

INTERVENTIONS



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Volume 6:1

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

July 2024

Personal Loss and Collective Trauma in Kenneth Lonergan's *Manchester by the Sea* (2016): Guardianship and Filiality as Redemption.

Meeraz Hoque

Research Scholar,
Department of English, Cooch Behar Panchanan University

Abstract: In Kenneth Lonergan's *Manchester by the Sea* (2016), a reclusive young white male named Lee Chandler is forced to return to his eponymous hometown after his brother (Joe Chandler) suffers a fatal cardiac arrest, only to find out later that he has been named as the legal guardian of his sixteen year old nephew Patrick, thereby reluctantly assuming a filial role to a child who has no affinity to him. Lee's reluctance is fuelled by the fact that few years ago he and his wife lost all three of their children in a freak household accident for which Lee fully blames himself. Their marriage does not survive this tragedy and Lee moves to the nearby town of Boston, to lead an asocial, meagre existence. The personal loss that Lee suffers metamorphoses into a mountain of collective trauma which all his family members must tiptoe around. The film highlights the severity of the post-traumatic stress disorder that Lee suffers from by focusing upon his extreme apathy towards being connected to his hometown in any capacity, which his initial unwillingness to be a legal guardian to Patrick is a manifestation of. At the heart of the film is the question surrounding the socio-political economy that forces Joe Chandler to name somebody as ineligible and unsuited to the role as Lee as his son's legal guardian and what that says about the lives of single working-class men in a blue-collar town, since both Joe and Lee are divorced. Lonergan treats the traumatic existence of Lee as the failure of the society and the public health care system to provide the help and care that Lee so desperately requires, leaving him vulnerable to bouts of depression, melancholia and despondency; conditions that render him vastly unsuited to the role of Patrick's legal guardian. This paper aims to understand the nexus between personal loss and collective trauma and how that manifests itself into a cycle of self-abuse and neglect, tearing apart the seams of filial bonds. It simultaneously attempts to explore the configuring the redemptive power of kinship and guardianship that salvages Lee's attempt to reaffirm his ties with his family and come to terms with his life.

Keywords: *Trauma, Loss, Depression, Family, Kinship.*

Introduction:

The Oxford Dictionary of Psychology defines Trauma as "a physical injury or wound, or a powerful psychological shock that has damaging effects". This definition certainly rings true in the case of Kenneth Lonergan's *Manchester by the Sea* (2016), as it focuses on the hapless

existence of Lee Chandler, a young white male who is going through life in a cycle of self-loathing and reclusive despair. Bereft of social interaction and family life, Lee blames himself for the death of his three young kids in a household fire, a mishap that not only killed the children but also destroyed the marital bonds of Lee and his wife Randi Ellington. Perturbed by self-guilt, Lee tries to fatally shoot himself by snatching the gun of an on-duty police officer. Even though the death of his children is a mishap and Lee is free to go, he blames himself for the tragedy. It becomes apparent to the viewer that Lee's suffering is not so much due to a guilty conscience but rather a fragmented sense of self where he views himself as a failed parent who could not protect his children from the worst possible calamity. A morbid sort of self-loathing overcomes him and that soon leads to a marital discord and resentment, eventually resulting in a strained divorce, leaving both Lee and Randi embittered, and propelling Lee's self-imposed exile in the nearby town of Boston. Lonergan encourages the viewer to brood over the details of this embittered couple's marital disharmony, suggesting that both Randi and Lee are victims of an unjust society.

Upon careful investigation of his psychological dilemma, it becomes evident that the reason why Lee is reluctant to assume the guardianship of Patrick is because it would involve his moving back to Manchester, thereby unleashing a tidal wave of all too recent calamitous memories which he has been trying to evade. By harping on Lee's reluctance, Lonergan emphasizes that our memories and our capacity to recollect have a spatial dimension to them, manifesting themselves at moments when we are made all too aware of the past and are not able to resist our vulnerability. Lee's misery is compounded by the fact that his brother's body cannot be buried until spring, as the ground is frozen. The more he tries to extricate himself from the situation, the more entangled he gets in the whole family kerfuffle. Lonergan shows us that it is not possible for patients of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) to fully commit to a situation that forces them to confront their past, which is why Lee finally acquiesces to staying in Manchester until the end of Patrick's school year. It has been made abundantly clear to him that without his guardianship, Patrick will become the responsibility of the State and might even be placed into foster care. Lee cannot shake away the filial bond that he shares with Patrick, even though the two of them do not get on well initially. When Patrick decides to reconnect with his estranged mother Elise, Lee is apprehensive about the outcome, as in the past Elise's alcoholism had caused her to abandon Patrick and his father, eventually robbing Patrick of the opportunity

of a normal childhood. This protective attitude that Lee feels towards Patrick almost borders on parental care and is suggestive of the fact that irrespective of how hard he tries, Lee cannot shrug off his filial attachments. This opens the possibility of a second chance that Lee might have towards reconnecting with his long-estranged family.

The Narrative Technique of Flashback in Addressing Trauma

In the scenes involving the mental disintegration of Lee, director Lonergan often takes recourse to what is popularly known as the stream of consciousness technique. Diving deep into the inner crevices of Lee's mind we find glimpses of a life that could have been, a life that he constantly obsesses over, one involving Randi and all three of his children and it is in these scenes that the film is at its poignant best. Lee knows that the life he once shared with Randi is gone forever, but he continues to punish himself for that by refusing to fully commit to the guardianship of Patrick. He does not realize that him being entrusted with the guardianship of Patrick is his second chance for happiness, even if that has come at the cost of his elder brother's death. This stubborn, inflexible attitude towards what appears to be an altogether inexorable issue (the matter of assuming Patrick's guardianship) seems very puerile. But the director constantly moves between the past and the present to signify the deep psychic labour that Lee is having to undertake, one that takes its toll on his mind, leaving no room for outward expression.

The scene involving the "reunion" of the long-divorced couple, Lee and Randi, is a reminder of the frayed hues of love gone astray, love that could not survive the unspeakable horror of watching your own children die in your own house. It is a cold gray morning in Manchester and Lee is trudging the street when suddenly, Randi walks into the screen with her newborn child in the stroller. The director does not waste any time introducing Randi, no dialogue is misspent as the flashbacks involving the house fire have already acquainted us with her character. At first hesitant and awkward, they begin talking, with Lee professing that he does not have anything "big to say". They briefly chat about Randi's new child, a reminder of her willingness to move forward with time that starkly contrasts with Lee's inertia and seclusion that he has imposed upon himself. Upon further prodding, it becomes apparent to Randi that Lee is severely depressed and is not willing to engage with the society at large, an almost Arthur Miller-esque crisis, that compels her to deliver the most profound line of the whole film: "You can't just die"; a line that almost convinces Lee that Randi might still care about his wellbeing.

Randi expresses remorse over her treatment of Lee during their divorce, offers up an apology and requests him to have lunch with her, an offer that Lee denies feeling that he does not deserve it. Nonchalantly he walks into a bar, picks a fight with a stranger and is soon thrown out. Rage spills over his face, rage that is emblematic of the larger malaise that surrounds his life, clawing at his sanity, making him unstable.

The Conflicted Individual and the Self-Imposition of Exile: Lee as a Defeated Man

Right after the infernal disaster in his house, the police take Lee and his family members into the police station. Following a preliminary investigation, it is revealed that Lee had forgotten to put the screen on his fireplace, which caused the fire, eventually leading to the death of his children. The police adjudicate that it is not a crime to forget to keep the screen up at the fireplace and allow Lee to go free. This greatly upsets Lee as he cannot forgive himself for making such a grave mistake; he wants the world to penalize him, he does not want to hide behind the safe cloak of “an honest mistake”; he wants his family members to turn on him, he wants punitive measures to be taken against him. In the police station after the interrogation, in a moment of weakness, Lee grabs at the holster of a police officer, snatches his pistol and tries to fatally shoot himself. He is eventually restrained, and the worst does not happen, but it is indicative of the pain and guilt that ultimately engulf his life.

On several occasions in the film, Lee confesses to his adolescent nephew Patrick that the reason why he does not want to assume his guardianship is because that would necessitate Lee moving back to Manchester, a place that he thinks “he cannot beat”. This image of being defeated at the mnemonic hands of his hometown is one that haunts him throughout the movie, unleashing a series of self-inflicted torture. The premonition of he and his loved ones being hurt by careless individuals is what makes him object to Patrick reconnecting with his estranged alcoholic mother, Elise. Despair becomes more intense whenever he is in his hometown, the place working as a catalyst to his asocial attitude and paranoia. Trauma works in many ways, - public shaming of a distressed individual being one of the prime ones. For example, earlier in the movie, when Lee shows up at his nephew’s hockey practice, he is identified by the hockey instructor as the man who had involuntarily killed his own children. Public scrutiny and rumour surrounding his tragedy was rife in the years following the tragedy, and which contributed to his self-exile. Lee does not want young Patrick to be disappointed by precarious adults like Elise, as

in the image of every precarious adult Lee sees the figure of his own self - the ultimate erroneous individual. Lee resigns himself to a life of solitude, which works to compound his misery. Director Lonergan suggests that self-awareness is not the same as the capacity for change, as Lee refuses to move on from his past despite being made aware by countless individuals in his life that the incident was not his fault; it is a guilt that he cannot shake off. Herein lies his tragedy, a conflicted individual who lets his history defeat himself, thereby multiplying his trauma.

Guardianship as Redemption: Triumphant Trauma

The crux of *Manchester by the Sea* lies in the psychological exploration of Lee's unending trauma, a mishap that everyone in his life seems to have moved on from, but one that he cannot shake free, one that gnaws at his heart, cleaving away at his being and rendering him helpless, completely at sea in facing life's vicissitudes. Patrick, the young precocious boy who is the only blood relation left in Lee's life, represents a carefree, uninhibited lifestyle that Lee cannot even think about imbibing. Patrick with his shoddy hockey practices, romantic liaisons with his girlfriends and occasional recreational usage of cannabis, embodies a life of willful pursuit of pleasure and merrymaking. What is interesting to see is that Lee is not critical of Patrick and his hedonistic ways, rather we find him pulling away from Patrick's life and sabotaging every opportunity that he gets at connecting with his nephew, at least initially. The pre-existing awkwardness between them gets compounded when it is revealed that it would be spring before Joe's body could be buried as the ground is frozen, contributing to an otherwise gloomy state of mind for Lee.

Over time, Lee realizes that he cannot evade his duties and bail the situation like he once did when his children perished in the fire. He agrees to stay back in Manchester till the end of Patrick's school year, a decision that represents a willingness to grow on his part. Patrick also seems to be making space for Lee in his life. Initially hesitant to open-up to Lee about life, Patrick learns how to use his uncle's experiences to his advantage, creating an amalgam of youth and experience that proves to be greatly beneficial to Patrick, providing him with much needed stability and temperance. Lee and Patrick learn to partake in the joys of life by taking out Joe's only material possession in life: the fishing boat. They take out the fishing boat to the sea, drink

and smoke and briefly forget about the cares of life. This represents an important stage in their relationship, where they are willing to give themselves a chance at happiness. Unencumbered by the tragedies of life and evils of time, they both realize that any attempt at correcting the past is futile and the only way forward is to embrace the present in all its glory. Patrick is the child that lost his father untimely, is estranged from his mother who is now married to a different man and is looking for direction and drive in his life. Lee, the elder member of the Chandler family, lost his children in a freak accident. They with their incompleteness and imperfections in life are a perfect foil for each other and can fill the holes in each other's lives. This is where guardianship comes as a blessing in Lee's life, providing him with the opportunity to exorcise the past guilt of not being able to be there for his children by ensuring that Patrick transitions well into his adulthood without getting bogged down by the trauma of losing his father. Because of his history of psychological despair and traumatic stress disorder, Lee is aware of how vicious it can be to navigate in life all alone. Luckily for Patrick, he has his uncle to guide him through the dark night, providing him with the necessary advice about life, belonging and love, shepherding his way through young adulthood, easing out his entry into the world. One might even say that his PTSD has made Lee more compassionate towards life and Patrick in general as he does not want Patrick to suffer in the face of insurmountable tragedy like he did, thereby confirming the bonds of filiality and blood.

After a brief encounter with his ex-wife Randi on the street, which results in them talking about their past life and their children, Lee feels overwhelmed with emotions and proceeds into a bar to douse his pain with alcohol. He picks up a fight with a random stranger and is soon thrown out, leaving him with the option of spending the night at the house of George, one of Joe's friends. Lee confesses to George and his wife that he cannot assume full time guardianship of Patrick and requests them to adopt him till he becomes an adult. Lee realizes how important it is to have a protective care this early in his life. George agrees and Lee completes the procedural formalities. Towards the end of the film, we see Lee confiding to Patrick that he is looking for residence in Boston, as he wants to spend more time with his nephew and wants to be a positive influence on him. For better or for worse, as the only family members who can hold on to each other, they are willing and actively trying to stay connected with each other. Lonergan suggests that the bonds of filiality do not get wiped out at the face of tragedy, rather they become more solid and binding. Their relationship triumphs over the dysfunctional state of their family, they

merge organically with each other and become resilient. Guardianship accords Lee to redeem himself not in the eyes of others, as it evident that others do not care about the goings on in Lee's life, but in his own eyes. His constant attempt to punish himself is over, he has mourned enough, and he is ready for the opportunity that life has offered to him to fully actualize his potential as a caregiver. Lee has known the depths of despair and self-loathing all too well and does not want the same for Patrick.

City, Nature and Colour: Lee as a Product of His Place:

The hometown of Lee Chandler, i.e. Manchester is a drab and dreary place, full of weary individuals who are desperate to rise above their stations; clutching at the straws that life throws at them, all the while trying to attain the best possible outcome for themselves. Randi is a prime example of this, she is not happy in her new marriage, despite being blessed with a new baby; but she sticks it out through the worst as she realizes that life with a new husband is what might just save her from an all-consuming neurosis. Similarly, Lee is also not adept at transitioning into a new setting as we find him eking out a meagre living in Boston, forever dole eyed and exhausted. Much of the psychological make-up of Randi and Lee can be traced back to their hometown. Manchester is a seaside town, but there is no beach, there is no tourism and there is certainly no way for young desolate souls to find recreation. Fishing and fish-processing seem to be the two main industries in the town, providing precarious employment to run-down individuals who are desperate for a second chance in life. Alcoholism grips the community, as evidenced by the multiple drinking related infractions, losses and injuries suffered by Lee, who one can treat as a metonymical representation of the town's young population. Nature and natural beauty seem to be an afterthought in this town; it does not provide any solace to the distressed, the sky is forever gray, the wind harrowing and chilly, and the soil frozen. In fact, the reason why Joe's burial gets delayed is because it is dead winter, and the ground is frozen. Nature compounds to Lee's misery; more time he spends in his hometown, the more vulnerable he becomes to the onslaughts of the past. The scenes describing Lee's stay in Manchester are either in grey or dark shades, the cinematography contributing to the overall despondent nature of the story, accelerating the progression of Lee from an outsider in his nephew's life into becoming an integral part of it.

Coming out of Exile: Lee's New Life:

Towards the end of the film, after Joe's burial is complete, Lee takes an otherwise unthinkable step in his life, - he confides to Patrick that he would like to be more involved in his life and promises to look for a larger residence at Boston so that the two of them can spend more time together. This is a remarkable advancement for Lee, signaling his growth and maturity as an individual. Even in his most vulnerable moments, Lee never lost sight of the fact that he is now going to be the sole care provider and guardian of his nephew, a young individual that reminds him of his own self. Trauma got the better of Lee for multiple years but his willingness to meaningfully engage with his nephew heralds a new chapter in his life, as someone who can rise above trauma to contribute positively to the lives of people around him. This is how Lonergan shows the capability of defeating trauma through his protagonist, one who can salvage the remnants of his life and is grateful for the opportunity that he gets to reconfigure his being. Filiality is shown to be the ultimate saving grace in Lee's life as his bond with Patrick is what saves him at last.

Conclusion

Manchester by the Sea is a brooding meditation on male loneliness, dysfunctional family, alcohol abuse, anger management and the healing powers of family. Surviving a great loss early in life, with the help of his friends and the gradually considerate nature of Patrick, Lee learns how to forgive himself. Trauma cannot hold him down for his entire life, even though it had metastasized into a mountain of grief, self-loathing and shame. Guardianship of Patrick represents an important new beginning in Lee Chandler's life, who realizes that healing and growing can only be found in the regenerative bonds of family or whatever remains of it. The rest of the protagonists in the film, Randi and Elise also fight their own demons, and try to overcome their traumatic self-abusive patterns of behavior in their own way. Director Lonergan conjures up a tale of self-sustenance through the telling of Lee's tragedy and opines that one tragedy is not the end of one's life, rather redemption lies at the other end of the spectrum. Depression is shown to be a corrosive mental illness, one that gnaws at Lee 's heart and leaves him prone to episodes of self-abuse. The film establishes Lee as the archetype of male loneliness

and apathy and shows that it is possible for a severely depressed young man to overcome bouts of depression and have a shot at genuine happiness. Happiness comes from a filial bonding and in ultimately breaking free of the past trauma and guilt. *Manchester by the Sea* is a paean to resilient self-affirmation, a film about superseding a dark chapter of one's life and showing that a person is not defined by his mistakes. The film points foregrounds that redemption and regeneration always welcome an individual who is not resistant to the idea of reconnecting with his past in a truthful manner as evidenced by Lee Chandler, whose life finally, is not a retreat into the dark abyss, but, rather a step into Light.

References

Coleman, M. Andrew. *A Dictionary of Psychology. (3 ed)*. Oxford University Press. 2008.

Lonergan, Kenneth. *Manchester by the Sea*. Roadside Attractions, 2016.