

The Dynamics of Hope in Unkrich and Molina's *Coco*

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes how the characters in Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina's animated film *Coco*, mainly Mamá Imelda, Héctor, and Miguel, manage their emotional responses when they are facing loss, bereavement, or other significant changes in their lives. The study uses Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five-stage model of grief to analyze how these characters go through the grieving process. Moreover, in order to suggest how those who are grieving can enter into positive states of mind, the study expands on Kübler-Ross's original model by incorporating a positive mindset of hope. In dialogue with Unkrich and Molina's film, the study uses Kübler-Ross's ideas to explore coping mechanisms that can help manage difficult times in life, while also suggesting the benefits of maintaining a positive mindset through hope.

Keywords: Bereavement; grief; hope; Kübler-Ross model; loss.

INTRODUCTION

Grief refers to the emotional experience or response of a person who may have suffered the loss of someone or something, or who may be experiencing the form of bereavement that attends the approach of his or her own death (Boerner et. al., 2016). The grief response is generally connected to degrees of suffering, which may be intense and unbearable or, in some cases, more endurable (Bruce, 2007). A number of theorists have proposed models of how people go through grief stages or phases in order to come to terms with loss; however, the most well-known model of this sort is the one Kübler-Ross developed in her highly influential book *On Death and Dying* (Kübler-Ross, 1969; 1997), in an attempt to identify universal patterns in the grieving process.

In order to further understand the grief response, the study intends to analyze Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina's animated film *Coco* (2017), which falls within the genre of fantasy, telling the extraordinary story of what happens one Día de Muertos—the Mexican "Day of Dead" holiday.

There has been not much study and film analysis in *Coco*. Du's study (2018) focused on the narrative motifs in *Coco*, including the motifs of kinship, death, trauma, etc., and examined how the motifs functioned in people with different cultural backgrounds. Raaijmakers (2019) took the film *Coco*, as well as *The*

Book of Life, as a case study to look into the racial and cultural other shown in animation films. However, there is no research on grief and bereavement in *Coco*. Therefore, the study intends to examine the entangled relationships of Miguel's family, mainly those involving Miguel, Miguel's great-great grandmother, Mamá Imelda, and his great-great grandfather, Héctor, and further examine how these characters manage their emotional responses when they are facing loss, bereavement, or other significant changes in their lives.

KÜBLER-ROSS'S FIVE-STAGE MODEL OF GRIEF

Kübler-Ross was a Swiss-American psychiatrist who devoted herself to working with terminally ill patients. She found that these patients would experience specific stages of emotional response when they were faced with their own impending death. She summarized the responses she observed in a model encapsulating what she identified as the five stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969; 1997). The five stages are denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (known as DABDA), though the sequence of stages may vary from person to person (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). Initially, this model was used to map out the emotional stages of terminally ill patients. Subsequently, however, Kübler-Ross expanded the model, arguing for its applicability for anyone facing any form of personal loss or the end of a close relationship.

The denial and isolation stage maybe the first stage people may go through while they are facing loss, bereavement, or a significant change of life. This stage refers to the adoption of an escapist attitude, one that is automatically activated in people as a self-defense mechanism. They may go numb or persuade themselves that nothing has happened to avoid being hurt, until they are better prepared to accept the reality. People may think that life makes no sense and that the world has become meaningless. Then, after realizing what has really happened, they may burst into anger. In the anger stage, people may have a strong sense of unfairness, making them lapse into feelings of discontent and of bearing a grudge. Moreover, they may project this negative emotion not only onto God but also onto the people with whom they come into contact. Although giving vent to anger may seem frightening, it is necessary for grieving persons to feel the anger and manage it. Even though anger is usually considered to be a negative emotion, it is still a crucial part of the healing process.

After the phase of anger, bargaining may show up. In this stage, individuals may feel repentant and make every effort to change themselves or negotiate with others out of a desire to return to their original lives. This situation may remain for an extended period. Once they recognize bargaining is not an effective coping strategy, however, griever may get discouraged and enter the stage of depression. Kübler-Ross divided depression into two types: one is reactive depression, and the other is preparatory depression. Reactive depression involves the reaction that may be triggered by a more or less recent loss, while preparatory depression is an emotional response experienced by those who are approaching an anticipated loss. If those who are grieving are allowed to express such feelings of sorrow and depression, they may finally be able to face reality, while also experiencing gratitude to those who have accompanied them as they went through the depression stage (Kübler-Ross, 1969; 1997). Finally, having gone through so many ups and downs, griever may reach the acceptance stage, in which they learn how to live with their suffering or difficulties. Acceptance does not mean that it is alright to lose someone or something important, however. Rather, the term refers to the way people must learn how to live with reality.

KÜBLER-ROSS'S FIVE-STAGE MODEL AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING AND HOPE IN *COCO*

Having argued that people tend to go through these responses, in one sequence or another, when trying to cope with difficult times, Kübler-Ross (1969; 1997)

also suggested the importance of maintaining hope in the face of life's difficulties. Yet she did not explicitly include this positive mindset of hope in her five-stage model. Arguably, though, maintaining hope is a crucial psychological and emotional resource, allowing people to persist through all the stages of grief.

Moreover, in order to suggest how those who are grieving can enter into positive states of mind, the study expands on Kübler-Ross's original model by incorporating a positive mindset of hope. The modified version of Kübler-Ross's model that informs this study, and that incorporates the positive mindset of hope, is shown in Figure 1.

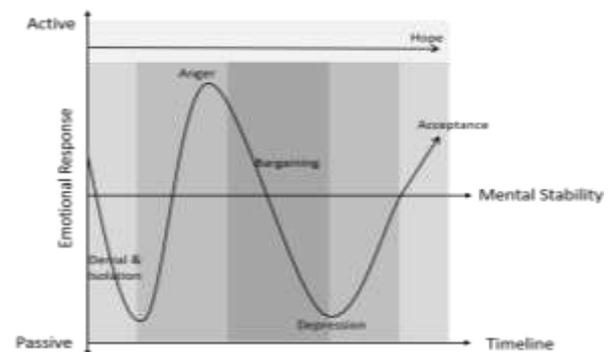


Figure 1. A modified version of Kübler-Ross's five-stage model of grief, incorporating the positive mindset of hope.

These intricate circumstances in *Coco* involve different kinds of grief; the characters are caught up in various situations involving bereavement, loss, and significant changes in their lives—and even after their deaths. For a closer consideration of how the film portrays Mamá Imelda's, Miguel's, and Héctor's experiences of loss, bereavement, and grief, this study uses the modified version of Kübler-Ross's five-stage model of grief to analyze the emotional stages experienced by the characters in *Coco*, and further demonstrate how those who are grieving can be helped by maintaining a positive mindset associated with hope.

There is no doubt that Mamá Imelda plays one of the key spiritual roles in *Coco*. Having experienced the loss of her once-beloved musician husband, Héctor, she has lost the ability to enjoy the music that once brought to this couple together. As Mamá Imelda herself says to Miguel, immediately after arguing with him about his desire to play music,

I remember that feeling, when my husband would play, and I would sing and nothing else mattered. But when we had Coco, suddenly... there was something in my life that mattered more than music. I wanted to put down roots. He wanted to play for the world. (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 55:57-56:21)

However, since she was trying to be a strong mother to protect the family, even after losing her husband Mamá Imelda “didn’t have time to cry over that walkway musician!” Instead of stagnating and crying about her loss, in order to raise up her daughter, Imelda “rolled up her sleeves and she learned to make shoes” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 01:50-02:10). Thus, Mamá Imelda had no time to let herself sink into the stage of denial, but rather had to become a breadwinner in order to raise her daughter Coco. Also, although she feels resentful at Héctor’s leaving the family, she accepts the fact and endeavors to work because she still has someone who needs her protection—her and Héctor’s daughter, Coco.

Strong as Mamá Imelda is, however, there is still a trauma in her heart. Because of her anger over being abandoned by Héctor, Mamá Imelda banishes “all music from her life” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 01:50-01:59), and by not putting Héctor’s photo on an ofrenda, she prevents Héctor from being able to cross the bridge to the world of the living in order to have a reunion with the family on the Día de Muertos. Moreover, in order to purge herself of her grief and to keep a positive mindset instead, Mamá Imelda has devoted herself to running a shoemaking business. She tries, in this way, to maintain peace and happiness in the whole family, from generation to generation. Mamá Imelda has tried hard to squeeze her beloved Héctor into the deepest recesses of memory, so as to forget the grief of being deserted. The scar in Mamá Imelda’s heart and the difficulties of raising a child alone, however, can never fully be compensated for.

Having been left behind by Héctor, Mamá Imelda is convinced that music has torn her family apart, and depression over her loss has caused her to isolate herself from music out of fear that memories would make her fall into a melancholy state all over again. For the same reasons, she has prohibited her posterity from gaining access to music and anything related to music. Nevertheless, the birth of Miguel upsets the balance of this seemingly peaceful family.

Miguel, rather than losing his life, loses something that is significant to him—his right to enjoy music, saying that, “I think we’re the only family in México who hates music...” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 04:09). Since he is always under the strict supervision of his family members, it is impossible for him to gain access to music, let alone sing or play the guitar. Frustrated by this situation, Miguel falls into the stage of depression, saying, “Sometimes I think I’m cursed... ’cause of something that happened before I was even born” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 01:10-01:15). Trying to be an obedient child and following the tradition in the

family, Miguel keeps on suppressing his desire for music until he finally cannot bear it anymore, saying, “I know I’m not supposed to love music—but it’s not my fault!” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 04:50-04:55). He makes up his mind to participate in a music competition, persuading himself that there can be “No more hiding, ... I gotta seize my moment” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 14:10-14:14). Miguel tries to negotiate with his family, asserting to them that “I’m gonna be a musician!” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 17:03-17:04). However, the negotiation is not successful: Abuelita, Miguel’s grandmother, lifts his guitar in the air and smashes it to pieces, saying, “There. No guitar, no music” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 17:58-18:10).

Ultimately, the contradiction between Miguel’s personal desires and the family’s prohibition ends in conflict. Miguel’s anger bursts forth; all he wants to do is to escape from his family’s rigid limitations, saying, “I don’t wanna be in this family!” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 18:18-18:20). Moreover, after having an argument with his family about his dream to become a musician and defending his right to be himself, Miguel distances himself from his family, asserting that “I didn’t care if they remembered me. I didn’t care if I was on their stupid ofrenda” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 17:51-17:55). The rage and resentment totally occupy Miguel’s mind. He argues that it is unfair for him to go down the path his family paves for him, to be a shoemaker but not a musician. In other words, he convinces himself that he has his own right to choose what kind of life he wants. However, what makes him most angry is gaining no support from his beloved family. As Miguel puts it, “But I don’t wanna... pick sides! Why can’t you be on MY side? That’s what family’s supposed to do— support you. But you never will” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 56:27-56:39). Getting no support from his family, helpless, and depressed, Miguel “wipes the corner of his eye, frustrated” (Molina & Aldrich, 2017, p. 81).

In fact, Miguel’s family has its reasons for forbidding him to play music. As time passes, Miguel becomes aware of what happened in the past. Thus, he can empathize with his family. In an effort to remain in harmony with them, Miguel reaches the stage of acceptance and decides to give up his musical dreams. However, after a series of events, Miguel’s family also comes to realize that family comes first. The mutual understanding and compromise allow Miguel and his family put away all of their preconceptions. In the end, Miguel gets his family’s blessing with no conditions, enabling him to play music with the support of his family. Moreover, he is able to pursue his larger dream of becoming a musician.

THE DYNAMICS OF HOPE IN *COCO*

Kübler-Ross (1969; 1997) defined hope as the state of mind in which one holds on to a positive expectation—in particular, to the idea there must be some meaning to or in one's grief. The hope in question implies that if those who are grieving can manage to suffer through their grief just a little bit longer, their suffering will ultimately “pay off.” Martin Luther King, Jr., similarly, once said that though human beings have no choice but accept finite disappointment, they should nonetheless keep faith and never lose infinite hope. Likewise, in the film *Theory of Everything* (dir. Marsh, 2014), the physicist Stephen Hawking is portrayed as saying that “However bad life may seem, where there is life, there is hope.” These statements about the importance of holding on to hope can further strengthen Kübler-Ross's idea. When everything seems to be a cause for despair, infinite hope is what allows people to survive during such hard times.

Although Mamá Imelda, Héctor, and Miguel all face various forms of loss, bereavement, or life-change, they all have faith in something and maintain hopefulness about their unfortunate situations. Each character, however, manifests such hopefulness in a distinct way.

There is no doubt that people will never be totally prepared to face the eternal separation—death. It is difficult for people to accept bereavement indifferently, especially in an unexpected situation like the one Mamá Imelda experiences when she loses her husband. Tough as the situation is, however, Mamá Imelda still does not allow herself to wallow in sadness. Her spirit is buoyed up by her dear daughter, Coco, who enables Mamá Imelda to maintain the hope needed to live her life to the fullest.

Mamá Imelda has tried to forget the grief brought on by being deserted. However, the unexpected appearance of Miguel reanimates her memory of her husband, as well as the trauma of being deserted. Had it not been for Miguel, she would never have known that she could confront the most vulnerable part of her heart and readmit her husband there. Miguel awakens her love for her departed husband, as does Miguel's passion for music. Moreover, when she sees Miguel grieving, to show care and love toward him Mamá Imelda softens herself; hence, instead of requesting that Miguel “Never play music again...” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 30:53-30:55), Mamá Imelda tries to adapt herself to reality, telling Miguel with a smile “To go home... to put up our photos... And to never... To never... forget how much your family loves you”

(Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 84:02-84:21). Though she still feels resentful toward her husband, she finally stops preventing her posterity from gaining access to and enjoying music. Hence, Miguel is able to keep on chasing his dream of becoming an outstanding musician. To be sure, abandoning a grudge and entering the stage of acceptance is not an easy thing. With those we care about, however, we may be able to keep a positive mindset, in an effort to empathize with one another's difficulties and maintain the bonds of affection. No matter how hard it may be, love, as a form of hope, can heal all wounds.

Like Mamá Imelda, Héctor holds on a positive expectation while being situated in an unfortunate situation. He keeps holding on to the hope of being able to seize an opportunity to cross the bridge and be reunited with his family. Death takes Héctor away without any warning. Although he feels astonished about waking up dead, he does not try to deny the fact. After entering the world of death, what Héctor most wants to do is to see his family again and express his love for them. Hence, holding on to the hope of seeing his family again, Héctor even takes the chance of coming back to the departures agent disguised as the artist Frida Kahlo. Unlucky he fails once again. However, likewise, hoping to be remembered by his daughter, Héctor writes a song for Coco, expressing his desire to have a chance to see Coco again.

Remember me/Though I have to say goodbye/
Remember me/Don't let it make you cry/For
even if I'm far way/I hold you in my heart/I sing
a secret song to you/Each night we are apart/
Remember me. (Unkrich & Molina, 2017,
1:12:37-1:12:49)

Héctor has a strong will and a sustaining hope. What he most wants to do is to meet his wife and daughter again and demonstrate his love for them. Although this hope seems to have little basis in reality, the desire to meet his family is so strong that enables Héctor to keep on seeking ways to cross the bridge, the boundary between the living and the dead. Hoping to cross the bridge, Héctor would like to let Imelda and Coco know that “I [Héctor] never should have left Santa Cecilia. I wish I could apologize. I wish I could tell her [Coco] that her papá was trying to come home. That he loved her so much” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 1:10:34-1:10:47). Hence, both the song “Remember Me” and the bridge are symbols of Héctor's hope that he will have a chance to see his family again.

Héctor is helplessly stuck in the Land of the Dead. The time limit cruelly speeds up, bringing Héctor's Final Death within view sooner than he expected. Héctor has

no way of leaving the Land of the Dead until Miguel, his grandson, accidentally falls into the Land of the Dead.

Even though Miguel knows that he cannot indulge his desire to play music due to the prohibition set up by his ancestor, he still convinces himself that he is meant to achieve his musical dream, holding the idea of “to seize the moment.” Never abandoning his hope, Miguel keeps on trying to obtain his family’s understanding, no matter how slim his chances of doing so seem to be. This passion not only urges him to look on the bright side but also reminds him to maintain the hope of being understood by his family.

Not only does Miguel maintain hopefulness concerning his own difficult life situations; what is more, he also acts as bridge between Mamá Imelda and Héctor, enabling Mamá Imelda to pour out her wrath toward Héctor and her grief about all the years she had to suffer. By acting as a bridge in this way, Miguel helps Héctor have a chance to explain that he did not desert his family but was poisoned and murdered by Ernesto after he had decided to go home. Also, Miguel enables Héctor to have a chance to apologize to Mamá Imelda. He says, “This is my fault, not yours. I’m sorry, Imelda” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 1:18:12-1:18:21). Moreover, to enable Héctor to see Coco again, Miguel bravely requests that Héctor’s photo should be put on the ofrenda, being part of the family. Miguel tells Mamá Imelda that “You don’t have to forgive him...But we shouldn’t forget him” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 1:17:58-1:19:03).

Moreover, ready to sacrifice his dream of playing music, Miguel tries to compromise with Mamá Imelda—if that means she will let Héctor be on the ofrenda and thus be remembered. He tells her, “I’m ready to accept your blessing... and your conditions” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 1:17:16-1:17:19). But I will help you” (Unkrich & Molina, 2017, 1:18:37-1:18:43). With Miguel negotiating between Mamá Imelda and Héctor, and hence between Coco and Héctor, finally Héctor’s photo can be put on an ofrenda, allowing Héctor to cross the bridge on the Día de Muertos and be reunited with his family. In being remembered in this way, Héctor does not fall into the Final Death and disappear altogether from this world.

CONCLUSION

Inevitably, we all face loss, bereavement, and significant changes of life. However, we can take lessons from Mamá Imelda, Héctor, and Miguel in *Coco*, learning how to manage such bereavement and loss. In bringing the film and its characters into dialogue with Kübler-Ross’s five-stage model of grief, which encompasses the stages of denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, the present study suggests how the model illuminates the coping mechanisms that allow people to manage difficult circumstances. The study also demonstrates how we, like the characters in *Coco*, can use the positive mindset of hope as a coping strategy in its own right.

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