



**Universidad
de Huelva**



Facultad de Humanidades

**Traumatic Loss, Grief Theory, and the Use of
Scriptotherapy as a Medium for Emotional Healing
in Colleen Hoover's *Reminders of Him* (2022)**

**Pérdida traumática, teoría del duelo y el uso de la
escritura terapéutica como modo de curación emocional
en *No Te Olvidaré* (2022) de Colleen Hoover**

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Dedication

In fond memory of my deceased cousin, Lila, who became a shining star embellishing the night sky,

May her beautiful soul find rest and eternal peace.

To my dear parents, Farida and Abdelhamid,

Whose encouragements have empowered me to complete this work.

To my dearest brother, Mehdi,

Who motivated me all along my academic journey.

To Rayan, my cherished companion, my anchor in storms, and my sunlight in the shadows,

Whose love and devotion never ceased.

To all my friends and family members,

For their constant love and unwavering support.

To my pen pals all around the world,

Whose letters bring brightness to my days and open windows to distant lands.

To myself,

In recognition of the determination and resilience that have carried me through this journey.

And to you, the reader,

May this work inspire and resonate with you.

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Abstract

This dissertation has meticulously explored the extent to which loss, mourning, and the therapeutic potential of writing in processing trauma and grief are present in Colleen Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022). More specifically, the study has examined how the female protagonist in the narrative, Kenna Rowan, uses letter-writing as a coping mechanism to confront her pain and guilt following her beloved partner's tragic death. It draws upon two major theoretical frameworks, of which are Kübler-Ross and Kessler's five stages of grief theory, as put forward in their book, *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss* (2005), as well as Henke's concept of scriptotherapy, as defined and presented in her work, *Shattered subjects: Trauma and testimony in women's life-writing* (1998). By employing a multidisciplinary approach that combines literary analysis with psychological theories of trauma and grief, the research has shed light on two significant findings. First, it has demonstrated how Kenna's retrospective letters to her deceased partner essentially reflect her progression through the five stages of grief—from initial denial and anger through bargaining and depression to eventual acceptance—ultimately reaching mental healing and psychological recovery. Second, it has highlighted the virtuous power of scriptotherapy, revealing how the main character's letter-writing forged her path toward emotional processing and psychological rehabilitation. It has also denoted that such a practice proved highly effective for emotional catharsis, allowing for the resolution of the plot's central conflicts, and enabling the protagonist to openly confront her past, reconstruct her fractured identity, and eventually achieve self-forgiveness and communal reconciliation. This study hence contributes to the growing body of research on scriptotherapy in contemporary American literature in general, primarily emphasizing the significant power of writing as a therapeutic medium for overcoming traumatic experiences, achieving emotional healing, and restoring personal wholeness.

Key words: grief, healing, letter-writing, scriptotherapy, trauma survival.

Resumen

Esta disertación ha explorado meticulosamente hasta qué punto la pérdida, el duelo y el potencial terapéutico de la escritura para procesar el trauma y el duelo están presentes en *No te olvidaré* (2022), de Colleen Hoover. Más concretamente, el estudio ha examinado cómo la protagonista femenina de la narración, Kenna Rowan, utiliza la escritura de cartas como mecanismo de afrontamiento del dolor y la culpa tras la trágica muerte de su amado compañero. Se basa en dos marcos teóricos principales, a saber, la teoría de las cinco etapas del duelo de Kübler-Ross y Kessler, expuesta en su libro, *Sobre el duelo y el dolor* (2005), así como el concepto de scriptoterapia de Henke, tal y como se define y presenta en su obra, *Shattered subjects: Trauma and testimony in women's life-writing* (1998). Al emplear un enfoque multidisciplinar que combina el análisis literario con las teorías psicológicas del trauma y el duelo, la investigación ha arrojado luz sobre dos hallazgos significativos. En primer lugar, ha demostrado cómo las cartas retrospectivas de Kenna a su pareja fallecida reflejan esencialmente su progresión a través de las cinco etapas del duelo—desde la negación y la ira iniciales, pasando por la negociación y la depresión, hasta la aceptación final—alcanzando finalmente la curación mental y la recuperación psicológica. En segundo lugar, ha puesto de relieve el poder virtuoso de la escritura, revelando cómo la escritura de cartas de la protagonista forjó su camino hacia el procesamiento emocional y la rehabilitación psicológica. También ha puesto de manifiesto que dicha práctica resultó muy eficaz para la catarsis emocional, permitiendo la resolución de los conflictos centrales de la trama, y permitiendo a la protagonista enfrentarse abiertamente a su pasado, reconstruir su identidad fracturada, y finalmente lograr el autoperdón y la reconciliación comunitaria. Este estudio contribuye, por tanto, al creciente corpus de investigación sobre la scriptoterapia en la literatura estadounidense contemporánea en general, destacando principalmente el importante poder de la escritura como medio terapéutico para superar experiencias traumáticas, lograr la curación emocional y restablecer la integridad personal.

Palabras clave : duelo, curación, escritura de cartas, scriptoterapia, supervivencia al trauma.



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I. General Introduction

The twentieth century may well be remembered as a century of historical trauma. As citizens facing the third millennium, we daily confront the unthinkable in news and television reports, in bizarre public trials, and in relentless statistics exposing rape, murder, torture, battering, and child abuse in an increasingly violent society. Global disasters challenge our sensibilities with occasions for communal mourning too numerous to chronicle. How have we survived, both individually and collectively, in the face of unimaginable trauma? (Henke, 1998, p. xi)

So did Henke write in the introductory paragraph of her book, *Shattered subjects: Trauma and testimony in women's life-writing* (1998). She highlighted how the previous century has been marked by universal crises and hardships, affecting vast numbers of populations across the globe. Over the past decades, humanity has endured intense suffering and devastating losses caused by a multitude of catastrophes—the negative consequences of world wars and genocides, the frequent acts of violence and human-made atrocities, the tragic toll of accidents, as well as the destructive force of natural disasters. These calamities have inflicted on people deep psychological wounds that have remained across generations, shattering the lives of countless individuals, ravaging communities, and fracturing societies. It is widely believed that the trauma experienced through such tragic events generally engenders lasting impacts on an individual's psychological, emotional, and physiological well-being. At its core, trauma shatters one's sense of safety, control, and understanding of the world, leaving deep scars that can manifest in various ways, often resulting in conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The latter more likely contributes to the development of severe forms of depression, anxiety disorders, and emotional dysregulations. Sleep disturbances and recurrent nightmares are two other effects from which many trauma survivors commonly suffer (Spoomaker & Montgomery, 2008, p. 169). In her book, *Trauma: Explorations in memory* (1995), Caruth summarized the regular symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, saying:

There is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (p. 4)

Importantly, traumatic events are not only limited to individual experiences, but can also manifest on a broader, collective level. The concept of “historical trauma,” or what came to be known under the name of “multigenerational trauma,” was first coined in the 1980s by Brave Heart, a Native American social worker, associate professor, and mental health expert. According to her, it refers to “the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences” (2011, p. 7). More particularly, this kind of trauma represents the psychological drawbacks that can be passed down from one generation to the next, often observed in communities that have faced injustice, oppression, and mass violence. As such, Brave Heart has specifically examined the intergenerational impacts of historical trauma experienced by the Lakota people, a Native American tribe, tracing its effects across multiple generations. It is crucial to note that the phenomenon of “historical trauma” subsequently expanded to encompass other indigenous populations worldwide; mainly those who have faced similar histories of colonization, forced assimilation, and cultural erasure.

It has become evident that in the aftermath of such overwhelming hardships, the crucial question became one of understanding how communities and societies have survived and found the power to heal. The human capacity for resilience and post-traumatic growth is remarkable to the point that some individuals have more or less demonstrated an incredible ability not only to survive, but also to heal and even grow stronger (Bonanno & Mancini, 2008, p. 369). Various therapeutic approaches have been adopted and developed in order to assist people in processing and recovering from traumatic experiences. Some therapeutic techniques are widely known for involving medical and clinical interventions, psychotherapy sessions, as well as mindfulness practices. These modalities likely facilitate the recovery process of individuals by means of cultivating self-awareness, fostering connections, and providing outlets for emotional expression. Such methods have also been instrumental in helping trauma survivors navigate their path toward healing and post-traumatic development, ultimately making sense of their traumatic experiences, developing coping strategies, and finally finding meaning and purpose in life.

Artistic expressions—including painting, drawing, music, theatre—as well as literary testimonies such as personal diaries, letters, autobiographies, and pathographies have further played a crucial role in providing an escape for individuals and communities to construct narratives of survival, reclaim their identities, and forge paths toward healing. Personal diaries are intimate chronicles of an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and daily events, often written with a sense of privacy and self-reflection. Letters, on the other hand, are written communications between individuals, allowing for the exchange of ideas, emotions, and narratives across distances. Autobiographies are comprehensive accounts of an individual’s life, typically written from a retrospective perspective, granting the author an opportunity to explore their personal experiences, the obstacles they have surmounted, and the transformative events that have shaped their growth and evolution as human beings. Pathographies, meanwhile, are accounts of personal experiences which offer a first-hand account of the illness or disability experience, narrated through the personal perspective of patients themselves (Hawkins, 1999, p. 128). Through these diverse channels, the human spirit has demonstrated its astounding ability to transcend even the darkest of experiences and emerge in terms of psychological resilience, emotional growth, and personal development.

The expression of traumatic experience was used in multiple ways; by singing, making artistic designs and other meaningful presentations. Writing is seen as one of the numerous ways that was employed to discuss the trauma phenomenon. As such, writing is an act that construes a narrative work throughout trauma. Being fundamentally narrative, writing consists of scripts and story schemas. As such, a new item appears to be studied in humanities. The latter is known as scriptotherapy. [...] Thus, one of the key targets of traumatic life writing would be to express certain excruciating emotional crises. (Osamnia & Djafri, 2020, p. 241)

Recently, there has been a great amount of interest in the therapeutic potential of writing, particularly in its ability to assist individuals in processing and healing from traumatic events. In her book, *Shattered subjects: Trauma and testimony in women’s life-writing* (1998), the literary scholar, Henke, first coined the term “scriptotherapy” which, as its name indicates, refers to a type of healing that is primarily achieved through the act of writing about one’s personal experiences with trauma. In fact, the term “scriptotherapy” combines the Latin word *scribere* meaning “to write” or “to carve marks on wood, stone and clay,” with the Greek word *therapeia* symbolizing “cure, healing, and service done to the sick”.

It is to be noted that the healing power of writing is no modern revelation. This therapeutic practice traces its roots back to ancient civilizations, such as the Egyptian one, in which it was largely believed that written words on papyrus conferred numerous health benefits. This belief was so entrenched in people's minds that even the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II's library entrance bore the inscription, "the house of healing for the soul" as a testament to the reverence accorded to the written word and its restorative qualities (Lutz, 1978, p. 36). This idea has more thoroughly been discussed in Lutz's article, "The oldest library motto: Ψυχῆς ἰατρείον" (1978), in which the scholar wrote: "The earliest authenticated library, that of Pharaoh Ramses II, in the second millennium before our era, bore an inscription over its portals designating it as 'the house of healing for the soul.'" (p. 36). In her analysis, Lutz (1978) went on to elucidate the origins of this motto, saying:

For one group of people, the bibliophiles, a more fitting memorial to the mighty pharaoh than all of the splendid material treasures and of greater interest than the mummy was the spiritual legacy he left in the form of an inscription placed above the portals of his library, an inscription which designated the library as "the house of healing for the soul." We owe the preservation of the words to Diodorus Siculus [...] who, writing in the last century before our era, records them in his Greek *History of the world* in the section on Egypt. [...] Of the great hall which housed the library of sacred books, however, he gives only the Greek translation of the inscription. (pp. 36 – 37)

In recent decades, scriptotherapy has gained increasing popularity and legitimacy as a therapeutic tool, reinforced by a growing body of research proving its efficacy. In *Shattered subjects: Trauma and testimony in women's life-writing* (1998), Henke stated: "Over the last decade, scriptotherapy has infiltrated the imagination of therapists, literary critics, mental health workers, and narratologists alike" (1998, p. xiii). The act of writing has in several cases allowed individuals to explore, articulate, and make sense of their trauma narratives, facilitating the integration of their fragmented memories and emotions into a coherent whole. Through this process, writers are given the opportunity to develop coping mechanisms and ultimately find a path toward recovery and personal growth. By extension, such a unique form of self-expression has long been associated with people's safe and private space whereby they could confront their deepest fears, anxieties, and experiences without the constraints or judgments that may arise in societal interactions. The written word hence becomes an ally, serving as a vehicle for self-discovery, emotional catharsis, and the reconstruction of one's

narrative. As the discipline of scriptotherapy continues to evolve with its therapeutic potential being further validated, it holds the promise of empowering individuals and release them of their condition, providing a new complementary and personalized approach to traditional therapeutic practices. Accordingly, through writing, people can embark on a journey of self-discovery, emotional healing, and the restoration of personal wholeness, essentially overcoming the psychological and emotional burdens of their traumatic experiences.

Over the last two decades, a great deal of attention has been devoted to the literary representation of trauma [...] It is symptomatic of a generalised attempt to narrativise, and so work through, collective traumas often correlated with moments of historical crisis (in our age, the two world wars, the Holocaust, the horrors of colonisation and its aftermath, the spectre of terrorism, among others), as well as the less overt, though equally damaging individual and structural traumas associated with patriarchal ideology, unmitigated capitalism and globalization [...] Such narratives may choose realism as a means of conveying the experience of trauma in the seemingly transparent terms of fictional testimony. (Ganteau & Onega, 2013, p. 1)

The rise of trauma narratives in contemporary fiction has been a significant trend over the past few decades, as noted in the quote above, reflecting a growing interest in exploring and understanding traumatic experiences through writing. It is with this critical paradigm in mind that I shall undertake the reading of Colleen Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022). This approach primarily aims at highlighting how the therapeutic elements of writing, as depicted in the novel, can inspire people to embrace writing as a means of enhancing their own well-being. By exploring how the female protagonist in the story uses writing to process her experiences, we can see how this accessible and deeply personal practice offers a valuable tool for managing and healing from trauma in real life. Additionally, although scriptotherapy has gained recognition in recent years by being incorporated into psychological and literary studies, it has not been given the importance or credit it deserves in mainstream therapeutic discourse. Therefore, this analysis also serves as an opportunity through which light can be shed on the therapeutic aspects of this practice, advocating for its wider recognition and application. By examining its portrayal in contemporary American literature, and more precisely in Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022), I can contribute to a broader understanding and appreciation of scriptotherapy's unprecedented potential and importance in promoting emotional healing and personal growth.

Review of the Literature

Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are central themes in Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022). At the heart of the narrative is Kenna Rowan, the female protagonist, who confronts overwhelming grieving episodes after her partner, Scotty Landry, had passed away in a tragic car wreck in which she was the driver, leaving her solely responsible for his death. She hence embarks on a journey of self-writing as a coping tool to process her trauma and as an attempt to recover from the guilt that consumes her, eventually reaching redemption and emotional relief. Some of the very few research studies that have examined this specific novel so far include Cahyadi's (2023) "Stylistic analysis: Similies and figurative language in Hoover's *Reminders of him*"; Fajriah's (2023) "Kenna's problem as an ex-prisoner in the novel *Reminders of him* by Colleen Hoover"; Mouriena's (2024) "A syntactic analysis of interrogative sentences in Colleen Hoover's *Reminders of him*"; as well as Sari's (2024) "The analysis of complex sentences found in *Reminders of him* novel by Colleen Hoover". Even though these research studies offer substantial contributions into the novel's thematic concerns and stylistic features, a scriptotherapeutic analysis remains notably absent.

To our best knowledge, no attention to this date has been accorded to analyze Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022) from a scriptotherapeutic standpoint. Such an approach would explore how the act of writing and the narrative structure function as coping mechanisms for Kenna's psychological healing and self-reconstruction. Analyzing *Reminders of him* (2022) through this lens would further reveal the way Hoover's narrative strategies facilitate the protagonist's emotional recovery and personal growth, contributing to the broader research fields on trauma survival and scriptotherapy studies.

Scriptotherapy has been the subject of interest of numerous reasearch studies such as Riordan's (1996) article "Scriptotherapy: Therapeutic writing as a counseling adjunct" which attempts at clarifying the nature of therapeutic writing, a technique that had proven useful but remained, in his words, "vague and purely defined" (p. 263). The scholar has thus provided a comprehensive review of its practice, supported by various examples. Another significant contribution to the field is the work of Smyth and Greenberg (2000), "Scriptotherapy: The effects of writing about traumatic events," a study which has examined the potential positive effects of writing about traumatic experiences on physical health. Indeed, the authors

reviewed various theories explaining reactions to trauma, and subsequently explored the historical background of expressive writing techniques. Importantly, their analysis of empirical evidence supported the conclusion that written expression about traumatic or stressful events could benefit both physical and psychological health. Further expanding the practical applications of this discipline, Gladding and Drake Wallace's (2018) "Scriptotherapy: Eighteen writing exercises to promote insight and wellness" is another article which has greatly emphasized writing as a therapeutic tool which, according to them, "can be used for dealing with a variety of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, ambivalence, and trauma" (p. 380). They have also noted its integration into established counseling theories such as narrative therapy; thus providing practical resources for implementing scriptotherapy in counseling practices.

Among the literary works on which 'scriptotherapy' as a theory has been widely applied, one could mention Tembo's (2014) "Traumatic memory and 'scriptotherapy' in Malawian poetry: The case of Bright Molande's *Seasons*" which offers a unique perspective on the healing power of writing in a specific cultural and historical context. In fact, this study examined how trauma is conceptualized in selected poems from Molande's work, claiming that traumatic events rooted in Malawi's post-independence regimes have represented ongoing struggles from which Malawians are attempting to recover. Accordingly, Tembo suggested that Molande's poetry successfully provided potential healing not only for the poet himself, but also for his audience, in the face of "structural violence" that has persisted in Malawi since independence. By broadening the scope of scriptotherapy research, this analysis has demonstrated its relevance in understanding and processing collective historical trauma through literature.

Mayaki and Omobowale's (2019) article entitled "Scriptotherapy in Ndlovu's *Invisible earthquake*" further extended on the application of scriptotherapy in literary analysis, focusing specifically on its role in dealing with grief. This study examined Ndlovu's *Invisible earthquake: A woman's journal through stillbirth* (2009), highlighting the healing process facilitated by creative writing as a means of confronting deeply personal and traumatic experiences, such as the loss of a child. By analyzing Ndlovu's narrative through this theoretical perspective, the scholars have illustrated how scriptotherapy can serve as a powerful tool for individuals to find meaning in loss, and ultimately work toward healing.

Hejaz's and Singh's (2023) "Writing the wrongs and writing the rights': Scriptotherapy in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*" is another illustration of scriptotherapy's application in literary analysis. This study examined how Briony, the main character of McEwan's novel, *Atonement* (2001), has employed writing as a therapeutic tool to confront the guilt that had consumed her due to a significant mistake she had committed when she was thirteen years old. The authors explored how Briony's guilt was transformed into a traumatic memory, which she strongly attempted to overcome through the act of writing, effectively engaging in scriptotherapy. This analysis is a great example of how fictional characters can embody the principles of scriptotherapy, demonstrating its potential for healing and self-reconciliation. By focusing on Briony's journey, Hejaz and Singh have highlighted how the process of writing could enable individuals to confront past mistakes, work through complex emotions, and potentially achieve a form of personal "atonement," as suggested by the novel's title.

It is worth mentioning that Rebaoui and Gherbi's (2023) dissertation, "On pathographies: The healing power of scriptotherapy in Joan Didion's *The year of magical thinking* (2005)" has also analyzed the virtuous role of writing by focusing on the intersection between pathography and scriptotherapy in memoir writing. By exploring Didion's journey of healing, the authors examined how memoirs could create a space for writers to express traumatic experiences and engage in a therapeutic process.

One can also mention Osamnia and Djafri's (2020) article, "Trauma survival and the use of scriptotherapy as a medium of healing in Susan Abulhawa['s] *The blue between sky and water* (2015) and Sapphire's *Precious* (1996)" in which they have analyzed the scriptotherapeutic strategies that have been adopted in the abovementioned narratives, concluding:

[...] it is advanced and proved psychologically and clinically that when sufferers express the traumatized experiences which cause them immense mental disturbances had restored the vitality of their physical and mental health. [... Writing] proves to be empowering and efficient to any participant who felt enclosed in a shell without the potential to stretch himself or herself from pain. Some individuals were cured and still decided to make of the written therapeutic activities as part of their daily life routines. The two female protagonists [...] prove that writing redeem and mend the broken hearts and distraught souls. (p. 256)

The therapeutic potential of expressive and creative writing has further been explored in Pennebaker's *Writing to heal: A guided journal for recovering from trauma and emotional upheaval* (2004). In this book, the author advocated for the use of poetry as a means to address psychological issues, suggesting that reading and composing verse have healing effects on individuals. Despite poetry's usefulness in psychotherapy, he has noted that the scientific community has yet to fully validate its therapeutic value. Pennebaker (2004) observed that, "expressing emotions about powerful experiences through poetry should have positive health effects. [...] poetry can often capture the contradictions inherent in most emotions and experiences" (p. 145).

Regarding Hoover's earlier literary works, not much research on scriptotherapy has been conducted. In her essay, "Trauma, gendered violence and coping-mechanisms in Colleen Hoover's *It ends with us*," Rundqvist (2020) has identified the therapeutic aspect of writing in the novel, revealing that the main character, Lily Bloom, had used writing as a coping tool while experiencing a traumatic childhood, mainly through her personal diary and teenage journal addressed to Ellen DeGeneres, a television personality. In the same vein, El Khoreiby (2024) has also discussed this topic in his "Gender-based violence, trauma, and strategies for coping in Colleen Hoover's novel *It ends with us*". The latter further emphasized the role of scriptotherapy in Lily's coping processes, detailing how her diary was an essential means for processing trauma and overcoming gendered violence. The analysis later reveals that Lily's written expressions not only helped her confront her past experiences, but also contributed to her character development and eventual decision to break the cycle of domestic abuse.

Through these examinations, it can be inferred that Hoover's use of writing as a remedy seems to have greatly evolved across her novels. In *It ends with us* (2016), scriptotherapy takes the form of diary entries and letters addressed to a public figure, appearing in flashbacks to provide background information into past traumas and create a dual timeline effect. This technique serves as a means to process childhood trauma, reflect on patterns of abuse, and ultimately contribute in breaking the cycle of domestic violence. Contrastingly, *Reminders of him* (2022) uses another approach as it features letters to a deceased person, written in the present tense to address both past events and current emotions. This linear progression focuses on the protagonist's ongoing healing process, grief

management, and the pursuit of redemption and self-forgiveness. It is thus very clear that the writer's approach to scriptotherapy has noticeably developed over time. While her former novel uses writing as a revelatory tool to uncover past traumas, her latest work embraces this practice as an active, present-tense healing mechanism. This change demonstrates a more direct engagement with the therapeutic process of writing in her novel, highlighting her growing sophistication in using written expressions to explore the emotional and psychological processes of her characters.

Issue and working hypotheses

From the above short thematic review of the literature, it has been made clear that an emerging body of studies has been dedicated to the discipline of scriptotherapy. However, to my best knowledge, no research study has ever been devoted to examining the scriptotherapeutic elements in Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022), given the fact that the novel is relatively recent—having been published in 2022. This is why I intend to see the sights of the narrative with an analysis that relies on traumatic loss, theory of grief, and the use of scriptotherapy as a means of recovery from traumatic experiences.

More specifically, the present research seeks at identifying the therapeutic effects of writing in *Reminders of him* (2022), so as to define the connection between letter writing and the female protagonist's recovery. It will address the therapeutic function of writing in the novel and its impact on the main character's personality by drawing upon two theoretical frameworks. The latter will include Kübler-Ross and Kessler's five stages of grief theory, along with Henke's concept of scriptotherapy.

Kübler-Ross and Kessler's five stages of grief theory, as presented in their *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss* (2005), represent common experiences in grief and provide a framework for understanding the mourning process through five grief phases—namely, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The main character's journey through grief in *Reminders of him* (2022) begins with denial, where she struggles to accept the reality of the accident, followed by intense anger and self-blame. She then moves into bargaining, attempting to rewrite her past with “what if” scenarios, and falls into deep depression due to her losses. Finally, she reaches the

stage of acceptance where she finds forgiveness and redemption, allowing her to let go of her past burdens, and eventually begins to rebuild her life.

Henke's concept of scriptotherapy, as put forward in her book, *Shattered subjects: Trauma and testimony in women's life-writing* (1998), indicates how writing facilitates the journey through grief, eventually creating long-term relief as it started and guided the process of the protagonist's recovery and rehabilitation. In fact, this research indicates that writing is the central tool used by Kenna to recover from the trauma of loss and guilt. As such, she writes letters to her deceased partner, Scotty, which alleviates her pain and provides cathartic release. In this case, self-writing is regarded as a powerful means for articulating individuals' emotions and recollections of the past. It involves the conversion of one's innermost thoughts and feelings into the written form. As a result, the act of putting pen to paper serves as a significant coping mechanism which undeniably helps individuals who seek emotional healing from traumatic experiences.

Methodological outline

As for the methodological outline, the discussion of this dissertation is organized into two main sections which deal with the stages of grief as well as the therapeutic use of writing in Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022). On the one hand, the first part will be devoted to an analysis of the five stages of grief theory, as put forward by Kübler-Ross and Kessler. It seeks at analyzing how the protagonist, Kenna Rowan, navigates through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance; and how these stages are depicted in her journey of processing loss and trauma. On the other hand, the second part will put emphasis on scriptotherapy as a medium for emotional catharsis, as defined by Henke. It will explore how the heroine's writing, particularly her letters to her departed partner, functions as a therapeutic tool that facilitates her emotional recovery. These concepts will be explained through reference to the narrative, ultimately reaching a comprehensive analysis which will likely shed light on the intersection between psychological theories of grief and the therapeutic power of writing in contemporary American fiction in general, and in Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022) in particular.

II. Methodology

In order to reach my goals, I ought to appeal to a critical theory that would allow me to approach Hoover's novel, *Reminders of him* (2022), from a scriptotherapeutic lens. Drawing upon Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief theory as well as Henke's conceptual exploration of scriptotherapy, this research paper will provide readers with the gradual process of recovering from trauma in Hoover's work. It will shed light on how the act of writing can be embraced as a powerful tool for processing emotions, working through painful memories, and facilitating the journey toward healing and personal growth.

A) Trauma

The word "trauma" originates from the ancient Greek term "τραῦμα" (trauma), which means "wound". As it has been in use for several centuries, it primarily referred to a physical injury inflicted on the body. In the medical and psychological context, the term began to take on its modern connotations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, largely due to the works of pioneering psychologists and psychiatrists. Thanks to figures like Freud and Charcot, the term's application evolved to describe profound psychological wounds and emotional damages, often manifesting in complex, long-lasting effects related to the mind and the soul. Freud, in particular, explored the effects of traumatic experiences on the mind in his early work on hysteria and later in his development of psychoanalytic theory. In her book, *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history* (1996), Caruth, a leading figure in psychoanalytically informed literary theory and humanistic approaches to trauma, provided a critical explanation of the modern concept of trauma, noting:

In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud's text, the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. But what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the pleasure principle* is that the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (pp. 3 – 4)

Generally speaking, trauma can be defined as a profound emotional and psychological response to an event or series of events that mainly disrupt an individual's sense of safety and well-being. As it manifests itself through intense fear, distress, and a variety of physical, emotional, and cognitive symptoms; it often leaves people feeling overwhelmed, helpless, and unable to cope with their situation. It has commonly been suggested that trauma could result from difficult and tragic experiences such as violence, abuse, accidents, or significant losses, with long-lasting effects on an individual's mental health and overall quality of life.

In the context of literary trauma theory, this definition was supported by Pederson's article, "Speak, trauma: Toward a revised understanding of literary trauma theory" (2014), in which he has discussed the concept of 'traumatic amnesia' that he defined as "the inability to remember an intensely painful experience" (p. 334). Pederson has also made several references to Caruth for whom, "trauma is an experience so intensely painful that the mind is unable to process it normally. In the immediate aftermath, the victim may totally forget the event" (2014, p. 334). He has further illustrated on the way trauma could make an individual feel helpless and unable to cope with the intense fear and distress caused by it, noting that, "In trauma, the horrific moment arrives with such world-shattering force that it scrambles the brain's function, and the victim is unable to process the experience in a normal way" (2014, p. 335). Ultimately, all these explanations correspond to the definition of trauma as a disruption of one's personal life and emotional stability.

B) The five stages of grief theory

The five stages of grief theory, also referred to as the Kübler-Ross model, were first introduced by the Swiss-American psychiatrist of the same name in her book, *On death and dying: What the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy and their own families* (1969). This model aimed at describing the emotional process that many individuals progressively undergo when confronted with loss or impending death. It has since evolved into a fundamental tool for understanding grief and providing a valuable framework for both those experiencing it and those engaged in supporting others through bereavement. In fact, it is more likely to help individuals contextualize and navigate the complex array of emotions that often accompany tragic life changes and deaths. While Kübler-Ross's initial book, *On death and dying: What the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy and their own families* (1969), primarily focused on terminally ill patients experiencing these five stages of grief, her later work, namely *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss* (2005), has rather explored the various emotional responses of individuals who are in the process of mourning the loss of their loved ones.

According to Kübler-Ross, the journey through grief unfolds into five distinct stages, each representing a unique emotional experience that individuals may go through as part of their healing process. These phases include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. More importantly, grieving is a highly individual experience and does not always follow a predictable pattern. Indeed, not everyone goes through all those five stages, nor do they necessarily experience them in a linear way. Instead, grieving individuals may move back and forth between different stages, revisit certain phases, or even skip some entirely as they make their way through their unique journey of loss and bereavement. In their book, Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) have asserted: "The five stages [...] are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order" (p. 7).

1. First stage of grief theory – Denial

In both her works, *On death and dying: What the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy and their own families* (1969) and *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss* (2005), Kübler-Ross positioned denial as the first stage of grief, which is more likely characterized by an inability to accept the reality of the loss, often serving as one of “the psyche’s protective mechanisms” (2005, p. 10). She openly described it as a temporary defense mechanism that helps individuals come to terms with tragic news in a gradual way, rather than facing them all at once.

When the stage of denial was first introduced in *On death and dying*, it focused on the person who was dying. In this book, *On grief and grieving*, the person who may be in denial is grieving the loss of a loved one. In a person who is dying, denial may look like disbelief. They may be going about life and actually denying that a terminal illness exists. For a person who has lost a loved one, however, the denial is more symbolic than literal. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 8)

In the context of grieving individuals for the loss of loved ones, Kübler-Ross and co-author Kessler (2005) have said that denial, as the first stage of grief, “helps us to survive the loss [... and] pace our feelings of grief. There is grace in denial. It is nature’s way of letting in only as much as we can handle” (p. 10). In other terms, this phase allows individuals to progressively absorb the reality of the situation at their own pace and in a manner that feels more manageable than direct confrontation with sadness or fear. “It is a way of denying the pain while trying to accept the reality of the loss” (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 10).

2. Second stage of grief theory – Anger

The initial stage of denial is often followed by anger, as exemplified by Kübler-Ross’s model. As the reality of the loss begins to fully penetrate the protective shield of denial, individuals may experience intense feelings of frustration, resentment, and rage. This idea has more thoroughly been demonstrated in *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss* (2005) in which the authors described anger as an essential and natural part of the journey toward healing. In their words,

Anger is a necessary stage of the healing process. [...] even though it may seem endless. The more you truly feel it, the more it will begin to dissipate and the more you will heal. [...] We often choose it to avoid the feelings underneath until we are ready to face them. It may feel all-consuming, but [...] it is part of your emotional management. It is a useful emotion until you've moved past the first waves of it. Then you will be ready to go deeper. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 12)

Anger usually manifests itself as a response to devastating feelings of helplessness and vulnerability experienced during one's mourning process. Kübler-Ross argued that unlike denial, anger could be a much more difficult phase given the fact that it can be displaced onto others, making it highly challenging for family members and caregivers. Indeed, it can be directed at inanimate objects, strangers, acquaintances, relatives, and occasionally even toward the deceased or oneself. In *On death and dying: What the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy and their own families* (1969), Kübler-Ross claimed that, "anger is displaced in all directions and projected onto the environment at times almost at random" (p. 40). This phase proves particularly arduous for both the bereaved and their social circle due to its nature of engendering tensions and conflicts. Despite being potentially difficult and extremely challenging for others to witness or to endure, Kübler-Ross and Kessler have emphasized its importance as well as its crucial role in emotional healing. This is mainly due to the fact that it represents a significant shift from the numbness of denial to a more active engagement with the pain of loss, albeit through the medium of anger.

Anger means you are progressing, that you are allowing all those feelings that were simply too much before to come to the surface. It is important to feel the anger without judging it, without attempting to find meaning in it. It may take many forms: anger at the health-care system, at life, at your loved one for leaving. Life is unfair. Death is unfair. Anger is a natural reaction to the unfairness of loss. Unfortunately, however, anger can isolate you from friends and family at the precise time you may need them the most. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 16)

3. Third stage of grief theory – Bargaining

If we have been unable to face the sad facts in the first period and have been angry at people and God in the second phase, maybe we can succeed in entering into some sort of an agreement which may postpone the inevitable happening. (Kübler-Ross, 1969, p. 66)

When anger proves insufficient to overcome the painful circumstances, individuals may find themselves entering the bargaining stage. The latter mainly consists of people's desire to bargain or negotiate with a higher entity such as God with the hope of reversing or delaying the prospect of loss and death. In *On death and dying: What the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy and their own families* (1969), the Swiss psychiatrist claimed: "Most bargains are made with God and are usually kept a secret" (p. 67). She has subsequently added that many "promise[d] 'a life dedicated to God' or 'a life in the service of the church' in exchange for some additional time" (p. 68). In order to better illustrate this situation, Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) argued: "We remain in the past, trying to negotiate our way out of the hurt" (p. 17). This phase often involves making promises or seeking a compromise as a way to regain one's control of a situation in which they feel powerless. "Before a loss, it seems you will do anything if only your loved one may be spared. 'Please, God,' you bargain, 'I will never be angry at my wife again if—you'll just let her live.'" (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 17).

It has been observed that bargaining typically involves a mixture of hope and guilt, as people reflect on past actions and contemplate on how things might have been made differently. In this case, individuals become lost in a labyrinth of hypothetical scenarios, ruminating "if only" and "what if" situations in an attempt to rewrite their painful realities and experience alternative possibilities. They ardently wish for a return to their previous lives and desperately long for the restoration of their lost loved ones. As already mentioned, someone might promise to live a more virtuous life in exchange for their loved one's recovery. As such, Kübler-Ross (2005) proclaimed:

After a loss, bargaining may take the form of a temporary truce. "What if I devote the rest of my life to helping others? Then can I wake up and realize this has all been a bad dream? We become lost in a maze of "if only . . ." or "What . . ." statements. We want life returned to what it was; we want our loved one restored. We want to go back in time: find the tumor sooner, recognize the illness more quickly, stop the accident from . . . if only, if only, if only. (p. 17).

Even though this stage may momentarily provide a sense of perceived control and hope, it is generally short-lived as the undeniable reality of loss begins to establish itself more thoroughly within the grieving individual's emotional landscape, paving the way for the fourth stage of grief theory known as 'depression'.

4. Fourth stage of grief theory – Depression

After bargaining, our attention moves squarely into the present. Empty feelings present themselves, and grief enters our lives on a deeper level, deeper than we ever imagined. This depressive stage feels as though it will last forever. It's important to understand that this depression is not a sign of mental illness. It is the appropriate response to a great loss. We withdraw from life, left in a fog of intense sadness, wondering, perhaps, if there is any point in going on alone. Why go on at all? (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 20)

In light of the abovementioned citation, it can be highlighted that depression represents a crucial shift in one's mourning process. In this stage, grieving individuals are confronted with the harsh reality of their loss in the present moment, experiencing intense feelings of absolute emptiness and endless sadness. Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) have emphasized that depression should not be misconceived as a mental illness, but rather understood as a natural and appropriate response to significant loss (p. 21). Accordingly, the authors asserted that this phenomenon, while often perceived negatively, is a necessary and constructive part of the healing process (2005, p. 21). During this stage, individuals may experience a withdrawal from life and question the purpose of continuing without their loved ones. This heavy emotional state, while deeply challenging, allows them to acknowledge the depth of their loss and its implications for their future lives before potentially moving toward acceptance.

It is worth mentioning that during this phase, people do not only grieve their current loss, but also the large number of unrealized possibilities and missed opportunities that they can no longer achieve due to their unfortunate situation. They hence become utterly aware of the void left by their loved one's absence in their lives: "Sensations of hollowness, sadness, or paralysis; overpowering sensations; thoughts of despair and hopelessness; napping or lying in bed all day; and regular crying are all signs of depression during a time of bereavement" (Rebaoui & Gherbi, 2023, p. 18).

5. Fifth stage of grief theory – Acceptance

This stage is about accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone and recognizing that this new reality is the permanent reality. We will never like this reality or make it okay, but eventually we accept it. We learn to live with it. It is the new norm with which we must learn to live. This is where our final healing and adjustment can take a firm hold, despite the fact that healing often looks and feels like an unattainable state. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, pp. 24 – 25)

The final stage, acceptance, is widely believed to be characterized by a sense of calm and tranquility. Contrary to common misconceptions, it does not necessarily imply that the individual is happy, but rather signifies a level of approval and coming to terms with the reality of the situation. It involves a gradual adaptation to life without the loved one, mainly through a clear reorganization of roles and an adoption of new ways of moving forward. In other terms, acceptance is about acknowledging the loss and learning to live with it, rather than overcoming it entirely. It has been said about acceptance:

When a person enters the acceptance stage, they start embracing the situation as it is and begin to take action. [...] Furthermore, recognising other tough aspects of one's life that they have accepted may help one feel more capable of conquering obstacles in the future. (Khouloud & Gherbaoui, 2023, pp. 18 – 19)

C) Scriptotherapy:

As mentioned earlier in the introductory part of this dissertation, the term “scriptotherapy” refers to a process of writing about one’s personal traumatic experiences with the aim of reaching emotional relief and psychological healing. It was first coined by Henke (1998) who defined it as “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment,” (p. xii) adding that “authorial effort to reconstruct a story of psychological debilitation could offer potential for mental healing and begin to alleviate persistent symptoms of numbing, dysphoria, and uncontrollable flashbacks” (p. xii). In *Shattered subjects: Trauma and testimony in women’s life-writing* (1998), Henke has also identified autobiography as a powerful healing tool serving a therapeutic function since it “generates a healing narrative that temporarily restores the fragmented self to an empowered position of psychological agency” (p. xvi). It is to be mentioned that she has further elaborated on the term “life-writing”, which according to her, was proposed by some feminist critics such as Benstock in order “to challenge the traditional limits of autobiography through the use of a category that encompasses memoirs, diaries, letters, and journals, as well as the bildungsroman and other personally inflected fictional texts” (1998, p. xiii). This definition thus expands the scope of autobiographical texts to include a wide range of other personal narrative forms, allowing for a more inclusive analysis of how individuals document and process their experiences through the means of writing.

Moreover, in her book which bears the name *Trauma and survival in contemporary fiction* (2002), Vickroy described the action of trauma narratives as an attempt “to internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures” (p. 7). In their book, *Opening up by writing it down: How expressive writing improves health and eases emotional pain* (2016), Pennebaker and Smyth have supported the hypothesis that expressive writing in a therapeutic context could be a considerably effective means for alleviating symptoms related to trauma. By guiding individuals to construct coherent narratives about their traumatic experiences, these scholars have suggested that writing could facilitate processing and potentially overcoming the devastating psychological impacts of trauma. In their words,

Expressive writing is usually enjoyable and meaningful. Across hundreds of studies, people report that they actually like to explore their thoughts and feelings. *And* they find that it can help them in all types of situations. [...] Writing about the thoughts and feelings connected with unexpected experiences forces us to bring together their many facets. Once we can distill complex experiences into more understandable packages, we can begin to move beyond them. Writing, then, organizes upheavals. (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016, p. 65)

Having established the theoretical frameworks of trauma, grief theory, and scriptotherapy, we can now turn our attention to their practical application in contemporary American fiction. In *Reminders of him* (2022), Hoover skillfully applies the principles of scriptotherapy within a fictional narrative framework as she interweaves the stages of grief with the gradual healing process facilitated by writing, demonstrating how the protagonist uses letter-writing as a valuable tool in confronting and processing her traumatic experiences. Through this narrative approach, the author illustrates the therapeutic potential of writing in helping individuals reconstruct their fragmented sense of self and find a path toward psychological recovery and rehabilitation.

III. Results and Discussion

A) Results

In order to fully grasp the extent to which Hoover has incorporated grief processing mechanisms and scriptotherapeutic elements into her narrative, I have used Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief theory as explained in her book, *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss* (2005), as well as Henke's concept of scriptotherapy from her work, *Shattered subjects: Trauma and testimony in women's life-writing* (1998). It is quite noticeable that in her narrative, Hoover has put forward the therapeutic journey of her protagonist, Kenna Rowan, through the act of writing. In fact, she built up a plot in which she has explored the healing process through the main character's use of letters addressed to Scotty, her deceased lover. Hoover has then attempted to describe the emotional progression and personal growth that her character gradually experienced through this therapeutic practice. Therefore, in order to reach a better understanding of scriptotherapy in contemporary American fiction in general, and in *Reminders of him* (2022) in particular, a deeper analysis of the novel is needed. To reach my purpose, I have made use of theoretical concepts borrowed from Kübler-Ross's "five stages of grief theory" along with Henke's notion of "scriptotherapy". Ultimately, the outcome of the study has revealed two major findings.

First, I have examined Hoover's novel relying on the five stages of grief in relation to the protagonist's letter-writing. These concepts have been used to shed light on Kenna's experiences of processing trauma and guilt through the act of writing. I have concluded from the analysis that the letters Kenna constantly writes to her deceased partner more or less reflect her emotional state and gradual progression of grief phases. This idea is more thoroughly encapsulated in *Reminders of him* (2022) which illustrates Kenna's emotional journey from its initial stages to its ultimate resolution, all through her letters. At the beginning, Kenna's writing is filled with a palpable sense of despair, guilt and responsibility for Scotty's death. More particularly, her words reflect a struggle to accept the enormity of her loss and her role in it, mainly through the former stages of grief theory, namely denial and anger. For instance, Kenna often revisits the night of the accident in her letters, expressing her disbelief and self-blame for not acting differently, echoing Kübler-Ross's observation of denial and anger as temporary defense mechanisms against massive emotional pain. As the story progresses, the main

character's epistolary compositions begin to indicate a move into the bargaining and depression stages of grief. This period in her mourning process is characterized by a strong desire for lost possibilities and an overwhelming feeling of despair regarding her life without Scotty and her child. Her letters further reflect her wish to bring changes to past events and decisions, highlighting her internal struggle and the burden of her remorse. By the end of the narrative, Kenna's written expressions evolve into catalysts for acceptance and healing. As such, her letters become instruments of reconciliation and hope for the future, facilitating her emotional processing of tragic experiences and enabling her to come to terms with her loss. This conclusion exposes Kenna's correspondence as a testament to her personal development and emotional fortitude, marking the beginning of an emerging serenity and optimism for what lies ahead in her quest for redemption, forgiveness, and a second chance at life.

Second, I have explored the concept of scriptotherapy and its therapeutic effects as portrayed in Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022). I have concluded that writing functions as a powerful tool for healing, accelerating emotional processing, self-reflection, and personal growth. Indeed, through her emotional letters to Scotty—a recipient who will never have the opportunity to read them—Kenna finds the strength to heal and rediscover herself in a protected and controlled manner. Through these written communications with her deceased partner, Kenna is rather able to reconstruct fragmented traumatic memories into a coherent narrative whole, while cultivating self-understanding and progressively rebuilding her fractured identity. The gradual shift in tone and content in her letters reflects her psychological progress, highlighting the therapeutic potential of writing on her. I have later concluded that Kenna's letters, told in a retrospective manner, not only serve as therapeutic means for personal and emotional healing, but also function as the final resolution of the novel's central conflicts, highlighting the pivotal role of letter-writing in the narrative structure.

B) Discussion

The plot

Colleen Hoover, born as Margaret Colleen Fennell on December 11th, 1979, in Sulphur Springs, Texas, is an American author who has gained widespread acclaim for her works in the new adult and young adult contemporary romance genres. *Reminders of him* (2022) is one of her most recent works; it consists of forty-two chapters which successively alternate between the perspectives of its main characters, Kenna Rowan and Ledger Ward, respectively. While the major events predominantly unfold in a chronological order, Kenna's chapters often include retrospective passages thanks to the letters she wrote to her deceased partner, Scotty Landry. This approach allows her to revisit past events and reexamine her actions and emotions in a more positive way, offering both a dual narrative structure and a glimpse into her past. The plot of the narrative revolves around the female protagonist, Kenna Rowan, a woman who is deeply haunted by the consequences of a tragic mistake she had committed in the past. She is finally released from incarceration after a period of five years for unintentional vehicular manslaughter, a sorrowful incident which had claimed the life of her lover. Despite understanding the potential risks, she returns to Scotty's hometown, yearning to obtain custody of her only child, Diem, whom she has never met due to the circumstances of her premature birth in jail. Since then, Diem has been raised by her paternal grandparents, i.e. Scotty's parents, Patrick and Grace Landry, who had formerly petitioned for the termination of Kenna's parental rights over her daughter. With deep resentment, the Landrys have categorically opposed any form of contact or interaction between their granddaughter and her mother who was cruelly labeled as their son's murderer.

On her first night back to town, Kenna seeks solace in a once-familiar bookstore where she used to spend time with Scotty, only to discover that it has been transformed into a pub. There, she is immediately captivated by the presence of a bartender, Ledger Ward, who reveals himself to be a former football athlete, as well as the owner of the pub. Unaware of her true identity, the bartender finds himself attracted to Kenna's melancholic presence. Much to her surprise, the heroine subsequently realized that Ledger was none other than Scotty's best friend—a man who has forged such a profound bond with Diem over the years to such an extent that he has ended his engagement with Leah, a woman he had once deeply loved, fearing

that she would fail to be an adequate parental figure for the child of his deceased best friend. As both Kenna and Ledger get close to each other, the female protagonist conceals her first name, assuming it to be Nicole, her middle name, as a way to avoid public condemnation; yet Ledger soon finds out her real identity. His rage boils over as he confronts the woman responsible for the passing of his closest friend. However, after witnessing her anguish over being separated from her daughter, his anger gradually softens, slowly giving way to an unexpected compassion, and ultimately leading him to fall in love with her.

It is worth mentioning that during her trial, Kenna showed up silent refusing to answer the questions she was asked within the courtroom, which the town mistook for her indifference to Scotty's death. Ledger thereafter urged her to keep her distance from the Landrys, who were struggling to rebuild their lives after the loss of their son. He emphasizes that her presence would only disrupt their painful healing process, given her role in the tragedy. Despite her hopelessness and powerlessness in the face of so many obstacles, the ailing woman's maternal instinct recurrently drove her to actively attempt to become part of her daughter's life. Her determination and perseverance to reunite with her daughter are significantly strengthened by her ardent desire to avoid the path taken by her biological mother, whose frequent absences instilled in her a deep sense of abandonment as a child. This had resulted in Kenna being shuttled between several foster families throughout her childhood and teenage years. In fact, she wants to ensure that Diem would not experience the same sense of maternal abandonment that had haunted her own youth, nor endure the instability and emotional unrest of foster care.

While news of Kenna's return has spread all over the town, the Landrys have obtained a restraining order prohibiting her from coming within five hundred feet of her child. The more Kenna confides in Ledger regarding her devastating feelings, the more their feelings for each other intensify into a passionate love affair whereby the grieving woman finds peace and comfort. Nevertheless, the restraining order has left her feeling broken, prompting her to consider leaving town entirely. In point of fact, Ledger had no other recourse but to offer her part-time employment at his pub, allowing her to amass the necessary amount of money should she decide to depart. Later on, Kenna reveals to him the existence of hundreds of letters that she has been writing as her incarceration began, wishing to compile them into a book someday. Spanning the entirety of her confinement up to the present day, these epistolary compositions,

which comprise over three hundred letters in total, are addressed to her deceased lover, Scotty. Indeed, Kenna clearly underlines that the act of writing these letters has been of great relief for her all along her imprisonment and up to the present day. Intrigued, Ledger asks her to read aloud one of these epistles, and more precisely the one detailing the night of Scotty's passing. With evident reluctance, Kenna starts reading the letter, exposing in detail all that had happened that fateful night. According to her, she and Scotty had attended a party where they have consumed a large number of alcoholic beverages, eventually reaching a high level of drunkenness. Because Kenna was relatively less drunk, Scotty invited her to drive his car in his place. Unfortunately, the vehicle tragically lost traction and flipped over in a ditch. A distraught Kenna panicked since Scotty was not moving after the wreck. She desperately tried to wake him up, but in vain; he remained motionless and unresponsive. In her immediate shock and anguish, she willingly walked onto the nearby street, seeking to end her own life by stepping in front of passing cars. She came close to death three times, but the car drivers turned away to avoid hitting her. Overcome with distress and the certainty that her partner had perished in the accident, she returned home on foot with the intention of ending her own life by leaping from the balcony of her fourth-floor apartment. However, before she could even reach it and commit suicide, she succumbed to unconsciousness and fainted in her bedroom.

Unsurprisingly, when the police officers found Kenna the following morning, surrounded by blood in her bedroom, they wrongly assumed that she had deliberately abandoned her boyfriend to his fate before retreating to her house in order to hide from the authorities. It was not until she was taken to prison that the cruel reality came to light – Scotty had indeed survived the initial crash, tenaciously clinging to life for over six hours and hopelessly seeking for help on that desolate highway. Due to the fact that Kenna was absent at that moment, her partner ended up alone, finally succumbing to his severe injuries. Ledger thus realized that Kenna's unresponsive behavior during her trial was not born out of indifference, but was rather the manifestation of devastating feelings in regard to her grief and guilt following Scotty's tragic death. This revelation finally allows him to fully understand the severity with which the town has unfairly condemned Kenna for an act she had committed so inadvertently. Witnessing Kenna's inner sorrow and Diem's need of her mother in her life, he incessantly struggled against the town's perception of Kenna as a heartless monster who, according to public opinion, had cowardly abandoned Scotty to die on a remote rural road so

as not to get herself into legal trouble.

Upon discovering Ledger's romantic involvement with the woman who had killed their son, the Landrys issued an ultimatum, compelling him to choose between Kenna and their granddaughter, Diem. Nonetheless, Ledger remains steadfastly determined to reveal Kenna's version of the story and facilitate a reconciliation between them, so that Diem would at least not be deprived of maternal affection as she continues to grow and mature. Grace was struck by a deep sense of disbelief when Ledger presented her with a copy of Kenna's letter detailing the night of the accident. For five long years, she has constantly been demonizing the woman she believed to be the sole responsible for her son's death. Upon reading the letter; however, she finds herself in the position to reevaluate her long-held assumptions and view the events through an entirely different angle. Finally determined to confront the past by forgiving Kenna for the tragic accident that claimed her son's life, Grace, with Ledger's assistance, finds the courage to visit her in her apartment. There, she conveys her forgiveness, promising to introduce her to the daughter she has longed to meet. Tears of happiness flowed freely, marking the beginning of a new chapter for both Kenna and Grace, and eventually putting an end to years of anguish and misunderstanding. Seizing this long-awaited opportunity, Kenna went to the Landrys' residence for dinner, her heart pounding with a mixture of apprehension and hope as she was preparing to see her daughter for the first time. The instant they met one another, an indescribable bond blossomed between mother and daughter, a connection so deep and instantaneous that it surpassed the years of separation and sorrow that have kept them apart. At this moment, Kenna was overwhelmed with a joy she had not experienced in what felt like an eternity. It was a pure, unrestrained happiness that seemed to wash away all the weight and the pain of her past mistakes.

After two years, Kenna and Ledger have settled in next door to Diem and the Landrys. While Diem remains with her grandparents for the sake of more stability in her life, she regularly visits Ledger and her mother. At the end of the narrative, it is revealed that Kenna and Ledger have welcomed a child of their own, Scotty, whom they named.

The five stages of grief theory in Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022)

The focus of this chapter is to explore the trajectory of grief and healing in Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022) by deploying Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief theory as articulated in her book, *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss* (2005). This theory provides a theoretical foundation for understanding and analyzing the emotional journey of Hoover's characters in general and her female protagonist in particular as she struggles with guilt and anguish following the loss of her deceased partner, Scotty Landry, due to the consequences of her actions in *Reminders of him* (2022). The five stages of grief were initially introduced by the Swiss-American psychiatrist, Kübler-Ross, in her work entitled *On death and dying: What the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy and their own families* (1969) in which she primarily addressed the experiences of terminally ill patients confronting their mortality and witnessing the process of their own death. Subsequently, the application of these stages has been extended to encompass larger categories of grieving individuals, such as those mourning the loss of loved ones rather than their own impending death. This approach has extensively been discussed by Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) who have stated:

The stages have evolved since their introduction [...] The five stages—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance—are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. [...] Our hope is that with these stages comes the knowledge of grief's terrain, making us better equipped to cope with life and loss. (p. 7)

Reminders of him (2022) proves to be a considerable case study in examining Kübler-Ross's five phases of grief theory—namely denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Through the application of this theoretical framework on Hoover's narrative, one can clearly witness the manifestation of grief stages in Kenna's cognitive processes and behavioral responses following Scotty's death. Indeed, the protagonist's journey through grief begins with an enormous sense of denial, a natural defense mechanism that allows her to protect herself from the full weight of her loss, which soon gives way to a burning anger as reality sets in, followed by desperate attempts at bargaining to undo the irreversible, before she sinks into a deep depression, ultimately emerging into a hard-won acceptance of her new reality.

1. Denial as the first stage of grief theory in *Reminders of him* (2022)

From a psychiatric standpoint, denial is regarded as a primitive defense. Denial rejects the existence of threat. This strategy may be effective for a short period of time and for situations in which there is an overwhelming threat. [... It] is often associated with a psychotic reaction, or as any person's first response to crisis and catastrophe. (Kastenbaum & M. Moreman, 2018, p. 25)

The state of denial is predominantly displayed in *Reminders of him* (2022) through Kenna's thoughts and actions as she returns to her hometown after serving five years in prison. As such, this first stage of grief manifests itself in various ways as a protective tool against the devastating impact of the protagonist's guilt and loss. One of the most remarkable examples of this can be found in the introductory chapter of the novel when she returns to Scotty's hometown, only to find a roadside memorial marking the date of his death at the place where the tragic accident occurred years before. Upon seeing it from the cab's window, her immediate reaction is that of removing it completely from this spot. Relying on Kenna's perspective, the author wrote:

There's a small wooden cross staked into the ground on the side of the road with the date of his death written on it. Scotty would hate it. I bet his mother put it there. "Can you pull over?" The driver slows down and brings the cab to a stop. I get out and walk back to where the cross is. I shake it side to side until the dirt loosens around it, and then I pull it out of the ground. (p. 1)

This scene verily depicts Kenna's denial at numerous levels. In fact, through the physical act of removing the memorial, she symbolically performs an act of denial, as though removing a tangible reminder from its place could somehow erase the reality of Scotty's death and relieve her of the role she held in the tragedy. Accordingly, her vital need to eliminate this visual evidence metaphorically demonstrates her denial regarding the irreversible nature of her actions and their lasting effects on her emotional state. As she attributes the placement of the cross to Scotty's mother, she shifts the focus away from her own guilt and projects it onto someone else, suggesting that it is someone else's grief and need for remembrance, not her own. This projection which helps her avoid her emotional burden and responsibility toward the incident further exposes the extent to which the female protagonist experiences the first phase of grief, as explained by Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) for whom, "The denial often comes in the form of our questioning our reality: Is it true? Did it really happen? Are they really gone?" (p. 10)

Meanwhile, Kenna's recollection of the pretrial scene is another prominent illustration of her denial mechanism. Indeed, the writer's depiction of her behavior during this crucial moment is very revealing of the nature of her psychological condition and coping strategies at that time. In this concern, the narrator stated:

Did he die in this very spot? Or did he die in the road? I didn't pay attention to the details during the pretrial. When I heard he had crawled several yards away from the car, I started humming so I wouldn't hear anything else the prosecutor said. (p. 1)

Through the act of "humming", the central character refuses to absorb the painful details of Scotty's death; hence creating an auditory barrier between herself and the unpleasant truth. This behavioral response reflects not only her inability to confront the results of her actions, but also her desperate attempt to preserve emotional equilibrium amidst intense remorse and sorrow. As such, Kenna's mental withdrawal during the proceedings is a form of dissociation, a common aspect of denial in trauma response theory which allows people to protect themselves from the gravity of their situation. Indeed, the fact of refusing to listen to those details as a way to dissociate herself from them grants her the opportunity to maintain a degree of emotional control over her role in Scotty's accidental passing, thereby avoiding full acknowledgment of her responsibility. This has greatly contributed to the gaps in Kenna's memory about the incident, as made evident by her current uncertainty about the exact location of the car wreck. Ultimately, the parallel between Kenna's present-day action at the memorial site and her behavior during the pretrial relevantly illustrates how firmly her coping mechanism has been established over the years. Such a response—spanning from the immediate aftermath of the tragedy up to her return years later—demonstrates how her denial has tenaciously persisted, unchanged despite the passage of time; thus reflecting on the protagonist's inability to accept the reality of the events as well as the unresolved nature of her traumatic experiences.

Other instances of denial in the novel can be found in its fourth chapter which is completely told through Ledger's point of view as he recounts his observations of Kenna's behavior. In this concern, the narrator wrote: "This girl does seem sad, but not sad in a way that would indicate she's grieving" (p. 20). This observation suggests that Kenna's denial has manifested in a way that masks her true emotional state. Her sadness, though evident, does not necessarily correspond to what Ledger expects from someone who has experienced the loss of a partner. This idea more or less points to the effectiveness of Kenna's denial as a defense

mechanism, enabling her to navigate daily life without outwardly displaying the full extent of her grief.

It is to be mentioned that the thirty-third chapter in *Reminders of him* (2022) is by far one of the most important sections in the whole narrative. Consisting of Kenna's letter to Scotty recounting all the details that occurred the night of his death, this chapter provides some of the most striking examples of Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief theory. More specifically, several examples of denial emerge throughout the protagonist's narration, showing how deeply entrenched this coping mechanism remains even years after the occurrence of the tragic event. Kenna's initial reaction to the car wreck verily epitomizes this phase of grief as she wrote:

The top was down on your convertible, and all I can remember when I felt the car hit the ditch and begin to tilt was that we needed to protect our faces, because I was worried the glass from the windshield might cut us. That was my biggest fear in that moment. A little bit of glass. I didn't see my life flash before my eyes. I didn't even see your life flash before my eyes. All I worried about in that moment was what would happen to the windshield. (p. 241)

The focus on a trivial concern like the windshield, rather than the gravity of the situation, exemplifies denial in its most immediate form. By fixating on this minor detail, Kenna's mind protects her from the overwhelming reality of what has just happened. The first stage of grief is further emphasized in her subsequent belief that, "*surely no one dies when they're at their happiest*" (p. 241). This idealistic notion reveals the mind's tendency to cling to positive beliefs as a defense against harsh realities, mirroring a fundamental rejection of the possibility that happiest moments could in a way or another end in tragedy and devastating loss. As the situation unfolds, the protagonist's denial persisted in her interpretation of the events:

Everything happened so fast, but I was calm in that moment. I thought you were, too. I was waiting for you to ask me if I was okay [...] I relied on you for everything, and your presence was the only reason I was still calm. I wasn't even worried about your car anymore because I knew you'd be more worried about me than your car. (pp. 241 – 242)

It is clear that such calmness in the face of catastrophe and the expectation of normalcy from Scotty's side demonstrate how denial can create a false sense of security, allowing Kenna to temporarily avoid confronting the full impact of the tragedy. In other words, the female protagonist's misinterpretation of the chaotic situation illustrates how denial can distort reality, creating a protective illusion of normalcy which serves as a temporary refuge from the devastating emotions associated with trauma. In this regard, Kenna openly claimed:

And it's not like I was speeding too much, or driving too recklessly. I was only a little bit drunk and a little bit high [...] I thought surely it would be minimal damage. Maybe a week or two in the shop, and then the car I loved so much, the car that felt like home, would be fine. Like you. Like me. [...] I wanted you to know I was okay. I thought maybe you were in shock, and that's why you were so quiet. [...] I couldn't grasp that. I couldn't fathom that a silly wreck on the side of a county road that landed us in a ditch could actually *hurt* us. (pp. 242 – 243)

Kenna thereafter attempted to rationalize the situation by minimizing the consequences of her actions and disconnecting herself from reality in order to avoid acknowledging her full responsibility in the tragedy, noting:

What I experienced in those moments was indescribable. You think you know how you'll react in a terrifying situation, but that's the thing. You can't *think* in a terrifying situation. There's probably a reason for how disconnected we become to our own thoughts in moments of sheer horror. But that's exactly how I felt. Disconnected. Parts of me were moving without my brain even knowing what was happening. My hands were searching around for things I wasn't even sure I was looking for. (p. 244)

It is more likely probable that the strongest illustration of denial in this chapter resides in Kenna's struggle to accept the reality of the accident. In fact, her statement: "I couldn't imagine that what happened was real, or that what was *happening* was real," (p. 245) encapsulates the essence of denial as an inability to accept reality, even when confronted with irrefutable evidence.

It can be inferred that *Reminders of him* (2022) clearly portrays the state of denial in its various forms—from selective focus and rationalization to dissociation and reality rejection. These manifestations, persisting for a long period of time, reveal the process of grief and the enduring nature of psychological trauma. While denial is often considered the first stage of grief, it is important to note that grief stages are not linear, as evidenced by Kenna's persistent struggle with denial even years after her imprisonment. This idea showcases how such emotional response can resurface and combine with other grief phases throughout the long-term process of coping with loss and guilt. The main character's struggle to reconcile her happy moments with the tragic outcome of her actions exemplifies the human mind's willingness and astounding capacity to remain positive amidst chaotic circumstances. Through this, Hoover provides an active description of the universal experience of grief and the psychological mechanisms employed by individuals to navigate profound loss and trauma. Ultimately, the analysis of denial

as the first stage of grief theory, as indicated by Kübler-Ross and Kessler, sets the stage for a long and arduous journey of grieving toward acceptance and healing, reflecting on the resilience of the human psyche facing overwhelming emotional challenges.

These feelings are important; they are the psyche's protective mechanisms. Letting in all the feelings associated with loss at once would be overwhelming emotionally. We can't believe what has happened because we actually *can't* believe what has happened. To fully believe at this stage would be too much. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 10)

2. Anger as the second stage of grief theory in *Reminders of him* (2022)

It is important to remember that the anger surfaces once you are feeling safe enough to know you will probably survive whatever comes. At first, the fact that you lived through the loss is surprising to you. Then more feelings hit, and anger is usually at the front of the line as feelings of sadness, panic, hurt, and loneliness also appear, stronger than ever. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, pp. 11 – 12)

In the landscape of grief, anger often emerges as the second phase, marking the transition from the numbing effects of denial to a more active engagement with loss. This shift, while challenging, represents a necessary step in the grieving process as it signals the psyche's readiness to begin confronting the painful reality of a particular situation. In the context of Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022), the characters' progression from denial to anger becomes increasingly apparent, manifesting in several ways. This transition is characterized by intense emotional outbursts, feelings of frustration and misdirected rage – all relevant features of the anger stage as described by Kübler-Ross and Kessler. Regarding the case of Kenna Rowan, it is worth noting that anger takes its roots fore and foremost from her awareness of the gravity of the situation through her recollection of the accident's aftermath. In a particularly emotionally charged moment, the heroine expressed her overwhelming emotional state as she became conscious of the painful reality, declaring:

It wasn't the memories of the wreck that took time to come back to me. It was *that* moment. The part of the night that was drowned out by the adrenaline rush and hysteria that bowled through me. I started making noises I didn't know I could make. I couldn't breathe because you were dead, and how was I supposed to breathe when you had no air? It was the worst realization I ever had, and I fell to my knees and screamed into the darkness. (pp. 245 – 246)

The intensity of Kenna's reaction underlines the heartbreaking nature of her epiphany in regard to her painful circumstances. As such, the central character's inability to breathe, the unfamiliar noises she makes, and her falling to her knees all represent how the body reacts to the mind's sudden and full comprehension of loss. It is; hence, clear that this powerful passage genuinely captures the disastrous moment when the full impact of loss finally hit home. This idea overtly parallels the description of anger as an active stage which engages with the reality of pain rather than the denial of truth, as depicted in *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss* (2005). Accordingly, Kenna's experience in this moment

exemplifies the delayed full awareness that often occurs in grief processes. As the initial shock of the event has passed, a flood of emotions and realizations came into surface. This emotional resurgence has further been made evident by Kenna's following words:

It was a stark realization that no matter how much you love someone, you can still do despicable things to them. It was like a wave of the most intense pain you could ever imagine rolled right over me. [...] I groaned, and I sobbed, and when I went back around the car to touch your hand again, there was nothing. No pulse in your wrist. No heartbeat in your palm. No warmth in your fingertips. I screamed. I screamed so much, I stopped being able to make sounds. And then I panicked. (p. 245)

While Kenna became more aware of the seriousness of the situation, anger began to come to the surface, marking the beginning of the second stage in the Kübler-Ross model of grief. This transition from denial to awareness and anger is often intense and powerful since the reality of the loss starts to set in and the grieving woman struggles with the implications of her actions. Kenna's state of anger is vividly illustrated in her words: "Cars were passing me, and I still had your blood on my hands, and I was scared and angry and couldn't stop seeing your mother's face" (p. 246). Her anger likely stems from a complex mixture of emotions, of which one could mention the frustration at her powerlessness to change what had happened, the rage at the unfairness of the situation, and even the guilt and self-blame for her role in the tragedy. In this vein, Kenna commented: "I had killed you and everyone was going to miss you, and you wouldn't be around to make anyone feel appreciated or important anymore, and it was my fault, and I just wanted to die" (p. 246). By remembering that the Landrys had struggled to give birth to Scotty due to their difficulties in conceiving children, Kenna has more extensively put the blame on herself, adding: "That's all I could think of in that moment. I had killed their miracle baby, and now they had no one, and it was all my fault" (p. 253). This self-directed anger aligns well with Kübler-Ross and Kessler's description of the anger stage in grief theory, where the emotion can be intensely focused and projected not only on others but also on oneself, as is the case with Kenna's deep sense of guilt and self-blame.

The anger is just another indication of the intensity of your love. [...] You also may experience feelings of guilt, which is anger turned inward of yourself. [...] If you could change things, you would, but you can't. Anger affirms that you *can* feel, that you *did* love, and that you *have* lost. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 16)

By extension, the feeling of anger following Scotty's death is not exclusively associated with Kenna, but with all the people who were once close to him, mainly his best friend and his parents who have also experienced intense anger as part of their grieving process. One notable example of this idea can particularly be encountered in the eighth chapter of the narrative where Ledger reminisces about a swing set which has evoked anger in him for a long time due to its association with memories of his deceased best friend. Through his perspective, it was said:

“She [Diem] wants a swing set,” she [Grace] says. “One of those ridiculously big ones like the one you used to have in your backyard. Her friend Nyla from school got one, and you know we can't say no. It'll be her fifth birthday.” [...] “It's in the shed in pieces, but I can help Patrick put it back together. Shouldn't be too hard.” [...] I fail to tell her Scotty is the reason I took it apart. I got angry every time I looked at it after he died. (p. 49)

This last brief but revealing statement indicates how Ledger's anger, a key component of his grief, led him to dismantle a swing set – a tangible reminder of his lost friend. The act of taking it apart can be interpreted as a physical manifestation of Ledger's emotional state. By removing this painful reminder from his sight, he attempts to manage the overwhelming anger and pain linked to Scotty's death. More specifically, Ledger's response to the swing set illustrates how anger in grief can lead to actions aimed at altering one's environment to cope with loss. Therefore, the swing set, once a source of joy and shared memories, became an unbearable reminder of what has been lost. As such, Ledger's reluctance to inform Grace of the real reason why he took it away implies a sense of embarrassment and unease related to his anger-motivated behavior. In such circumstances, individuals often find it challenging to express or rationalize their anger-induced actions to others, further emphasizing the personal and isolating nature of the grieving process. Additionally, Ledger's characterization of Kenna as a person he has “spent so many years angry at,” (p. 277) provides another compelling example of how anger can become a defining feature of one's grieving experience. In addition, Ledger once bitterly doubted Kenna's intentions, assuming:

And now she wants forgiveness? I can't think about the details of Scotty's death right now. [...] I'd rather be dead than allow her the satisfaction of knowing Diem. If it means driving us both off a bridge, I might just be vengeful enough to do that right now. The fact that she thought it would be okay to show up is baffling to me. I'm pissed she's here, but I think my anger is amplified by the knowledge that she knew who I was last night. (pp. 79 – 80)

This constant resentment, spanning over years, discloses how emotions related to grief can evolve from immediate responses into perpetual states of being. The extended duration of Ledger's anger indicates that it has become an integral part of his emotional state, highlighting how anger, when rooted in grief, can create a lasting barrier in relationships with others, and eventually persisting long after the initial loss. Ledger thought:

I've had this vision of her in my head all these years. A girl with no remorse for what she's done. A mother with no attachment to the child she brought into the world. Five years of preconceived yet solid notions aren't easy to let go of. Kenna has been one way and one way only in my mind. Unremorseful. Uninvolved. Uncaring. Unworthy. (p. 83)

Another prominent instance of anger is also found in the novel's fortieth chapter in which Scotty's mother had already read Kenna's letter recounting all the details of the tragic night and finally decided to address her, saying: "After hearing your version of events, I was even more devastated and angry than I was before I read it. It was so hard . . . hearing all the details. I cried all night" (p. 300). The old woman's reaction overtly denotes how anger can persist and even intensify as more details about a loss come to light. This resurgence of the state of anger within the grieving process aligns properly with Kübler-Ross and Kessler's observation that anger often appears in a stronger way as soon as the reality of the loss genuinely sets in. The scholars (2005) have openly claimed:

The more anger you allow, the more feelings you will find underneath. Anger is the most immediate emotion, but as you deal with it, you will find other feelings hidden. Mostly you will find the pain of loss. The power of your anger may overwhelm you because for some it may be in proportion to the amount of lost love that it represents. It may seem that if you go into the pain, you will never come out of it or that the pain will never end. (p. 16)

Grace Landry's subsequent reflection also shows how she has been directing and projecting her anger on Kenna as a defense mechanism in order not to feel overwhelmed by the impact of her son's death. At the end, she admitted: "Maybe I assumed all those things because it was easier to have someone to blame for such a horrific and pointless loss. And I know your grief shouldn't bring me peace, Kenna" (p. 300). In this case, Scotty's mother acknowledges that her anger, while intense, may have been misdirected and amplified by her need to blame someone on whom she could freely project this feeling. As a marker of this projection, Ledger

once told the Landrys: “I also know you’re just trying to protect yourselves from the pain Kenna’s actions caused,” (p. 293) suggesting that anger is a dangerous yet necessary coping tool as it temporarily protects grieving individuals in the face unbearable loss.

Meanwhile, Patrick has also experienced severe forms of anger following his son’s death, particularly when he discovers Ledger’s secret relationship with the woman responsible of this tragedy. This triggers an extreme emotional response in him, culminating in a violent act as he turns extremely mad and eventually ends up punching Ledger repeatedly. It is noteworthy that Patrick was previously represented as a highly quiet and calm person, indicating that this aggressive behavior stems not from habit or nature, but from extreme rage and anger. Through Ledger’s perspective, it was stated:

His expression is full of betrayal. ‘Did she not leave my son to die? Did your best friend not spend his last hours on this earth alone on a deserted road barely breathing because of her?’ A tear escapes, and he angrily wipes it away. He’s so angry he has to blow out a steady breath to keep from screaming at me. [...] He punches me hard in the mouth. [...] Patrick hits me again, right when Grace runs out her front door. My father pushes himself between us before Patrick can get in a third punch. [...] He’s looking at me without even an ounce of regret. (pp. 281 – 282)

Through the examples examined above, it has been made clear that *Reminders of him* (2022) relevantly illustrates anger as the second stage of grief, manifesting in various forms across multiple characters. From Kenna’s intense emotional outbursts and self-directed blame to Ledger’s long-lasting resentment and the Landrys’ misdirected rage, the novel portrays anger as a dangerous, persistent, yet paradoxically essential element of the grieving experience. These depictions closely fit Kübler-Ross and Kessler’s description of anger in grief theory, demonstrating how it serves both as a coping mechanism and as a means of actively engaging with loss. As a result, the exploration of anger in the narrative highlights what individuals have to undergo in their pursuit of healing and acceptance.

Anger is strength and it can be an anchor, giving temporary structure to the nothingness of loss. At first grief feels like being lost at sea: no connection to anything. Then you get angry at someone [...] Suddenly you have a structure—your anger toward them. The anger becomes a bridge over the open sea, a connection from you to them. It is something to hold on to, and a connection made from the strength of anger feels better than nothing. (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, pp. 15 – 16)

3. Bargaining as the third stage of grief theory in *Reminders of him* (2022)

The stage of bargaining in the grieving process, as theorized by Kübler-Ross, is marked by a desperate attempt to postpone the loss and to regain control over a situation that feels overwhelmingly out of one's hands. As previously mentioned, this phase entails individuals who often engage in "what if" and "if only" statements, mentally negotiating with fate or a higher power in an attempt to change the outcome of their loss. As Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) maintained:

[...] bargaining can help our mind move from one state of loss to another. It can be a way station that gives our psyche the time it may need to adjust. Bargaining may fill the gaps that our strong emotions generally dominate, which often keep suffering at a distance. It allows us to believe that we can restore order to the chaos that has taken over. (pp. 19 – 20)

In Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022), the stage of bargaining is primarily portrayed through the actions and thoughts of the female protagonist as she grapples with the aftermath of Scotty's tragic passing. Chapter eleven exemplifies Kenna's internal struggles through her engagement in an extensive interior monologue which provides interesting instances of how bargaining can manifest as a complex mental experiment. Indeed, she puts herself in Grace's position, envisioning a life where she would be the mother of a son who has lost his life due to his partner's actions. By imagining this scenario happening to her, she seeks to find out whether she – and in parallel Scotty's mother – would one day find the strength to forgive someone who has caused such a devastating loss. At the beginning, the protagonist sets up an idealized scenario in which she argued: "In a perfect world, [... the Landrys will] open their front door for me and allow me to reunite with the daughter I've never held" (p. 68). However, she immediately acknowledges the impossibility of this imaginative scene. "*In a perfect world . . . their son would still be alive,*" (p. 68) assumed Kenna, "The forgiveness I was hoping had found its way to them never made it here. They still hate me. *Apparently so does everyone else in their lives*" (p. 76). In the same vein, Kenna recognized: "I've had dreams like this before. Dreams where Grace shows up to forgive me and lets me meet Diem, but then I wake up alone and realize it was a cruel nightmare" (p. 301). The main character further admitted:

All I have is this intangible hope I try to cling to with childlike hands. [...] I know they hate me, and they have every right to hate me, but part of me has been living with them for the past four years in Diem. My hope is that they've found a sliver of forgiveness for me through my daughter. *Time heals all wounds, right?* Except I didn't leave them with a simple wound. I left them with a casualty. One so heartbreaking there's a possibility it will never be forgiven. (p. 67)

By delving deeper into her imaginative thoughts, Kenna contemplates on another hypothetical scenario as she supposed: "Imagine being told your perfect son had a perfect pulse and might have lived a perfect life if only he could have had that wreck with a perfect girl" (p. 70). It is clear that this statement encapsulates the very essence of the "if only" thinking that characterizes the bargaining phase of grief, revealing the psychological and defense mechanisms at play as bereaved individuals face loss and death. In fact, Kenna imagines an alternative reality where Scotty's accident would have occurred with another girl who would have better handled the situation. This mental exercise epitomizes the bargaining stage's tendency to explore counterfactual situations, searching for a version of events where the tragedy could have been largely prevented.

Building upon the established examination, other examples of bargaining have further been added in other chapters of the narrative, eventually confirming the relevance of the Kübler-Ross model in regard to the plot's analysis. In this concern, Kenna wrote to Scotty:

Turns out, your heart was still beating. It was just your arm that had died. I could go into more gruesome details about how it was so horribly crushed and mangled during the wreck that the blood flow was completely cut off and that's why I touched you and thought you were dead, and how, despite all that, you still somehow woke up and got out of the car and tried to get the help I never brought back to you. I would have realized that if only I would have stayed with you longer, or tried harder. If I wouldn't have panicked and ran and allowed the adrenaline to pump through me to the point that I wasn't even functioning within the borders of reality. If I could have been as calm as you always were, you'd still be alive. (pp. 250 – 251)

This powerful passage which can more likely be identified as a crucial interior monologue exemplifies with high clarity the bargaining stage of grief. It is; in fact, greatly revealing of the workings of a mind desperately trying to negotiate with the past, embodying the essence of bargaining itself. The detailed reconstruction of the accident's events in Kenna's

mind is a prime illustration of how this third phase manifests in grief. Kenna fully engages in Kübler-Ross's concept of bargaining as a coping mechanism by meticulously exploring hypothetical scenarios and repeatedly employing conditional phrases as an attempt to alter the status quo. This detailed focus not only allows Kenna to approach the painful reality of loss on her own terms, but it simultaneously enables her to imagine a different outcome where intervention to reduce the fateful damages might have been possible. By mentally constructing these hypothetical thoughts, grieving individuals often seek a way to better control their journey through grief and their quest toward healing and redemption. The bargaining mindset is further reinforced in *Reminders of him* (2022) as Kenna continues to imagine alternative futures, exposing the depth of her struggle with loss, along with desperate attempts to rewrite history which she saw as a "fantasy" in which Scotty "would someday propose to me [Kenna] and then we'd get married and have babies and raise them together in this town" (p. 116). In a reflection of her yearning for what might have been, Kenna further envisioned a utopic life trajectory – a life filled with shared experiences and dreams realized beside her partner, presuming:

We'd probably be raising the daughter together that you never even knew we made. We'd probably have two kids by now, or even three, and I'd more than likely be a teacher, or a nurse, or a writer, or whatever you would have undoubtedly given me the strength to realize I could be.
(p. 251)

In *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss* (2005), a connection between the bargaining stage of grief and the emotion of guilt is strongly underlined. Kübler-Ross and Kessler maintained that these two psychological states often correlate, with guilt frequently going hand in hand with bargaining thoughts. They pointed out: "Guilt is often bargaining's companion. The 'if only's' cause us to find fault with ourselves and what we 'think' we could have done differently" (p. 17). Unsurprisingly, this close relationship – between bargaining and guilt – is firmly established in Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022) where the female protagonist's journey through grief denotes how these two emotional states are interrelated, shaping the bereaved individual's experience of loss, as made clear by Kübler-Ross and Kessler's observations. As a marker of her profound guilt and culpability regarding her partner's passing, the introductory chapter of the novel sets the stage for Kenna's inner turmoil, captured in her haunting thoughts. "I pleaded guilty. Because technically, I was. I may not have killed him with my actions, but I definitely killed him with my inaction," assumed Kenna, "*I thought you were dead, Scotty. But dead people can't crawl*" (p. 1). Additionally, she

wrote a letter to Scotty in which she has confessed:

I was very, very, very, very, very, very remorseful. But I didn't care what the lawyer suggested. I *wanted* to go to prison. [...] I pleaded guilty, to my lawyer's dismay. I had to. When they started talking about what you went through after I ran away from you that night, I knew I would rather die than sit through a trial and listen to the details. It was all too gruesome, like I was living some horror story, and not my own life. *I'm sorry, Scotty.* I tuned it all out somehow by just repeating that phrase over and over in my head. *I'm sorry, Scotty. I'm sorry, Scotty. I'm sorry, Scotty.* (pp. 251 – 252)

Following her acknowledgment of deep regret, Kenna has then recounted the actions that she had undertaken in the wake of the tragic incident. Her decision to plead guilty even against her lawyer's advice can be seen as a reflection of both self-imposed blame and as an attempt to bargain with fate and circumstances. By accepting full legal responsibility, Kenna seems to be punishing herself out of guilt. Concurrently, this action could be viewed as a way to negotiate with her conscience, as if accepting and embracing punishment might somehow absolve her of the mistakes she had committed in the past and change the painful results of her loss. She declared: "[...] not having Diem in my life would mean it's your way of punishing me. It's okay. I deserve it. I plan to fight it, but I know I deserve it" (p. 254). The main character's acceptance of punishment, as made clear in this statement, embodies a clear interplay between self-imposed guilt and a form of emotional bargaining. She; subsequently, added: "My sentence was not justice considering the way you died. Eternity wouldn't be justice" (p. 254). Considering the same situation, Ledger once rhetorically questioned: "But what if we were just looking for someone to blame because we were all hurting so much?" (p. 134).

Throughout the novel, Kenna struggles with others' perceptions of her emotional state. In a sharp conversation with Ledger, she vehemently defended her remorse, asking: "*How could anyone think I was unremorseful?* I was absolutely devastated. [...] Is that why they refuse to let me see my daughter? They think I didn't *care*?" (p. 147). Elaborating on her emotional turmoil, she clarified: "I wasn't unremorseful. I was too devastated to speak. [...] I was *shattered*, Ledger. You have to believe that. Too shattered to even defend myself, or care what happened to my life. I wasn't unemotional, I was *broken*" (p. 148). This raw declaration further illustrates the depth of her grief and the overwhelming guilt that she has been carrying on her shoulders for several years. In the same context, she has argued:

I don't blame anyone but myself. Everything would be different if I wouldn't have panicked that night. But I did, and these are the consequences, and I've accepted that. I spent the first couple of years of my sentence replaying every decision I've ever made, wishing I could go back and get a second shot. Ivy once said to me, "*Regret keeps you stuck on pause. So does prison. When you get out of here, make sure you hit play so you don't forget to move forward.*" I'm scared to move forward, though. (p. 144)

The analysis presented herein demonstrates Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022) as a compelling portrayal of the bargaining stage of grief as conceptualized by Kübler-Ross and Kessler. Through Kenna's journey of grief, the novel overtly illustrates bargaining in its various manifestations – from her hypothetical scenarios involving “what if” and “if only” thoughts to her attempts at reconstructing past events and imagining alternative realities and futures. These elements powerfully display the human mind's desperate efforts to regain control and alter the painful reality of loss. Interconnected with bargaining, the narrative also explores the presence of the feeling of guilt, showcasing how these two emotional states often go together in the grieving process. The protagonist's remorse, her self-imposed punishment by pleading guilty, and her struggle with others' perceptions of her guilt all highlight the interdependence between bargaining and guilt. By depicting these interrelated aspects of grief, the author succeeds in validating the Kübler-Ross model in regard to the third phase of loss, ultimately indicating the resilience and the vulnerability of the human mind, as well as the challenging path toward healing and acceptance in the aftermath of tragedy.

As we move through the bargaining process, the mind alters past events while exploring all those “what if” and “if only” statements. Sadly, the mind inevitably comes to the same conclusion ... the tragic reality is that our loved one is truly gone. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 20)

4. Depression as the fourth stage of grief theory in *Reminders of him* (2022)

The loss of a loved one is a very depressing situation, and depression is a normal and appropriate response. To *not* experience depression after a loved one dies would be unusual. When a loss fully settles in your soul, the realization that your loved one didn't get better this time and is not coming back is understandably depressing. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 21)

Depression, as the fourth stage in the Kübler-Ross model of grief, represents an important and deep shift in the grieving process. It marks a period where the reality of the loss fully settles in, often accompanied by intense feelings of sadness, emptiness, and withdrawal. Nonetheless, it has widely been thought to be a necessary step toward acceptance in the context of grief, enabling individuals to process their loss more deeply. In Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022), this stage prominently manifests in the emotional journey of the female protagonist as she initially becomes depressed over the loss of her partner and subsequently experiences the heartbreak of having her newborn daughter taken immediately away after giving birth to her in prison. Kenna's emotional distress following Scotty's passing is more clearly depicted through her personal accounts on her mental condition at the time of her incarceration. In her words, she acknowledged the gravity of her condition, stating: "Looking back on it now, I realize I was in a deep and dangerous state of depression, but I don't think anyone noticed, or maybe there was just no one who cared" (p. 251). This reflection not only exposes the intensity of Kenna's emotional turmoil, but also speaks volumes of the alienation and exclusion she felt from society as nobody seemed to recognize her suffering during this tumultuous period. As a marker of the intersection of her various feelings of pain, sadness, loneliness, and depression, she wrote a letter to Scotty, revealing: "I was confused, I was weak, I was hurting. But the most powerful of all the feelings flooding me in that moment was my loneliness. Little did I know, that feeling would become perpetual. Permanent" (p. 247). "I never even attempted to call my mother through all of it. I was too depressed to call anyone at all. [...] I was ashamed and sad," she added, "and as a result of that, no one in my life before I met you knew what I had done. And since you were gone, and your entire family hated me, I had no visitors" (p. 250).

Throughout the narrative, Kenna's depression is further laid bare across a myriad of physical and emotional symptoms including insomnia, loss of appetite, and an uncontrollable

sense of despair. “I hadn’t slept, I was heartbroken, I couldn’t eat or drink anything. I just. Wanted. To die,” the protagonist noted, “the only place I wanted to be was alone in that cell where I could refuse to eat the food they gave me and hopefully, eventually, my heart would stop beating like I thought yours had that night” (pp. 249 – 250). Her anguish instantly reaches its peak as she continued writing about her depressive state, painting a haunting picture that exacerbates the depths of her grief:

And then, when they told me you would still be alive if I had just called for help, I *did* die. It was a Monday, I think. Two days after our wreck. I sometimes want to buy myself a headstone and have that date written on it, even though I’m still pretending not to be dead. My epitaph would read: *Kenna Nicole Rowan, died two days after the passing of her beloved Scotty.* (pp. 249 – 250)

The passage above can be interpreted as a metaphorical representation of depression, embodying the concept of emotional death as Kenna’s inner self has apparently ceased to exist despite her physical presence. A part of her had indeed died along with Scotty, leaving her as a mere shadow of her previous identity, trapped in a liminal space between life and death. This idea is plainly epitomized in the main character’s desire to buy herself a headstone with an epitaph bearing her name, symbolizing her internal death due to her belief that she is no longer truly alive. Her internal struggle to reconcile her emotional demise with the necessity of maintaining a semblance of life by acting as if she were alive despite the emptiness she feels considerably accentuates the void left by her partner’s absence and the feelings of depression that she felt afterward. This powerful imagery seeks at expressing how deeply depressed individuals feel transformed by their loss, to the point that they no longer recognize themselves as the people they once were. In essence, Kenna’s symbolic description firmly captures the paralyzing effects of severe depression in grief where one feels emotionally extinguished while paradoxically remaining alive at a physical level, metaphorically equating her miserable and painful feelings with a form of living death. “Seeking a way out of depression feels like going into a hurricane and sailing around the inside perimeter, fearful that there is no exit door” (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 22).

[... Ivy] saw me crying while holding a book about postpartum depression. [... Diem] was a preemie, so they took her as soon as she was born. [... Ivy] wasn’t saying I would move past what I was feeling, or that things would get easier. She was telling me this was it—the misery I felt was my new normal. I could either learn to live with it or I could let it consume me. (pp. 88 – 89)

It is to be mentioned, as Kenna herself admitted in the quote above, that another form of depression soon appears in Hoover's novel following the protagonist's forced separation from Diem, depriving her of the precious bond that every mother gets the chance to experience shortly after childbirth. This loss compounds her already-existing emotional anguish, eventually pushing her into manifesting symptoms of postpartum depression which clearly invoke in Kenna an intense psychological distress. As Ivy brutally informs her that the pain she feels has become her normal state of being, the protagonist realizes that she must now either learn to live with it or risk being completely overtaken by it. Confronted with this dilemma, Kenna finds herself trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of despair, struggling to imagine a future where she can move past the "misery" that has become her constant companion. Just as the loss of her partner had plunged her into a deep state of mourning, the additional pain of being denied the opportunity to form a maternal connection with her child drove her further into persistent episodes of depression. In this concern, she argued: "My normal would never be the same. It hadn't been since I lost you, and losing our daughter to your parents just pushed me even further from center" (p. 90). She later confirmed: "The way I felt when they took her from me back then is the exact same defeated misery I feel right now" (p. 90).

The culmination of Kenna's depressive state is powerfully typified in her reflection on the sharp disparity between dreams and reality. This idea was more intensely expressed in Kenna's ruminations:

But you died, and we didn't get to live out our dream. And now we never will, because life is a cruel, cruel thing, the way it picks and chooses who to bully. We're given these shitty circumstances and told by society that we, too, can live the American dream. But what they don't tell us is that dreams almost never come true. It's why they call it the American dream rather than the American reality. Our reality is that you're dead, I'm in orientation for a shitty job making minimum wage, and our daughter is being raised by people who aren't us. Reality is depressing as fuck. (p. 116)

Kenna's words visually depict the heavy weight of depression as a component of grief, especially when exacerbated by unfulfilled aspirations and harsh circumstances. This reflection can hence be determined as a microcosm of Kenna's emotional journey through depression, characterizing this significant phase of the grieving process. Indeed, the metaphor of life as a bully which decides who its victims are strongly resonates with the feelings of unfairness and

victimization often experienced in this stage. Additionally, the juxtaposition – between dreams and reality – is emblematic of the despair and hopelessness that usually consume individuals dealing with depression. This dichotomy essentially exemplifies a condition where even the faintest glimmer of optimism fades when confronted with an unforgiving and merciless reality, perfectly embodying the essence of the fourth stage in the Kübler-Ross model of grief.

Moreover, Kenna’s critique of the “American dream” is a broader commentary on societal expectations and the realities that contradict them. Her assertion that dreams are rarely achievable reflects a negative and skeptical mindset typical of depression, where hope withers and the future seems hopeless. This disillusionment is not just personal as it extends to a societal level, revealing that the perception she once had of a perfect world at large had visibly vanished. The juxtaposition of the idealistic “American dream” with Kenna’s vision of a pessimistic “American reality” is particularly noticeable, highlighting the gap between societal promises and individual experiences. This disparity denotes an eventual failure of the American dream, which pledges prosperity but often delivers hardship. In other words, the American dream often offers the illusion of a utopic existence, but bereaved individuals are more likely to face a dystopic reality instead. As such, Kenna’s reality – marked by death, financial struggle, and separation from her child – stands in direct opposition to the prosperous and fulfilling life of an American dream that she had once envisioned. This long distance between expectation and reality is a crucial aspect of depression in grief, forcing people to confront and accept a future that vastly diverges from what they had originally planned. It demonstrates how loss can steadily reshape one’s vision of the world, leading to a re-evaluation of previously held beliefs and collective ideals. This process firmly illuminates the intersection between personal tragedy and societal disillusionment which often mark the emotional turmoil experienced by depressed individuals in their journey through loss and its aftermath.

It is evident that depression is fore and foremost exemplified through one of the most excruciatingly sorrowful and heartbreaking passages in *Reminders of him* (2022). The following line arises from the epitome of Kenna’s realization that Scotty had irrevocably abandoned her to confront an agonizing fate alone as she addressed him, saying: “There was *before* you and there was *during* you. For some reason, I never thought there would be an *after* you. But there was, and I was in it. I’ll be in it forever” (p. 248). The division of time in this quote into “*before*,”

“*during*,” and “*after*” periods centered around her relationship with her deceased partner illustrates how losing him has played a fundamental role in reconstructing her perception of reality and reshaping the course of her personal life. This temporal segmentation is; thus, a paramount characteristic of the depressive stage of grief where individuals often struggle to envision a future without their loved ones. Therefore, the feeling of being trapped in an eternal “*after*” vigorously resonates with the fourth phase of grief theory, namely depression, in which the pain likely feels brutally endless and roughly insurmountable.

Last but not least, Kenna’s avoidance of listening to any kind of music in *Reminders of him* (2022) shows how depression can transform typically pleasurable experiences into sources of pain. Her statement: “Every song is a reminder of something bad in my life, so I’d rather hear no songs at all,” (p. 162) overtly exposes how music, often a source of comfort and joy for the majority of people, has become a trigger for painful memories for Kenna, linking her present reality to her past loss. Ledger suggested: “Most songs are about love or loss, two things that are probably incredibly difficult for her to absorb in any medium” (p. 176). His observation that, “In the end, if there’s nothing good going on in your life, almost every song becomes depressing, no matter what it’s about,” (p. 177) emphasizes how depression can poison one’s experiences, infusing even the simplest pleasures of life with a bitter taste of emptiness. This can be defined as a hallmark of the depressive stage of grief, where the pain of loss infiltrates every aspect of life, leaving the bereaved individual struggling to find joy or meaning in once-cherished activities. In this regard, the female protagonist has added: “That was one good thing about prison—I rarely heard music” (p. 162). Her preference for the silence of the prison over the emotional tumult evoked by music ultimately illustrates how withdrawing from sensory stimuli becomes not just a coping mechanism, but also a refuge from the constant reminders of loss.

With all this being said, it can be deduced that Hoover’s *Reminders of him* (2022) considerably explores the stage of depression within the framework of grief. Through the protagonist’s distressing journey, one can witness the overbearing burden of loss and its aftermath. Her journey through grief is marked by two tragic events: the death of her partner as well as the forced separation from her newborn daughter, both of which plunge her into the depths of depression. Her ardent desire to die thereafter and the feeling of being trapped in an

eternity of pain highly capture the essence of the fourth phase of grief theory in the narrative. The latter also tackles broader themes, questioning the notion of the American dream and exploring how depression can strip joy away even from the simplest pleasures of life. By blending all these themes together, Hoover portrays a deeply personal journey while also shedding light on societal pressures that genuinely intensify individual suffering. In doing so, the writer effectively brings the Kübler-Ross model to life in due course, with her literary work testifying of the inevitable and arduous path toward recovery following a devastating loss.

As difficult as it is to endure, depression has elements that can be helpful in grief. It slows us down and allows us to take real stock of the loss. It makes us rebuild ourselves from the ground up. It clears the deck for growth. It takes us to a deeper place in our soul that we would not normally explore. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 24)

5. Acceptance as the fifth stage of grief theory in *Reminders of him* (2022)

Healing looks like remembering, recollecting, and reorganizing. We may cease to be angry with God; we may become aware of the commonsense reasons for our loss, even if we never actually understand the reasons. We the survivors begin to realize sadly that it was our loved one's time to die. Of course it was too soon for us, and probably too soon for him or her, too. [...] But *our* journey still continues. It is not yet time for us to die; in fact, it is time for us to heal. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 25)

Unlike the four preceding stages of grief theory, acceptance is considered the final and only phase in which optimism reigns. Indeed, it is characterized by a growing sense of peace, understanding, and recovery. Although it does not necessarily guarantee complete and total happiness, it opens the door to acknowledging the new reality and fosters a willingness to adapt to the new circumstances. In this stage, individuals often find themselves able to remember their loved ones without being submerged by the pain of their absence. Accordingly, grief does not entirely vanish, but its intensity diminishes over time, making room for joy and hope to resurface. In the context of *Reminders of him* (2022), acceptance likely plays an important role in Kenna's journey. The novel evidently explores how the main character navigates this final stage, learning to live with loss while honoring the memory of her departed partner. In a reflection regarding acceptance and forgiveness, Kenna wrote to Scotty:

But I hope your family knows my actions that night didn't come from a place of selfishness. It was horror and shock and agony and confusion and terror that guided me away from you that night. It was never selfishness. I am not a bad person, and I know you know that, wherever you are. And I know you forgive me. It's just who you are. I only hope one day our daughter will forgive me too. And your parents. Then maybe, by some miracle, I can start to forgive myself. (p. 254)

This quote essentially portrays Kenna's emotional and internal struggles that characterize her journey toward forgiveness. As a matter of fact, her words reveal a gradual shift toward a potential stage of acceptance as she acknowledges the circumstances of that fateful night, recognizing that her actions were driven by overwhelming emotions rather than selfishness. This more or less marks a crucial step in her healing process, as she begins to view her past actions through a lens of compassion rather than self-condemnation. It is very clear that the protagonist's perception of forgiveness unfolds in a sequential manner, beginning with her seeking forgiveness from Scotty, to hoping for forgiveness from their daughter and his parents,

and ultimately culminating in the possibility of forgiving herself. This hierarchical progression suggests that true healing involves not only coming to terms with external relationships, but also reconciling with one's own actions and their consequences. By viewing self-forgiveness as part of a miraculous process, Kenna emphasizes the monumental challenges that she needs to face in order to attain it; and by extension, to fully accept her new reality. This contemplation further portrays the acceptance stage not as a simple resolution of grief, but as an ongoing process of understanding, forgiving, and finding a way to move forward while carrying the weight of the past. More specifically, it embodies the idea that acceptance is not about forgetting or diminishing the loss, but about learning to live with it and finding a path toward healing and self-compassion, even when such a path seems miraculous and out of reach. Additionally, Kenna's certainty about Scotty's forgiveness indicates a deep understanding of his character and a connection that is preserved even after his passing. This phenomenon exemplifies an important feature of the acceptance stage of grief, wherein individuals find new ways to maintain bonds and sustain connections with their lost loved ones.

As we heal, we learn who we are and who our loved one was in life. In a strange way, as we move through grief, healing brings us closer to the person we loved. A new relationship begins. We learn to live with the loved one we lost. We start the process of reintegration, trying to put back the pieces that have been ripped away. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 25)

Other instances of acceptance mostly take place at the end of the narrative, coinciding with the period when Kenna has earned the forgiveness of both Ledger and Landrys. In fact, Grace's perspective dramatically shifts after reading Kenna's letter to Scotty detailing the night of the accident. Recognizing her misjudgment, she seeks out Kenna to offer forgiveness and; eventually, allows her to meet her daughter for the first time. Grace pointed out:

All these years, I assumed your silence in the courtroom was indifference. I assumed you left him in that car because you only cared for yourself and didn't want to get in legal trouble. Maybe I assumed all those things because it was easier to have someone to blame for such a horrific and pointless loss. And I know your grief shouldn't bring me peace, Kenna. But it's so much easier to understand you now than when I assumed you never grieved at all. [...] I am so sorry, Kenna. [...] I'm responsible for keeping you from your daughter for five years, and there's no excuse for that. The only thing I can do is make sure you don't go another day without knowing her. (p. 300)

The passage above encapsulates the transition to the stage of acceptance in the context of grief theory. Indeed, Grace's words reflect a drastic shift from anger and misunderstanding to empathy and reconciliation. Initially, Scotty's mother found it easier to blame Kenna, interpreting her silence as indifference and her actions as selfish. This perspective allowed her to project her pain on a specific target, simplifying the devastating emotions surrounding her loss. However, as she moves toward acceptance, Grace acknowledges the flaws in her previous assumptions; and eventually, realizes that finding solace in another's suffering is ultimately unfulfilling and perhaps even ethically questionable, marking a significant turning point in her grieving process. Grace's realization that Kenna has genuinely mourned challenges her previous beliefs, bringing her peace and solace. This epiphany, combined with her apology and determination to rectify her past actions, demonstrates her growing acceptance of her son's tragic loss. Additionally, her decision to allow Kenna to finally meet Diem signifies a willingness to adapt to new circumstances and to move forward in her life. This moment not only illustrates Grace's progression through the stages of grief, but also facilitates Kenna's own journey toward acceptance and redemption, granting her the opportunity to reconnect with her child and begin to heal from the loss of her partner. This pivotal moment of forgiveness and acceptance is further made obvious in a powerful scene between Grace and Kenna whereby the narrator stated:

She [Grace] immediately walks over to me and pulls me in for a hug. It's an amazing hug. A forgiving hug. [...] "We go forward," she says. "That's it. It's that simple. I forgive you and you forgive me, and we go forward together and give that little girl the best life we can give her. Okay?" I nod, because I can do that. I forgive them. I've always forgiven them. It's myself I've been hard on. But I think I've reached the point that forgiving myself finally feels okay. So I do. *You're forgiven, Kenna.* (p. 308)

This exchange encloses the very nature of acceptance in grief theory. In fact, Grace's embrace symbolizes not only forgiveness, but also mutual understanding and shared healing between the two grieving women. Her words reflect the core principle of acceptance – acknowledging the past while choosing to move ahead. The reciprocal nature of forgiveness highlighted here demonstrates that acceptance is often a collective process, involving all those affected by the loss. Importantly, Kenna's internal dialogue reveals her final step toward self-forgiveness, a crucial component of true acceptance. By forgiving herself, Kenna completes her journey through the stages of grief, finally allowing herself to heal and move forward in life.

Ledger's perspective offers another interesting example of the stage of acceptance as portrayed in *Reminders of him* (2022). His observation encapsulates the power of understanding and forgiveness, not just for Kenna, but for all those affected by the tragedy. In a reflection, he stated:

I could tell Patrick and Grace were pleasantly surprised at how different she [Kenna] is from what we all expected her to be. It proves that time, distance, and devastation allow people enough opportunity to craft villains out of people they don't even know. But Kenna was never a villain. She was a victim. We all were. (p. 310)

This quote largely illustrates the importance of the stage of acceptance, particularly when multiple parties are involved. Ledger's thinking on how people construct "villains" from strangers illuminates a common psychological response to tragedy, through which individuals often resort to scapegoating and assigning blame to others as coping tools against painful realities. This idea goes hand in hand with earlier stages of grief, such as anger and bargaining, where individuals often seek to make sense of their loss by finding fault in others. However, Ledger's assertion that Kenna has never truly been the monster they thought, but rather a "victim" along with everyone else, marks a significant change in his perspective and a shift toward acceptance. This realization shows a better understanding of the tragedy, recognizing that pain and loss affected everyone involved. In other words, by considering Kenna as a fellow victim rather than a criminal, he perceives the acceptance stage through a lens of empathy and compassion for all parties involved. Ledger's perspective also reinforces the idea that acceptance is not just an individual process, but can be a collective journey as well. His observations suggest that as each person involved begins to shift toward acceptance, it creates a domino effect, facilitating healing and understanding for the entire group affected by the loss. In essence, this passage reveals how acceptance can lead to a reconfiguration of relationships and perceptions, ultimately fostering an environment of healing for everyone.

I don't want to believe that there are good people and bad people, and no in-between people. I don't want to believe I'm worse than anyone else, as if there's a bucket full of evil somewhere within me that continues to refill every time it runs empty. I don't want to believe I'm capable of repeating behavior I've displayed in the past [...] Despite the devastation I've left in my wake, I am not a bad person. *I am not a bad person*. It took five years of weekly therapy sessions to help me realize this. I only recently learned how to say it out loud. "I am not a bad person." (Hoover, 2022, p. 297)

The protagonist's introspective passage above suitably reflects a crucial aspect of acceptance in grief theory—a process which does not only include forgiving others, but mainly forgiving one's self and reconciling with one's own past. Kenna's internal monologue demonstrates her struggle to move beyond binary thinking and moral characterizations as a way to embrace herself as a good, rather than a bad person. This shift in perspective is integral to her journey toward coming to terms with her past and recovering emotionally as she begins to experience inner-tranquility and self-comprehension. In other words, Kenna's acceptance involves reconciling her past actions with her sense of self-worth and her capacity for change. By rejecting the notion of people as being inherently "good" or "bad", Kenna rejects the self-condemnation that has likely plagued her since the tragic incident. Her internal struggle which centers around an outright refusal to categorize herself as a bad person is seen both as an affirmation and a revelation, indicating the results of her therapy sessions in reshaping her self-perception. This process genuinely allows the heroine to acknowledge her past mistakes without necessarily internalizing them to the point of letting them become the sole feature defining her identity, marking a significant step toward self-acceptance and healing.

The final chapter in *Reminders of him* (2022) further illustrates acceptance in all its glory, depicting Kenna's complete immersion in this stage in which she finally reconciles with her past, embraces her present circumstances, and ultimately looks toward the future with hope and optimism. As mentioned in the previous stage, Kenna's experience with music was marked by intense emotional distress, as it unconsciously evoked painful memories of her late partner. However, now that she has accepted her fate, her emotional response to auditory cues – as far as songs and melodies are concerned – has largely evolved. She now finds herself able to embrace these musical reminders without automatically succumbing to grief. This shift is eloquently captured in her words as she stated: "For the first time in a long, long time, I want to listen to the radio. I want to hear any song, even the sad ones" (p. 318). In fact, such a willingness to listen to all types of songs, even the melancholic ones, signifies a positive change in Kenna's path toward acceptance and healing. She has strengthened this idea of transformation in the last line of the last chapter, proclaiming: "Music still makes me think of Scotty, but thinking of Scotty no longer makes me sad. Now that I've forgiven myself, the reminders of him only make me smile" (p. 318). These two assertions beautifully epitomize the stage of acceptance as described by Kübler-Ross and Kessler, mainly through the protagonist who has not only come

to terms with her loss, but has evolved to a point where she can fondly cherish memories of her past without being overwhelmed by sorrow.

The stage of acceptance is more thoroughly expressed in the novel's epilogue in which Kenna reflects on her journey, revealing how acceptance has reshaped her perspective and her place within Scotty's circle of loved ones. A particularly moving quote from the epilogue encapsulates the depth of her integration and the unconditional acceptance that she has received from Scotty's family, as she stated:

Since the day they accepted me into her life, I've never felt unwelcome. Not for one day or even one second. They didn't accept me with conditions. They just accepted me like I belong here with all the people who loved you. You were surrounded by good people, Scotty. From your parents to your best friend to your best friend's parents, I have never met a family more loving. The people that were in your life are now the people who are in my life, and I'll do everything I can to continue to show them as much love and respect as you gave them. (p. 320)

In light of this passage, it is clear that the heroine finally reconciled with her past, achieved healing, and found a new place within a loving community. Her reflections reveal a transformative journey from isolation and guilt to unconditional acceptance and integration. Kenna reflects on how she has consistently felt welcomed, emphasizing the depth of the forgiveness that she has received. She notes that there were no conditions attached to her inclusion in the family, suggesting a genuine and comprehensive forgiveness. This unconditional acceptance has played a crucial role in her healing process, allowing her to feel truly integrated among those who have loved Scotty. Such a sense of belonging represents both a connection to her past and a stepping stone toward her future. The protagonist's expression of admiration for Scotty's family and her commitment to reciprocate their love and respect indicates her active engagement in her new reality. This willingness to honor her partner's memory by caring for his loved ones further exemplifies her progress through the acceptance stage, showing how she has not only come to terms with her loss but is also embracing her present circumstances and her future possibilities. Ultimately, this passage illustrates how the final stage of grief can lead to new beginnings, enabling Kenna to forge new relationships, find her place within a supportive community, and move forward in life with a healed heart and a restored sense of purpose.

[...] little by little, we withdraw our energy from the loss and begin to invest it in life. We put the loss into perspective, learning how to remember our loved ones and commemorate the loss. We start to form new relationships or put more time into old ones. Finding acceptance may be just having more good days than bad. [...] we begin to live again and enjoy our life. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 28)

The female protagonist's journey toward acceptance culminates in a stirring blend of past and present circumstances, symbolized by her newly formed family. Her union with Ledger, once her late partner's closest friend, also represents a new chapter in her life, as well as a link connecting her former life to the one she currently embraces. This connection is further solidified by the naming of their newborn son. In a particularly emotional and significant moment, Kenna instinctively names the child after her late partner to whom she wrote:

You know how seriously I take naming things. [...] The last name I handed out two weeks ago was by far one of the more important ones, yet somehow the easiest name to come up with. When they placed our newborn son on my chest, I looked down at him through teary eyes, and I said, "Hi, Scotty." (p. 320)

This decision, described as both profoundly important and surprisingly effortless, exposes Kenna's ability to honor her past while fully embracing her present. Indeed, the act of naming her son after Scotty serves as a living tribute to his memory, transforming what was once a source of pain into a joyful reminder of love and continuity. This powerful gesture encapsulates the main character's growth throughout her grieving journey, showcasing her capacity to integrate her loss into a new, hope-filled reality.

We can never replace what has been lost, but we can make new connections, new meaningful relationships, new interdependencies. Instead of denying our feelings, we listen to our needs; we move, we change, we grow, we evolve. We may start to reach out to others and become involved in their lives. We invest in our friendships and in our relationship with ourself. We begin to live again, but we cannot do so until we have given grief its time. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 28)

To conclude, Hoover's narrative effectively illustrates the acceptance stage of grief through the main character's journey and the evolving perspectives of those around her. As such, it demonstrates the way acceptance involves recognizing past actions with compassion, as seen in Kenna's reflections on forgiveness. The novel also portrays acceptance as a collective process, exemplified by Grace's shift in understanding and forgiving the woman responsible for her son's

tragic death, as well as Ledger's realization that Kenna has never been their enemy, but rather a victim who has endured as much pain as Scotty's relatives. In addition, the story mirrors the importance of self-forgiveness and the rejection of binary moral categorizations in achieving healing and recovery. Kenna's transformed relationship with music and her integration into Scotty's family circle further emphasize her progress and the redemption that she has reached. Finally, the naming of her newborn son after Scotty symbolizes her ability to honor her past while embracing her present, embodying the essence of acceptance in grief theory as described by Kübler-Ross and Kessler. Ultimately, *Reminders of him* (2022) firmly establishes itself within the frame of contemporary American grief literature in general, and the acceptance stage in particular, through its analysis of themes such as forgiveness, redemption, and personal growth.

Scriptotherapy as a medium for emotional healing in Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022)

The present section aims at analyzing the role of scriptotherapy – defined by Henke (1998) as the therapeutic use of writing – as a central element in Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022). It explores how the female protagonist, Kenna Rowan, uses this method as a way to work through her personal trauma and embark on a journey toward emotional recovery and self-discovery. By examining Kenna's use of writing as a therapeutic tool, the analysis aims at shedding light on the power of self-expression through the written word, as made evident in Henke's *Shattered subjects: Trauma and testimony in women's life-writing* (1998). This chapter also investigates how Hoover portrays this process within the narrative, potentially clarifying the applications of scriptotherapy in both literature and real-world therapeutic contexts. The focus of this chapter further seeks at uncovering the way writing facilitates the main character's healing process, potentially revealing broader themes about resilience, self-reflection, and the cathartic nature of creative expression:

The term *narrative recovery*, now fairly current in the field of narratology, pivots on a double entendre meant to evoke both the recovery of past experience through narrative articulation and the psychological reintegration of a traumatically shattered subject. What the following study tries to illustrate is that much of the impetus behind women's life-writing in this century has been connected by emotional webs and filaments to a wide range of traumatic episodes; that many of these experiences have had a profound impact on the construction of female subjectivity; and that a number of women authors have instinctively turned to modes of autobiographical expression to implement the kind of healing made possible through the public inscription of personal testimony. (Henke, 1998, xxii)

The efficacy of scriptotherapy as a healing mechanism is crucially exemplified through Kenna's consistent engagement with writing throughout the narrative. Her dedication to this therapeutic practice is openly illustrated as she declared: "I pull out my notebook and my pen. I don't know that I'll ever do anything with the letters I write to Scotty, but they're cathartic" (p. 167). This statement captures the core idea of scriptotherapy, described by Henke as a way to release intense emotions, regardless of whether anyone else will read one's written accounts. Indeed, the protagonist's letters to her departed partner serve as a metaphorical vessel, containing and giving form to the tumultuous sea of her grief and unresolved emotions.

More importantly, the therapeutic value of these letters is amplified by the fact that Scotty is no longer alive and can; hence, never read them. This irrefutable fact transforms the purpose of her writing from communication to pure self-expression and emotional processing. Accordingly, the letters become a safe space for Kenna to voice her deepest thoughts, regrets and hopes without fear of judgment. In this context, Scotty becomes less of a recipient and more of a symbolic figure – an evident representation of Kenna’s past, her loss, and the emotions she needs to work through. The act of addressing her words to him, despite his inability to read them, enables Kenna to maintain a connection to her past while simultaneously moving forward in her healing journey. This process strongly resonates with Henke’s conceptualization of scriptotherapy since she views writing as a medium for processing trauma and reconstituting the self in its aftermath. The theorist elucidated this concept, saying: “Through the artistic replication of a coherent subject-position, the life-writing project generates a healing narrative that temporarily restores the fragmented self to an empowered position of psychological agency” (1998, p. xvi). In other words, the heroine’s letters become a bridge between her traumatic past and her healing present, allowing her to reassemble her fractured sense of self. By regularly engaging in this one-sided correspondence, Kenna gradually begins to sort through her devastating emotions surrounding her loss, her guilt, and her desire for redemption. Each letter she writes represents; in fact, a step ahead in her journey toward accepting her loss and forgiving herself, illustrating the power of epistolary catharsis in facilitating emotional growth even in the absence of external validation. Through her steadfast commitment to this practice, Kenna unknowingly engages in a journey of self-discovery and emotional healing, effectively demonstrating the therapeutic power of the written word in surmounting loss and achieving recovery. Ultimately, Kenna’s letters to Scotty mirror her inner world and reflect her own emotional evolution and progress. Though nominally addressed to him, these writings primarily function as a medium through which Kenna confronts her past, processes her trauma, and progressively attains emotional restoration.

If you [Scotty] could see the pages I’m writing this letter on, you’d see the tearstains. Crying seems to be the only thing left in life that I’m good at. Crying and making bad decisions. And, of course, I’m good at writing you bad poetry. I’ll leave you with one I wrote on the bus ride back to this town. I have a daughter I have never held. She has a scent I have never smelled. She has a name I have never yelled. She has a mother who has already failed. (Hoover, 2022, p. 46)

In the fragment above, the description of teardrops on the letter creates a palpable representation of Kenna's grief, effectively bridging the gap between her internal emotional state and its physical manifestation. Yet, amidst her perceived failures, she finds comfort in the act of writing poetry which she likely identifies as a unique skill she possesses. This acknowledgment indicates that even in her most difficult times, Kenna has discovered a personal mode of self-expression in which she can take pride. In an environment where she feels powerless in many aspects, her talent for crafting poetry; hence, stands as the one thing at which she genuinely considers herself adept when faced with the challenges of her circumstances, offering her a rare sense of mastery and control over her narrative and emotions. Indeed, the art of composing poetry, even what she sees as "bad poetry", serves as an essential release of her intense emotions. The poem itself, with its simple yet powerful structure, encapsulates the very essence of her loss and remorse. Each line emphasizes a sensory or emotional connection she has been denied with her daughter, culminating in a crushing self-judgment that lays bare the enormity of the emotional burden she carries. Through carefully chosen words and a rhythmic cadence, Kenna artistically captures her emotional experience, demonstrating her growing prowess as a writer despite her personal tribulations. Through writing, she not only expresses her pain, but also begins to process it; turning unprocessed emotions into structured verse. This creative practice, which entails writing being elevated as a sanctuary, enables her to externalize her internal conflicts, providing a degree of emotional detachment from her sorrowful feelings, which may eventually contribute to her psychological recovery.

The protagonist's desperate longing to see her daughter reverberates all along the narrative, revealing the depth of her despair and the injustice she perceives. This more likely foreshadows the emotional turmoil that she is on the verge of experiencing. "I have a daughter, and no one will let me see her," Kenna announced, "I also have a feeling my breakdown is going to last at least until morning" (pp. 86 – 87). It is within this context of profound anguish that Kenna turns to her writing. "I immediately grab my notebook and write a letter to Scotty because it's the only thing that can prevent me from crumbling," (p. 87) she declared. This statement brings attention to the immediate and imperative role of writing in Kenna's coping mechanisms. It covers the desperate urgency with which she turns to her pen as a crucial source of solace, striving to maintain emotional stability through it. This practice; hence, becomes a form of psychological refuge for her, providing a temporary respite from the overwhelming pain she

feels. In the long run, the act of writing becomes more than merely a cathartic release for Kenna, reaching the status of a crucial survival strategy through which she is able to maintain a semblance of control amidst the chaos of her emotions:

As such, when people integrate themselves in therapeutic writing, they start to have a new clear vision about themselves, their own personal environment and the world where they live and, thus, become more mature in the process. Subsequently, writing appears to endorse and hasten the progress of psychological development. (Osamnia & Djafri, 2020, p. 256)

In addition, Kenna's preservation of her letters, both in physical and digital formats, stresses their high significance in her life, as she maintained: "I have digital copies too. I typed them all up a couple of months ago and put them into Google Drive. I was afraid to lose them" (p. 217). "Letters that are written but have never been delivered to the addressee have been reported as powerfully therapeutic [... because] the survivor is free to write without fear or apprehension or feeling of disgrace and embarrassment" (Osamnia & Djafri, 2020, p. 245). In this case, letters are no longer an information exchange device, but a physical artifact of memorial conservation. At the beginning, the protagonist vehemently rejected the idea of reading one of her letters to Ledger since she thought that they were too private to share, saying: "Those letters are personal to me. This is the second time he's asked if I'd read one, and the answer is still no" (p. 217). Drawing upon these quotes from *Reminders of him* (2022), the intensely private nature of Kenna's letters becomes increasingly apparent as she fiercely guards them against external access. Her adamant refusal to share these intimate writings, even with Ledger, accentuates their primary function as a deeply personal healing tool, rather than a means of communication with others. This protective stance toward her epistolary compositions reveals the vulnerability they contain, suggesting that within their pages lie unfiltered emotions, painful confessions, and perhaps even hopes too fragile to voice aloud. The act of writing, for Kenna, thus goes beyond mere documentation; becoming a sacred ritual of self-reflection and emotional processing. Accordingly, each letter serves as a private space where she is able to confront her demons, deal with her guilt, and nurture her hopes without fear of judgment or misunderstanding. By keeping these expressive writings away from others, Kenna preserves the purity of this personal therapeutic process, ensuring that the cathartic benefits of her letters remain uncompromised by outside influences. This insistence on privacy further emphasizes the letters' vital role in her emotional balance and psychological survival. The sheer volume of her

output further exposes the cruciality of this practice in her life, as she confessed having written more than three hundred letters in total (p. 168). This staggering number not only reflects the depth of her emotional pain, but also highlights the consistency with which she turns to writing as a coping mechanism. In essence, her letters become silent confidants, bearing witness to Kenna's internal struggles and gradual healing, their value lying not in their potential to be read, but in the cathartic act of their creation and the emotional release they provide.

“You [Ledger] asking me to read you one of those letters would be like me asking you to play a tape of one of your therapy sessions,” (p. 217) argued Kenna. In light of this statement, the therapeutic value of Kenna's writing practice becomes clearly evident. This compelling analogy draws a direct parallel between the heroine's letter-writing and the confidential, healing environment of formal psychotherapy sessions. In doing so, her writing becomes firmly positioned within the scope of scriptotherapy, which transparently came to be recognized as a validated therapeutic method for Kenna who employs writing as a means to process pain and agony. Accordingly, she wholeheartedly acknowledges the profound psychological significance of her letters, framing them not merely as personal reflections, but as vital instruments in her healing journey. Just as therapy sessions are safeguarded by client-therapist confidentiality, Kenna's letters serve as a private dialogue with herself, allowing for raw, honest introspection that might otherwise remain unexpressed. This therapeutic writing process likely enables her to externalize her internal struggles, providing a sense of catharsis and clarity that might be difficult to achieve through other means. Convincingly, Kenna's letters become more than simple written correspondence, evolving into a useful self-administered form of disciplined psychological treatment that suitably plays a central role in her path toward emotional recovery and self-understanding.

Traumatic flashbacks make repeated intrusions into consciousness until their haunting reverberations take the form of an *idée fixe*. In order to break this torturous circuit of repetition, the victim must reenact the trauma in all its physical, sensory, psychological, and emotional detail. (Henke, 1998, p. xviii).

The therapeutic virtues of scriptotherapy are further emphasized through Kenna's excessive reliance on writing as a coping mechanism when she confessed: “I write all the time. I write poems, I write letters to Scotty, I write book ideas I don't know that I'll ever get around to fleshing out. Writing might actually be what saved me from myself” (p. 168). This admission

foregrounds the deep impact that the act of writing has had on Kenna's psychological well-being, echoing Henke's definition of scriptotherapy as a means of self-preservation and reconstruction following one's traumatic experiences. By engaging in various forms of writing – ranging from intimate personal letters to imaginative creative pieces – the narrator cultivates a varied approach to her own healing process. The diversity of her written expressions suggests that scriptotherapy can take many forms, each contributing to the overall therapeutic effect. More precisely, the regularity and variety of her writing habits also advocate that scriptotherapy has become an integral part of her daily existence, facilitating a continuous process of introspection and emotional processing. Her assertion that writing has been her salvation highlights the paramount role of this practice in her life. It directly reveals that the act of putting pen to paper is a vital lifeline for Kenna, potentially preventing her from succumbing to self-destructive thoughts and behaviors. This metaphor – which entails writing as a remedy and as a rescue mechanism – epitomizes how this practice is essential in confronting trauma, nurturing resilience, and eventually paving the way for emotional healing and self-discovery. In essence, Kenna's relationship with writing becomes a model of her overall recovery process, with each word penned representing progress in reclaiming her shattered identity and forging a path toward psychological rehabilitation.

What cannot be uttered might at least be written—cloaked in the mask of fiction [...] Testimonial life-writing allows the author to share an unutterable tale of pain and suffering, of transgression or victimization, in a discursive medium that can be addressed to everyone or no-one [...] No matter. It is through the very process of rehearsing and reenacting a drama of mental survival that the trauma narrative effects psychological catharsis. (Henke, 1998, p. xix)

The female leading character's healing journey facilitated by scriptotherapy is further exemplified in her evolving relationship with her writing practice. This shift is verily captured in one of her letters to Scotty in which she wrote: "I'm sorry I hardly write to you anymore. I used to write to you because I was lonely, so I guess it's a good thing the letters are few and far between now" (p. 319). This comment exposes the use of writing as a useful therapeutic practice through which the healing process naturally adjusts as Kenna gets better. Initially, her frequent letters to Scotty served as a lifeline, a means to combat overwhelming loneliness and process her trauma. As such, her persistent urge to write to him was a manifestation of her emotional distress and need for relief. However, as her healing journey advances, the diminishing

frequency of these letters becomes a testament to her improving mental health and growing emotional resilience. Indeed, the decreasing need for Kenna to write constantly as she used to do suggests that she is gradually reintegrating her fragmented self, finding alternative ways to manage her emotions, and forming meaningful connections in her present life. Therefore, the act of writing less frequently to her late boyfriend indicates a remarkable progress in her psychological recovery. It demonstrates that scriptotherapy has fulfilled its primary purpose, that of helping Kenna overcome her phase of sorrow and isolation while regaining control of her life. By becoming less reliant on her letters for emotional support, she inadvertently displays the success of scriptotherapy in facilitating her overall emotional growth.

It is worth mentioning that apart from the emotional catharsis that Kenna finds in writing letters to her departed partner, this practice also plays an important role in *Reminders of him* (2022) regarding the plot's denouement. Indeed, the power of the heroine's written words extends far beyond her personal healing, ultimately being the catalyst for resolution and forgiveness in the novel's central conflicts. A prime example of this can be seen in Ledger's ability to easily forgive Kenna, an important moment in the narrative, which is directly triggered by only one letter she wrote detailing the night of the accident. Upon hearing her read this deeply personal account aloud, his perception of her undergoes a radical transformation. The words she speaks strip away his preconceptions, and he no longer sees a criminal before him. Instead, he recognizes a victim – a fellow human who has endured unspeakable painful episodes, just as everyone else did. In this concern, he confessed to the Landrys:

She writes letters to him. To Scotty. She's been doing it for five years. This is the only one I've read, but it was enough to change my entire opinion of her. [...] I forgave Kenna before I even knew the contents of the letter. But the second she read this out loud to me, I realized she's been hurting just as much as all of us have. And we're slowly killing her by continuing to drag out her pain. [...] We are keeping a mother from her child. That's not okay. Scotty would be so mad at us. (pp. 293 – 294)

The fact that Kenna has been writing letters to Scotty for five years highlights the consistency of her emotional processing through the act of putting pen to paper. Ledger's recognition that a single letter she wrote was sufficient to utterly reshape his perception of her highly emphasizes the potency of her written expressions in conveying the authenticity of her character and the depth of her regrets. Interestingly, he acknowledges that his forgiveness of

Kenna preceded his knowledge of the letter's content, suggesting that the mere act of writing letters was enough to initiate the process of pardon. Reading the letter has; at a larger distance, proved him of Kenna's genuine remorse and her desire for redemption. This primarily points out to the potential of scriptotherapy not only as a personal healing tool, but also as a means of communicating one's feelings to others, ultimately leading to a better understanding of situations where barriers once stood. Ledger's realization that Kenna has been suffering just as much as everyone else further marks a crucial shift in his perspective. Indeed, it humanizes Kenna in the eyes of those who had previously vilified and dehumanized her, fostering compassion and understanding. This empathy extends to a recognition of the collective responsibility in prolonging the protagonist's suffering, suggesting that the impact of her letters goes beyond individual healing to challenge moral standings and ethical considerations. The concluding observation about the cruelty of keeping a mother from her child and speculating on Scotty's probable reaction to such a monstrous act overtly indicates the way Kenna's letters have not only facilitated personal forgiveness, but have also given rise to a re-evaluation of justice and mercy, paving the way for the restoration of family bonds.

The heroine's epistolary productions have also impacted other key characters in *Reminders of him* (2022), most notably, Grace Landry, who did not hesitate to forgive her after reading one of the many letters she had addressed to Scotty. This remarkably highlights the critical role of Kenna's letters in the resolution of one of the story's core conflicts, guiding the characters toward emotional healing and reconciliation. Motivated by his own forgiveness of Kenna, Ledger takes the initiative to share her letter detailing the night of the accident with the Landrys, hoping to inspire in them the same compassion he has discovered. This idea is relevantly shown when Scotty's mother admitted to Kenna: "I promised Ledger I wouldn't tell you this, but . . . he gave us one of the letters you wrote to Scotty. [...] He made me read it last night" (p. 300). This has later led to the climactic scene where Grace forgives Kenna, a moment that represents the culmination of Kenna's arduous journey toward redemption and acceptance. The power of this forgiveness is palpable in Kenna's description of their interaction:

Grace reaches toward a strand of hair that's fallen loose from my ponytail, and she brushes it gently behind my ear. It's something a mother would do, and I don't understand it. I don't know how she can go from hating me to forgiving me in such a short amount of time, so I continue to be wary of this moment. But the tears in her eyes feel like the truth. [...] and then she hugs me when I fall apart. She runs a soothing hand over the back of my head and allows me several minutes to absorb everything that's happening. This is everything I've ever wanted, and it's coming at me all at once. It's both physically and emotionally overwhelming. [...] *Please let this be real.* (pp. 300 – 301)

Thanks to a single letter among hundreds she has written, Kenna became, in the eyes of those around her, a sympathetic figure worthy of compassion and understanding. Significantly, this redemptive moment is particularly meaningful for her, given her troubled history with her own biological mother who has deprived her of love, care and maternal presence. As such, Grace's maternal gestures symbolize a shift from condemnation to empathy in regard to Kenna whose initial caution and subsequent emotional release foreground the magnitude of this moment, emphasizing how unexpected this forgiveness is for her. Contrary to Grace's previous hostility, her present caring and nurturing manners illustrate the positive impact that a simple written composition can have in strengthening human connections. Through the power of her epistolary work, she has been able to forge an unexpected bond with Scotty's mother, finding in her a source of maternal care and affection. This relationship that blossoms between Kenna and Grace represents the emotional climax of the novel, reinforcing the healing potential of written expression. In point of fact, Kenna's letters, previously a private form of therapy, become the means through which she is able to communicate her pain, remorse and humanity to those who had formerly judged her. The fact that Grace's forgiveness comes so swiftly after reading the letter attests to the authenticity of Kenna's written words and the usefulness of expressive writing in bringing about positive change. Following this, Grace finally allows her to reunite with her daughter, leading to the real denouement of the story. Such resolution, precipitated by a single letter, not only resolves the central conflict in the narrative, but also provides a satisfying emotional closure to the protagonist's long journey toward redemption and her desire to reconnect with her child. Ultimately, *Reminders of him* (2022) ties together the themes of acceptance and the power of written words, eventually capturing their significance in the overall narrative arc.

To sum it all up, it can be deduced that Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022) vigorously attests to the potential of scriptotherapy as a creative means for the female protagonist to prevail over emotional wounds. Her unwavering commitment to the act of letter-writing, addressed to her late partner, shows how the therapeutic process of expressive writing can facilitate emotional catharsis, foster self-discovery, and ultimately pave the way for mental healing and redemption. More precisely, the letters Kenna writes act as both a private sanctuary where she can face her fears and a powerful tool capable of repairing damaged relationships and inspiring empathy in those around her. By sharing her genuine written thoughts, she manages to challenge preconceived notions, promote understanding, and eventually secure the forgiveness and reunification she has so desperately craved for so long. In doing so, Hoover's narrative underlines the virtues of scriptotherapy at the level of individual restoration and communal reconciliation. *Reminders of him* (2022) hence provides a compelling demonstration of the unique potential of self-expression, highlighting how it can become a vital medium for overcoming grief and trauma, ultimately offering grieving individuals a guiding light toward healing and renewal. Drawing on the works of both Herman in *Trauma and recovery* (1992) and Haaken in "The recovery of memory, fantasy, and desire: Feminist approaches to sexual abuse and psychic trauma" (1996), Henke (1998) has ultimately claimed that:

The object of psychoanalysis—and of autobiography as scriptotherapy—is to “reassemble an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context” out of “fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation” (Herman *Trauma* 177). A great deal of evidence now suggests that the formulation of narrative cohesion can reconfigure the individual's obsessive mental processing of embedded traumatic scripts. “With this transformation of memory,” Herman tells us, “comes relief of many of the major symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. [...] In the very act of articulation, the trauma story becomes a testimony, a publicly accessible “ritual of healing” (181) that inscribes the victim into a sympathetic discourse-community and inaugurates the possibility of psychological reintegration. The trauma story, notes Janice Haaken, “anoints the survivor with a heroic status—as the bearer of unspeakable truths” (1083). (p. xviii)

IV. General Conclusion

This Master's dissertation entitled "Traumatic Loss, Grief Theory, and the Use of Scriptotherapy as a Medium for Emotional Healing in Colleen Hoover's *Reminders of Him* (2022)" has attempted to explore the extent to which loss, mourning, and the healing potential of written expression have been present in this American literary work. In order to accomplish this, I have relied on two major theoretical frameworks, including the five stages of grief theory as put forward by Kübler-Ross and Kessler in their *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss* (2005), as well as Henke's concept of scriptotherapy as presented in her book, *Shattered subjects: Trauma and testimony in women's life writing* (1998). This research study has yielded significant findings in relation to how humans universally cope with loss and bereavement. It has particularly emphasized the way personal expression, as exemplified in *Reminders of him* (2022), contributes to the journey toward healing and recovery in the aftermath of traumatic events. In conducting this research, I have reached the conclusion that scriptotherapy, as a central element of this analysis, stands out as an exceptionally effective method among diverse strategies for managing grief and processing trauma. Although conventional therapeutic techniques provide important assistance, the practice of articulating one's experiences through expressive and retrospective writing offers a distinct and remarkably powerful tool for psychological healing.

My analysis started by pointing out the originality of applying the abovementioned theoretical frameworks on Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022) given its status as a recently published work of American fiction. I have later proceeded to examine how such theories were applied on the narrative. To do so, I have first examined the extent to which Kübler-Ross and Kessler's five stages of grief theory manifest in the novel, tracing the protagonist's grieving journey through each stage—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The study has revealed the critical importance of effective coping strategies in one's quest for healing and recovery. Subsequently, I went on to explore Henke's concept of scriptotherapy within the novel, focusing on Kenna's letter-writing as a means of processing loss and trauma. Analyzing her letters to her deceased partner has openly exposed how this highly therapeutic practice facilitates emotional healing by allowing the grieving woman to externalize her feelings of grief and guilt. These retrospective letters later prove crucial, being the key component to the

resolution of the novel's central conflicts, ultimately leading to Kenna's self-forgiveness, acceptance and reconciliation. Therefore, the narrative arc in *Reminders of him* (2022) calls attention to scriptotherapy as a paramount medium for emotional catharsis, enabling Kenna to confront her guilt, reflect on her past, and eventually reconstruct her identity through a painful, yet redemptive process.

It is obvious that this dissertation combines literary analysis with psychological theories of trauma and grief, providing a multidisciplinary perspective on the novel's thematic and stylistic concerns. By scrutinizing the divergence of literature, psychology, and therapeutic approaches, the analysis centers on the idea of writing as a powerful remedy, one that is often seen as an overlooked approach in confronting and overcoming emotional and psychological wounds. While this study contributed to the growing body of research on scriptotherapy and its applications in both literary studies and therapeutic practices, it is essential to acknowledge that it only focused on literary criticism of one single novel; thus offering a fertile ground for future research studies. Potential avenues for further investigation could include comparative analyses of scriptotherapy in other contemporary literary works across different cultures, elucidating its universal applicability and cultural nuances in literature. For example, comparing Hoover's *Reminders of him* (2022) to trauma narratives from non-Western authors could reveal diverse approaches to healing through writing. Future studies could explore the long-term effects of scriptotherapy on individuals who have experienced traumatic loss in real-life cases which more likely mirror Kenna's fictional journey through grief and healing in the novel. Lastly, interdisciplinary research combining neuroscience and literary studies could investigate the neurological impacts of writing as a healing practice, potentially offering empirical support for the therapeutic benefits observed in fictional narratives in general.

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