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Family Tension and Grief: A Psychological Reading of David Lindsay - Abaire's Rabbit Hole

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A B S T R A C T

Grief impacts people in different ways resulting in possibilities for health or depression. Lindsay-Abaire's Rabbit Hole discuss the issue of grief for a lost child. the impact of losing a family member ,especially a child, vary from one character to another. The characters struggle to let go of their feelings of mourning and attempt to find ways for emotional recovery. The psychological analysis offers an important theoretical ground to discuss the ramifications of grief on the individual and the family. This paper analyzes the impact of grief on family ties and discusses the possibility of healing after losing a loved one.

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التوتر الأسري والحزن: قراءة نفسية في مسرحية لدايفيد ليندسي–أبير

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الملخص:

يُحدِث الحزن تأثيرات متفاوتة على الأفراد، مما قد يقود إمّا إلى التعافي والصحة أو إلى الاكتئاب. وتتناول مسرحية لدايفيد ليندسي– أبير مسألة الحزن على فقدان طفل. إن تأثير فقدان أحد أفراد الأسرة، وخاصة الطفل، يختلف من شخصية إلى أخرى. تكافح الشخصيات للتخلّص من مشاعر الحداد، وتحاول إيجاد طرق للتعافي العاطفي. ويقدّم التحليل النفسي أساسًا نظريًا مهمًا لمناقشة تداعيات الحزن على الفرد والأسرة. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى تحليل أثر الحزن في الروابط الأسرية، ومناقشة إمكانية الشفاء بعد فقدان شخص عزيز.

1.1. Introduction

Grief is a universal reaction to the loss of a loved one. It is understood to be a transitory process, rather than a permanent one. While most people adjust within a year to the loss, some experience prolonged grief disorder which arises when the person fails to heal the grief. Acute grief is often marked by sadness, crying, and sleep disturbances, but usually requires no treatment. However, the grief can develop into prolonged grief disorder involves enduring emotional pain and difficulty in adapting to the loss. A lot of grieving individuals struggle in recovering from the loss of a loved one which put them in danger of prolonged grief (Azhar, Mughal, & Rout, 2023).

Grief refers to the emotional response to loss, which is most often associated with death but may also occur in other forms, such as receiving a terminal diagnosis that brings anticipatory loss. Reconstructing identity after such a loss depends largely on society since one's new sense of self is shaped in relation to other people's help. Adapting to loss requires integrating it into a different perspective. The change of perspective enables survival and leads to growth.

The ability to mourn represents a significant stage in personality development, while the inability to do so can disturb the formation of a close relationship. Grief is a painful process that people often attempt to deny. The earliest systematic ideas about loss were shaped by Freud's psychoanalytic theory. While grief can contribute to pathology and illness, it may also fuel creativity.

Grief can be categorized as uncomplicated or complicated. In uncomplicated cases, people may seek help from religious leaders, healers, or counselors, whereas complicated grief often requires psychiatric or medical treatment. Health professionals themselves are vulnerable to what is termed "occupational grief," particularly those working in oncology, hospice care, neonatal pediatrics, psychiatry, and social work, where repeated exposure to loss is common (Devan, 1993, p. 445).

Grief is usually linked to death and existential suffering. There are five dimensions of grief: physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual. Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* laid the groundwork for systematic grief research, even though his main focus was melancholia. By the late twentieth century, the field had advanced with theories such as Continuing Bonds and the Dual-Process Model (DPM), which marked a paradigm shift in how grief and grief interventions were understood (Gulden &Leget, 2023).

The effect of a death can differ greatly, depending on the relationship and the kind of experienced loss. Nature of relationship plays a key role, whether it is physical, emotional, or both. Spousal bereavement is one case where physical and emotional closeness combine. When two people share a home and a deep attachment, the loss can be very serious, especially if the surviving partner depended on the other. The daily absence of someone who was once always present leaves a major gap in everyday routine (Lioyd, 2017, p. 27).

Rabbit Hole is considered one of Lindsay-Abaire's important works. The play was nominated for five Tony Awards, including Best Play, and went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. It also received the Spirit of America Award and was later adapted into a film of the same name, which earned an Academy Award nomination. *Rabbit hole* represent the concept of grief and how it can pose a threat to personal and emotional relationships, especially among family members. Their grief is caused by a child death. Death of loved ones creates a disturbance that may lead to grief and cause a major shock to the family of the deceased person. (Gelcher, 1986, p. 318).

1.2. Literature review

Rabbit Hole has been studied from different perspectives at the hands of academians and critics. One of the studies that focused on this play is "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in David Lindsay-Abaire's *Rabbit Hole*: A Psychoanalytic Study*"* (2023) by Mark Binyamin Sobhi. This study applies psychoanalytic theory and Glenn R. Schiraldi's ideas on PTSD to *Rabbit Hole*. It explores how the play's characters, particularly Becca, exhibit symptoms of trauma after the death of her son. The analysis connects Freud, Jung, and Lacan's ideas to modern trauma theory, highlighting how grief manifests through defense mechanisms and coping strategies.

Also, there is "Coming to Terms with a Tragedy: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Lindsay-Abaire's *Rabbit Hole* and Harling's Steel Magnolias" (2022) by Rasha Farouk Hamza. This paper studies how characters process grief and trauma using psychoanalysis and PTSD theory. It compares Becca's and Howie's coping strategies to those in *Steel Magnolias*, showing how different individuals confront loss. The research emphasizes that grief responses vary from denial to gradual acceptance, and that literature provides a space to observe these psychological processes.

Lujain Alharbi, Rawdhah Alnafie, and Amani Alghamdi (2025) study the play in their article "Defying the Traditional Stages of Trauma Healing in David Lindsay-Abaire's *Rabbit Hole* and David Auburn's Proof: A Deconstructive Analysis." This study challenges the conventional model of linear recovery from trauma. Through a deconstructive reading, it shows that Becca's grief does not follow neat stages but exists in tension with healing, isolation, and reconnection. The paper highlights how grief is fluid, unstable, and intertwined

with both vulnerability and resilience, offering a complex view of mourning beyond traditional psychology.

Finally, there is "Becca's Survival Attempt After the Death of Her Beloved Son in David Lindsay-Abaire's *Rabbit Hole*: A New Criticism Study" (2015) by Lutfita Maudy Prastikasari. This research focuses on Becca's character and her struggle to survive emotionally after her son's death. Using a New Criticism approach, the paper analyzes how characterization, plot, and symbolism express her attempts to regain stability. The study shows how grief reshapes identity and underlines the human effort to find meaning after tragedy.

Thus, previous studies have tended to focus on Becca's character and her coping mechanism. The current study aims to develop the result of these studies and incorporate them in order to come up with a new insight on the impat of grief on family relationships.

1.3. Grief and Tension in *Rabbit Hole*

Rabbit Hole is a play about traumatized family. The play centers on Becca and Howie, whose four-year-old son Danny dies eight months before the opening scene. Danny runs into the street after their dog when Howie forgets to close the door while Becca is on the phone with her sister Izzy. The accident leaves every family member feeling a burden of guilt. Lindsay-Abaire shows a family that carries the difficulty of loosening the grip of a trauma. Despite their differences, misunderstandings, and conflicts, the family cannot finds ways to reconnect.

Lindsay-Abaire's title deliberately recalls Alice's fall into the rabbit hole. She descends into the unknown madness, or a separate world from which she wants to escape. The parallel is clear between that imagined descent and the strange, disorienting emotions of early grief that Becca feels in the play. Becca suffered deep loss while the world continues to move on. The question becomes how, or even if, one can return to "normal." This is the struggle that Becca, along with the other characters, must confront in the play. The play asks whether there can be a right or wrong way to grieve. After losing a child, the coping strategies of the family diverge, creating tension between them.

Domestic plays have long been favorites of American audiences. Reports of rising violence, domestic tensions, and abuse have made representations of family life even more relevant. As Briganti and Mezei (2012) notes, "the house and home are frequently perceived as symbols of the self, the psyche, and the body" (p. 8). Therefore, examining the home space can reveal the nature of relationship among its residents (Gul, 2023, p. 44).

Becca was once a happy mother, a loyal friend, a supportive wife, a caring sister, and a religious woman. After Danny's death, her personality changes drastically. She becomes depressed, judgmental, and turns away from religion altogether. This transformation shows how grief can impact a mother. Becca's grief and bitterness affect her relationships with those close to her: her husband Howie, her sister Izzy, her mother Nat, and her old friend Debbie.

The novel starts with a conversation between Izzy and Becca over a fight that Izzy had with a woman at the bar. Their talk gradually changes to hint at Danny's death. Izzy

blames herself for keeping Becca occupied on the phone while Danny was running behind the dog. When Izzy admits she is still coping with Danny's death, Becca responds cruelly: "You're not allowed to use him to justify your own shit" (p. 14). Becca uses sharp language and throws accusations towards everyone as a way to mitigate her pain. It turns out that her relationship has been destroyed even with her own mother and best friend Debbie.

During Izzy's birthday gathering, Becca's mother, Nat, recounts the story of Aristotle Onassis, who believed his son's death was an assassination rather than an accident. He even went as far as putting an award to the one that can prove that his son was murdered. Nat's story suggests that denial of accidental loss is destructive, yet Becca interprets it as a criticism of her own grief. She attacks her mother saying that: "You never just talk. It sounds like you're just talking but it's always so much more, isn't it" (p. 68).

The tension escalates when Nat compares Danny's death to that of her own son Arthur. Becca is a grieving mother and she believes that her pain, like her son, is unique to her alone. She does not want anyone to show a sign of comparison with her child or with her loss: "You know what I wish?! I wish you would stop comparing Danny to Arthur! Danny was a four-year-old boy who chased his dog into the street! Arthur was a thirty-year-old heroin addict who hung himself" (p. 75). Her bursting words and tears shocks her family, especially Nat, as Becca shows no regard for her mother's grief over her own son.

Research on grief as a trauma shows its severe psychological and physical consequences. Stroebe, et al. (2005) found that grieving individuals, particularly those suffering from extreme loneliness and depressive symptoms, face a great risk of suicidal ideation. Similarly, Li, et al. (2005) state that bereaved parents, especially mothers, were more likely to experience a psychiatric hospitalization than non-bereaved parents. This high risk for mothers remained present for more than five years following the child's death. In Becca's case, the sudden loss of her child transforms her into someone who is angry, bitter, and unable to reconcile with her faith:

> **Nat**: I don't know why you don't believe in God anyway. Ibrought you to church every Sunday. You used to believe in God.
>
> **Becca**: Well I don't anymore (Lindsay-Abaire, 2012, p. 74)

Debbie was a close friend to Becca. Yet, she vanishes from Becca's life after Danny's death. She never calls or visits, which Becca perceives as deliberate abandonment. Howie excuses Debbie's absence by saying that "obviously if she hasn't called you it's because she doesn't know what to say" (p. 35). Becca, however, rejects this explanation, insisting: "I would've been there for her if God forbid something had ever happened to Robbie or Em. I wouldn't have vanished the way she did" (p. 35). This exchange shows Becca's bitterness and sensitivity to abandonment. Her child's death is the severest form of abandonment that a mother can experience.

One of the most intense conflicts between Becca and Howie centers on the video tape. The tape contained touching home videos of Danny's childhood, and Howie cherished it deeply. Watching it every night before bed gave him comfort. The tape held happy memories of his son. However, one evening, when he put the tape into the player, he was shocked to discover that it had been erased. Someone has recorded over it. It turned out that Becca was

the one who had taped over it. She explained that she had thought the tape inside the player was *Pride and Prejudice*, not Danny's tape. She did not realize that Howie had switched the tapes last night. Despite her explanation, the mistake gave Howie an opportunity to release his frustration about Becca's continuing grief and treatment of Danny's belongings. He accused her of deliberately erasing the video, interpreting her action as part of a larger pattern of behavior: "You're trying to get rid of him. I'm sorry, but that's how it feels to me sometimes. Every day, it's something else. It feels like you're trying to get rid of any evidence he was ever here" (p. 83).

Howie's accusation reflects his fear that Becca is trying to erase Danny from their lives. From the very beginning of the play, Becca has attempted to give away reminders of her son. She planned to donate Danny's clothes to charity, removed his paintings from the refrigerator, boxed up his photographs, and even sent their dog Taz to her mother's house because it reminded her of the accident. To Howie, all these actions suggest a desire to move on by erasing traces of Danny's existence.

Every grieving person undergoes a process of denial as part of healing, followed by restoration–oriented process that aims adapting to new life after the loss. his incident captures the deep divide in their grieving process. This process aims at creating a new type of life style, activities, and solving challenges that came with the loss of the person (Douglas, Smith, & Ciupak, 2015, p. 91). Howie finds solace in preserving Danny's memory through objects, routines, and rituals, while Becca tries to cope by removing reminders that intensify her pain. Their opposing strategies clash and turn their home space into an emotionally charged one: "It's not just the tape! I'm not talking about the tape, Becca! It's Taz, and the paintings, and the clothes, and it's everything ! You have to stop erasing him! You have to stop it! You HAVE TO STOP!" (p. 86). Eventually, Becca comes to an important realization: she can never erase Danny's memory, nor does she want to. In one of the most powerful moments of the play, she responds to Howie's accusation:

> Do you really not know me, Howie? Do you really not know how utterly impossible that would be? To erase him? […] I'm trying to make things a little easier on myself by hiding some of the photos, and giving away the clothes, but that does not mean I'm trying to erase him. (Lindsay-Abaire, 2012, p. 86)

Thus, Danny's memory is permanently engraved in Becca's mind, no matter what steps she takes to ease her pain. Her attempts to put away reminders are not about forgetting her son, but about finding a way to deal with her grief.

Becca's trauma, however, also leads to tense encounters outside her marriage. In one supermarket scene, she notices a boy crying hysterically because his mother refuses to buy him sweets. Becca intervenes, telling the mother not to disappoint her child and to appreciate what she has. The woman angrily tells Becca to mind her own business, and Becca, overwhelmed with anger, slaps her in the face. This loss of control reveals that she has a trouble controlling her emotions and physical responses. Her failure to cope with Danny's loss make her disturbed and socially anxious.

Her strained relationships also extend to her sister Izzy. When Becca learns that Izzy is pregnant, instead of supporting her, she reacts with hostility. She accuses Izzy of being irresponsible and even questions whether she should keep the baby or give it up for adoption. Becca's bitterness toward Izzy's pregnancy reflects her inability to process the unfairness of losing her own child while others continue to have children.

The video tape incident escalates into one of the most heated fights between Becca and Howie. Although Howie accuses her of deliberately destroying Danny's memory, Becca admits that erasing him is impossible. She clarifies that her attempts to donate his belongings or hide his photos are not about forgetting Danny but about managing her grief. In the end, Becca acknowledges that nothing she does will make Danny's absence less painful, and no action will ever erase his presence from her heart.

HOWIE: Your wanting to sell the house.

BECCA: We already talked about it.

HOWIE: Taz. Sending Taz to your mother […] he was a reminder.

BECCA: Yes, he was a reminder. So what? I wanted one less reminder around here. That's perfectly normal. Oh for godsakes. (Lindsay-Abaire, 2012, p. 47)

One of the most important turning points in *Rabbit Hole* comes through Becca's evolving relationship with her mother, Nat. Earlier in the play, Becca reacts angrily when Nat compares Danny's death to the loss of her own son Arthur. But later, Becca's attitude begins to change. When Becca and Nat are sorting through Danny's belongings, Nat once again mentions Arthur, then quickly regrets doing so, fearing it will upset Becca. Instead, Becca surprises her mother by accepting the reference: she admits that Arthur was her brother, and she even seeks to learn from Nat's experience. This shift shows Becca beginning to move toward healing. She asks Nat directly:

BECCA: This feeling, does it ever go away?
NAT: No, I don't think it does. Not for me it hasn't. And that's going on eleven years. It changes though.
BECCA: How?
NAT: I do not know. The weight of it, I guess. At some point it becomes bearable. (Lindsay-Abaire, 2012, p. 129)

They talk about the one thing that they have in common at the moment, grief. Becca learns that grief may never disappear completely, but it can become bearable over time. Becca realizes that her mother's way of accepting tragedy is the only way forward. Acceptance, rather than denial or avoidance, is the first step toward surviving trauma.

Other characters in the play embody different coping strategies. Izzy, Becca's sister, was very close to Danny and shared many playful moments with him. His sudden accidental death is also traumatic for her, yet she responds by embracing life. She enters a new relationship, becomes pregnant, and chooses to celebrates the baby telling everyone that she is eager to fully experience motherhood. Although Becca sometimes doubts whether Izzy is truly grieving, Izzy insists that she is still coping with Danny's loss in her own way:

> IZZY: I wasn't using him as an excuse. I was just saying that it's been hard to pull it together, that's all. For all of us.
> BECCA: Don't do that.
> IZZY: Hey, I'm still coping too, Becca. I know it's not the same, but it is still hard. Okay? (Lindsay-Abaire, 2012, p. 13).

Towards the end of the novel, Becca begins to accept her son's fate, especially when she reconnects with the person that drove the car that hit him. Jason, the seventeen-year-old boy who accidentally hit Danny, represents yet another perspective on trauma. He appears to be haunted by guilt and regret. He struggles with the knowledge that his actions led to Danny's death.

Jason, the one who accidentally killed Danny, goes to Becca's house to apologize. They talk about many things including fiction. When Becca brings up rabbit hole fiction, they discuss the idea of an infinite space with endless possibilities and different versions of people living other lives. This thought gives Becca comfort. She imagines another version of herself living happily, and this motivates her to recover from her trauma and rebuild her relationships with her sister, mother, and husband.

Becca learns from Jason's method of coping and decides to embrace her family and her pain. Jason copes by channeling his feelings into creative activities, especially writing. He contributes fictional stories to his school magazine and dedicates one of them to Danny. In this story, he imagines a rabbit hole that can transport people to a world of happiness, free from pain and loss. His writing symbolizes an attempt to create redemption through imagination.

> JASON: Yeah, because infinite space means...it means it goes on and on forever, so there's a never-ending stream of possibilities"(Lindsay-Abaire, 2012, p. 143).

The title of the play refers to Jason's story. Only at the end is the title explained through Jason's narration of his fictional writing. The concept of rabbit hole is taken from Lewis Carroll's classic novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). In the novel, Alice follows a white rabbit into a hole in the ground, which leads her into an unfamiliar world filled with strange characters and unexpected experiences. The rabbit hole symbolizes being lost in undiscovered territory. Lindsay-Abaire draws on this symbolism in *Rabbit Hole*, connecting it to Becca's journey through grief. Her conversation about the possibility of another version of herself, one living a happier life, starts a turning point in her perspective. Rather than remaining trapped in despair, Becca chooses to cope with her loss by attempting to reconnect with her family (Farouk, 2022, p. 334).

Generally, the tragedy Lindsay-Abaire presents lies not only in Danny's death but in the fact that it was both accidental and avoidable. Each character feels some degree of guilt, though they also know that their guilt carry no real weight. There is no single villain to blame; accidents happen and sometimes they are inevitable. There is nobody that can prevent dogs from chasing squirrels, children from chasing dogs, or drivers from being distracted while driving.

The story ends in scene four when Howie returns from work. There are no more arguments between Becca and Howie in their conversation. Becca even suggests reconsidering the house, saying that she no longer insists on selling it because she also loves it. By the end, Becca's character treats grief as a new found land that she can decide how to inhabit it or how to leave it.

Conclusion

The loss of a child create a deep impact on family. In the play, the grieving mother is shown as someone who struggles to hold herself together while trying, and failing, to reconnect with others. Her decision to give away Danny's clothes and belongings becomes her way of coping, as though forgetting could lessen the pain. Each character finds a different method of survival, but the play suggests that the only true path through grief is to accept the loss and not to escape it. Becca's final moment of peace happens when she learns to channel her pain into imagining a different happier version. She closes her long journey of grieving with a genuine desire to give herself the choice to accept his absence and move forward.

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