panic attack*
(01:55)

The first encounter with a mysterious accompany affects the main character's confusion and disorganization. This scene which shows the main character keeps on looking for the mysterious accompany reflect a child's dependence on the mysterious because of feeling safe and sound.



Picture. 8 *Anna got confused and passed out*
(01:20:53)

The film shows the main character's vivid dreams and flashbacks that blur the line between reality and imagination. These dreams are often disorienting and surreal, adding to her sense of emotional turmoil and confusion. Grief can have a profound effect on an individual's perception of reality and imagination. The experience of loss can be so overwhelming that it can create a sense of confusion between what is real and what is imagined (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011). This can lead to a range of emotional and psychological symptoms, including anxiety, depression, and disorientation.



Picture. 9 *Anna finally realizes between reality and imagination*
(01:23:49)

At the end of the movie, the main character learns the truth about the mysterious identity and realizes that many of the memories and experiences she had with mysterious identity were figments of her imagination. This

revelation sends the main character into a state of emotional turmoil and confusion, as she struggles to make sense of what is real and what is not.



Picture. 10 *Anna finds the truth about Marnie*
(01:08:33)

The main character experiences a variety of utterances that reflect this sense of disorganization and emotional upheavals. The stage also can be seen in the utterances that appear in the film. First, “I hate myself. I hate myself so much. I’m so different from everyone else.” It conveys a child’s sense of emotional turmoil and confusion as she tries to cope with her feelings of isolation and disconnection from the world around her. Second, “I keep getting lost. I don’t know where I am.” This utterance adds sense of disorganization and instability. Third, “Who are you? Why are you here?” reflects a child’s confusion and disorientation as she tries to understand the mysterious identity’s true intentions. The next, “What’s happening? Is this real?” adds sense of emotional turmoil and confusion. Moreover, “Why are you doing this? What do you want from me?” reflects a child’s sense of disorganization and emotional instability as she struggles to understand the true nature of their friendship. The last, “Who am I? What’s real and what’s not?” reflects a child’s sense of emotional disorganization and instability as she struggles to make sense of what she has experienced.

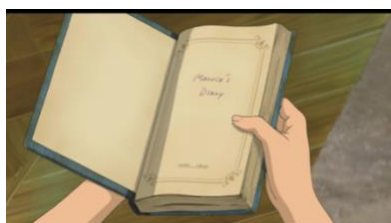
The utterances in “When Marnie Was There” film effectively convey a child’s sense of emotional turmoil and confusion as she tries to navigate the complexities of her own grief and emotional trauma. She lashes out at others, particularly her foster mother, and becomes withdrawn and moody. The scenes and utterances above show how a child is struggling for herself even though there are several scenes where she tries to socialize or mingle with other people and the panic attacks and asthma she experiences recur. It can show how a child has difficulty distinguishing between reality and her subconscious, so this causes her to become confused and seem disoriented.

The fourth stage is reorganization stage. In the reorganization stage of grief, individuals begin to accept their loss and start to reorganize their lives without the person or thing they have lost. The scene which reflects the main character’s reorganization stage represents a new beginning for the main character, as she begins to reintegrate into her life after her journey of grief by accepting her foster mother. Reintegrating into life after a journey of grief is one of the signs of accepting the past and is part of the reorganization stage. It can be a challenging process, but it is an important part of the grieving process and can help individuals find a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives (Stroebe et al., 2010).



Picture. 11 *Anna finally finds the truth about her past and accepts her foster mother*
(01:34:05)

The main character is reinforced by the presence of a mysterious figure who becomes a friend. The scene shows a diary which narrates a similar experience of loss which allows the main character to understand other’s perspective and helps her to accept the truth and move forward with her life.



Picture. 12 *Anna found Marnie's diary*
(01:00:12)

In the reorganization stage, the scene shows the main character's artwork begins to change, reflecting her acceptance of her past and her willingness to move forward. The artwork represents the main character's acceptance of her relationship with her best accompany and the impact that it had on her life.



Picture. 13 *Anna's drawing changes*
(01:39:00)

At the end of the film, scene reflects the main character's ability to deal with her past, accept to live with it, and tried to open herself to the world. She changed for herself.



Picture. 14 *Anna finally accepts her life and opens herself*
(01:38:20)

Several utterances correspond to the visualization of the reintegration stage. First, "I'm so happy to see you!" represents a new beginning for the main character, as she begins to reintegrate into her life after her journey of grief. The next, "It's time to go home." represents a sense of closure for both the main character and her best accompany. It shows that they have both accepted the reality of their situation and are ready to move forward with their lives. In addition, "We'll always be friends, won't we?" represents the main character's acceptance of her relationship with her best accompany and the impact that it had on her life. The next, "I'm sorry I didn't trust you." represents the main character's acceptance of the truth and her willingness to move forward with her life.

The scenes and utterances above show a child's growth and development, as she learns to trust others and create new memories. "When Marnie Was There" film effectively portrays the reorganization stage of grief through its use of utterances and character development. The main character reaches the stage of reorganization, which is evident in her decision to visit the silo, and realizes that Marnie, her best accompany, was not a real person but a manifestation of her subconscious. This realization allows the main character to find closure and move on from her grief. She accepts that her best accompany was a part of her imagination and that she can continue to cherish the memories of their time together. The main character's journey of grief is a powerful reminder that, while grief is a difficult and painful process, it is possible to find acceptance and move forward with our lives.

Discussion

Children's stories are stories intended for children with children as the main characters. The style of storytelling is adapted to children's ability to digest. Likewise, the themes presented in the story are intended to be understood by children.

The theme of grieving in children's stories, such as the one in "When Marnie Was There", signifies the realism side by packaging the reality of children's lives that are not always happy. The reality of children is not depicted with a life full of joy and fulfillment of children's physical and mental needs. The realism side of the film underlines what Taghizadeh (2014, p. 1628) describes as "the relation between literature and reality, between what the word says and what the life is. This dimension is usually dealt with under -representation which is

psychological, cognitive, as well as anthropological.” The interpretation of the story “When Marnie Was There” cannot be simply meant in terms of moral messages because the story presents a complexity of internal and external conflicts. This complexity presents a child protagonist with the burden and inner turmoil of an adult.

“When Marnie Was There” renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail. It takes characters and sets them going about life. The film portrays the characters in their real complexity of temperament and motive. The issue of grieving in the film places character more important than plot and action. The stages of grief highlight the events that occur is usually be plausible, given the circumstances. Another realism side of the film is the absence heroic actions. It dramatizes the life experiences of average children as they are involved with the real ups and downs of daily life. Characters in the film typically represent the members ordinary children.

CONCLUSION

“When Marnie Was There” film effectively portrays a child’s journey through the stages of grief. The main character’s journey illustrates the complexity and multi-dimensionality of grief, as she experiences a range of emotions and undergoes personal growth and healing which are the four stages shown up in the scenes and utterances. “When Marnie Was There” film serves as a poignant exploration of loss, identity, and the power of friendship and acceptance in the process of grief.

The results of this study are limited to a reflection of the reality of a child’s experience. It does not generalize the grieving process experienced by all people. The issue of grieving, which is a common theme in non-children's literature and which is presented with a child protagonist, signifies the realism of grieving as part of children’s lives. The application of the results of this study is the utilization of the therapeutic side of the narrative for children who are experiencing grief.

REFERENCES

- Azzahra, S. Y., Thahjodiningrat, H., Zhafirah, N. I., Miranda, G., Septiani, D., & Zhafira, A. T. (2022). *Analyzing Grief in “Setelah Dia Pergi” Documentary Film*. 4th International Conference on Arts and Design Education (ICADE 2021), Bandung, Indonesia. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220601.061>
- Effendy, Z. M., Subargo, Y. L., & Santoso, E. (2023). Perkembangan Sosial Tokoh Anna dalam Film “When Marnie Was There”: Perspektif Psikososial. *Didaktis*, 23(1).
- Eysenck, H. J. (1946). The Measurement of Personality. [Résumé]. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 40(2), 75–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003591574604000209>
- Holland, J. M. (2014). *Elisabeth Kübler-Ross*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.3863.2401>
- Kessler, D. (2019). *Finding Meaning*. The Sixth Stage of Grief. Scribner.
- Kokou-Kpolou, C. K., Moukouta, C. S., Masson, J., Bernoussi, A., Cénat, J. M., & Bacqué, M.-F. (2020). Correlates of grief-related disorders and mental health outcomes among adult refugees exposed to trauma and bereavement: A systematic review and future research directions. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 267, 171–184. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.02.026>
- Maranda, K., & Wahyuni, D. (2019). Grief Journey in Bill Clegg’s Novel *Did You Ever Have a Family* (2015). *English Language and Literature*, 8(4). <https://doi.org/10.24036/ell.v8i4.106801>
- Mudjiono, Y. (2011). Kajian Semiotika Dalam Film. *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi*, 1(1), 125–138. <https://doi.org/10.15642/jik.2011.1.1.125-138>
- Neimeyer, R. A., & Sands, D. C. (2011). Meaning reconstruction in bereavement: From principles to practice. In *Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society: Bridging Research and Practice* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 9–22). Routledge.
- Prosser-Dodds, L., Kavar, L., Malpass, D., Gonzalez, C., & Brandt, C. R. (n.d.). The Relationship Between Grief and Personality – A Quantitative Study.
- Sari, T. O. (2009). *Fairy Godmother’s Ambition Revealed in Shrek 2 Cartoon Movie: A Psychoanalytic Approach* [Thesis]. Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta.
- Sin, S. K. (2022). Analyzing The Grief of Naomi in The Book of Ruth. *DUNAMIS: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristiani*, 6(2), 621–634. <https://doi.org/10.30648/dun.v6i2.610>
- Stroebe, M., Schut, H., & Boerner, K. (2010). Continuing bonds in adaptation to bereavement: Toward theoretical integration. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30(2), 259–268.
- Taghizadeh, A. (2014). A Theory of Literary Realism. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 4(8), 1628-1635.
- Tonkin, L. (1996). Growing around grief—Another way of looking at grief and recovery. *Bereavement Care*, 15(1), 10.

Utami, A. R. (2018). *“Inside and Outside Invisible Magic Circle”: Anna’s Introvercy in Joan G Robinson’s “When Marnie was There”* [Thesis]. State Islamic University of Sunan Ampel Surabaya.