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Psychological Landscapes of Grief in Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd": A Kübler-Rossian Analysis

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Abstract: Walt Whitman's elegies, especially "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," offer an in-depth investigation of grief by integrating individual and collective grief in reaction to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. This study employs Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance to analyze the psychological complexity of Whitman's elegies. The research shows how Whitman expresses grief as a transformational journey by translating these stages onto the poem's compelling use of nature imagery. In Whitman's writing, grief is shown as both a national experience and an individual emotional struggle, bridging the gap between the personal and the universal. His journey from hopelessness to acceptance of death is a reflection of life's cycles and the never-ending healing process. Whitman's elegies have psychological resonance and are ageless in their treatment of the intricacies of mortality and loss when placed within the framework of the Kübler-Ross model. In the end, this analysis sheds light on Whitman's approach to grieving and shows how his elegies continue to provide comfort and understanding of the human grief process.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, Elegy, Kübler-Ross theory of grief, American poetry

Introduction: Walt Whitman's poetry, especially his elegiac pieces, holds a special position in American literature because it delves deeply into loss and sadness. Among these, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is a significant reaction to President Abraham Lincoln's murder, capturing both the individual's grief and the grief of the entire country. The elegy delves into universal themes of mortality, memory, and the cyclical nature of life and death, transcending its historical setting.

The elegies of Walt Whitman, written among others "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," reflect a state of mourning that is permanently set in an apposition of individual sorrow and national lament associated with the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. The theoretical basis of this involves an application of Kübler-Ross's model to the balance between the expressions of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance; yet

it might reveal the psychological depth of Whitman's elegies. Ways of mapping these stages to Whitman's deployment and employment of suggestive natural symbols in the poem offered the poet's way of defining mourning as a kind of transformation involved within. Working to reconcile the self and the state, Whitman's work depicts mourning as both internal emotional action and, through the very act of such mourning, a social experience grafted upon the fabric of nationhood itself. His retreat from nihilism into peace with death becomes a reflection of the cyclicality of life and a continuum toward healing. This fit of Whitman's elegies into the Kübler-Ross model adds a psychological connotation to Whitman's elegies that seems undying in their articulation of mourning. In essence, the exploration intends to unravel Whitman's ethos on grieving and how impactful or thought-provoking his elegies can be concerning perspective and consolation for the grieving process.

Author and Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (July 8, 1926 – August 24, 2004) is renowned for her groundbreaking contributions to our understanding of death and the dying process. Her model of the five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—offers a convincing framework for understanding the depths of psychological experience. Originally created to describe the emotional growth of patients facing death, Kübler-Ross's stages have since been extended to encompass the grieving process for other people.

In "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Whitman employs intricate metaphors that illustrate the stages of mourning, including the fallen star, the lilac bush, and the hermit thrush.

The lilac bush, with its heart-shaped leaves and perennial bloom, represents memory and the certainty of regeneration, while the fallen star, which stands for Lincoln, depicts the initial shock and denial of loss. The poet's internalized sadness is voiced by the hermit thrush, who sings from the far swamp, connecting the cathartic expression of sorrow with the seclusion of grieving. By fusing individual feeling with universal meaning, each sign represents a phase of the grief process.

This study reveals the psychological depth in Whitman's elegies by analyzing the connections between his poetic representations of loss and Kübler-Ross's stages. The study emphasizes how Whitman's poetry captures the nuanced emotional process of mourning by examining particular lines, symbols, and thematic developments. It also looks at how Whitman presents grief as a human experience that is both unique to each person and universal, bridging the gap between the personal and collective aspects of grief.

The study also highlights Whitman's novel perspective on grieving, which holds that sadness is transformative rather than stagnant. His elegies demonstrate the human spirit's tenacity in facing death by showing a journey from despondency to acceptance. By placing Whitman's elegies within the parameters of Kübler-Ross's model, this study provides a new

understanding of the psychological complexities of his writing and shows that it is both a timeless reflection on the nature of grief and a historical reaction to Lincoln's passing.

Literature Review: Many academics from a variety of fields have studied grief in great detail since it is a universal but intensely personal experience. Grief theories and accounts offer important insights into the psychological, emotional, and cultural aspects of the experience. This study is based on literary reflections like Walt Whitman's elegies and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's seminal concept of the five stages of grief, which provide light on the intricate relationship between loss and healing.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross first presented the well-known five stages of grief in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. These phases include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This adaptable, non-linear model emphasizes the uniqueness of grieving and the value of compassionate care catered to particular situations. Kübler-Ross and David Kessler build on this paradigm in their 2014 book *On Grief and Grieving*, where they examine how grief changes over time, how society views it, and how it interacts with spirituality and children's experiences. To promote healing, they urge candid communication and group support. According to Freud's *On Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia* (2005), melancholia is a more complicated state characterized by ambivalence and self-criticism, while mourning is a normal healing process. He lays a strong emphasis on how society shapes grieving, particularly in times of mass disaster. The personal story of loss told in C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* (2001) progresses from agony and uncertainty to acceptance and a greater understanding of the enduring essence of love. His thoughts shed light on mourning as a process of transformation and as a monument to love. The book offers a literary and intimate examination of the emotional terrain that follows the death of a loved one, making it a significant addition to the literature on grieving. The book emphasizes the value of grieving and the function of literature in comprehending and processing such intense experiences through Lewis's thoughts and Gresham's observations. A key subject that strikes a deep chord is the interaction of love, loss, and memory; as such, it is an invaluable tool for anyone negotiating the challenges of grief. *The Psychology of Grief* by Richard Gross highlights the cultural and individual differences in sorrow while criticizing outmoded stage-based paradigms. He argues for a more personalized interpretation of the experience by highlighting the ways in which cultural norms influence grieving habits. Similarly, J. William Worden's *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (2018) offers mental health professionals a useful manual that addresses the behavioral, emotional, and physical aspects of mourning. It highlights the need for nuanced support to help people navigate the grieving process by examining therapeutic approaches like writing, cognitive restructuring, and gender variations in grief expression. The article "Elegy and Eros: Configuring Grief" by David Baker examines the themes of love and loss in American elegy, focusing on Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" and Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." The interpretation emphasizes the value of natural images, especially the lilac, as a representation of rebirth and remembering in the face of loss. It asserts that Whitman's elegy is a celebration of life and

continuity rather than merely a form of sadness. When taken as a whole, these works highlight the complex and intensely personal aspects of sorrow while providing theoretical understandings and useful strategies for assisting and understanding those who are grieving.

Methodology: To accomplish the objectives of this study, Kübler-Ross's theoretical framework has been used. Walt Whitman's elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is examined using a qualitative study approach based on interpretive methodologies. Kübler-Ross's grief theory, which distinguishes the following stages—denial/isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—is used to analyze the elegy. This method enables a more complex reading of the poem's themes, bringing them into line with the emotional processes described in Kübler-Ross's grief model.

Discussion: In response to President Abraham Lincoln's assassination, Walt Whitman wrote the moving elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." The poem captures the emotional journey of grieving and, despite being a very personal expression of mourning, it also has universal resonance. The five phases of mourning identified by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—are strikingly akin to Whitman's literary expression. Using particular phrases and metaphors from Whitman's elegy, the article explores how these stages appear in the poem and traces the development of mourning.

Denial and Isolation: "It cannot be true": According to Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*, denial is a coping strategy that acts as a short-term buffer to assist people in dealing with upsetting or distressing news. "Denial is usually a temporary defense and will soon be replaced by partial acceptance." (Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* 32) Denial enables one to collect oneself and progressively create other coping mechanisms. Even though they might be reluctant to talk about their circumstances at first, when they are emotionally prepared, they might appreciate candid discussions regarding their condition.

The symbolic disbelief of people grieving a loved one is the main emphasis of denial in Ross's *On Grief and Grieving*. Even though the bereaved acknowledge the actuality of the loss, denial shows up as a difficulty in accepting its reality. "When we are in denial, we may respond at first by being paralyzed with shock or blanketed with numbness. The denial is still not denial of the actual death, even though someone may be saying, 'I can't believe he's dead.'" (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, "Denial").

Walt Whitman illustrates this stage in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" as he struggles with Abraham Lincoln's death. A profound sense of incredulity and hesitancy to face the finality of loss are reflected in the poet's rhetorical questioning and his hesitancy to end the ritual of mourning. Whitman's denial reflects our inherent tendency to initially reject the agonizing truth of death in favor of maintaining an attachment with the deceased via remembrance and respect. "O great star disappeared—O the black murk that hides the star!" (Whitman 257) represents the abrupt and terrible loss of a leading figure and also

reflects the poet's disbelief at Lincoln's death. The "black murk" that obscures the star represents the emotional haze that frequently accompanies denial, as the bereaved person finds it difficult to understand the magnitude of the loss.

A feeling of loneliness is another characteristic of this stage, as demonstrated in "How shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?" (Whitman 261). Whitman's denial and emotional difficulty in accepting Lincoln's death are reflected in the line. He is unable to completely understand the loss of someone he held in the highest regard. By referring to Lincoln as "the large sweet soul," Whitman gives him a mythic status that makes it impossible to comprehend and accept his departure. The line "deck my song" expresses his wish to pay homage to Lincoln in a way that is appropriate, but the question also suggests that he is reluctant to complete the act of mourning since it would require him to face the sad truth of his passing. This statement perfectly captures the initial phases of sorrow, when denial shows up as hesitancy, perplexity, and a feeling of being overtaken by the magnitude of loss.

Anger: "Why me? It's not fair!": The phases of denial and seclusion are followed by anger. "When the first stage of denial cannot be maintained any longer, it is replaced by feelings of anger, rage, envy, and resentment." (Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* 40) Kübler-Ross claims that anger in grieving can take many different forms, including anger with oneself for not avoiding the loss or resentment towards a loved one for not taking better care of themselves. It might also be aimed at the injustice of the circumstance when a loved one passes away suddenly. Usually, this rage comes after the first shock has subsided and the survivor is strong enough to face more intense feelings. Anger may seem overwhelming, yet it is an essential component of the healing process. Eventually, people can overcome their anger and deal with the underlying feelings if they completely experience and express it. Throughout the grieving process, anger may resurface in various ways, but it is necessary for processing emotions and for healing.

Whitman does not specifically mention anger as one of the phases of grieving in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," but it is possible to read faint undertones of annoyance and sadness as expressing this feeling. Walt Whitman's effort to cope with the devastating loss of Abraham Lincoln is reflected in his subtly expressed rage, which fits with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's stage of anger in mourning. Even though Whitman's tone is mostly elegiac, there are moments of subdued resistance when he addresses the emotional upheaval brought on by death. Whitman bemoans the crushing weight of grief that surrounds him in the line, "O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul," (Whitman 257), signifying his extreme dissatisfaction with his incapacity to achieve emotional freedom. As the poet feels imprisoned in his grief, this imagery alludes to the anger that is frequently turned inward during mourning. The second stage of mourning, which is summed up in these lines, is when rage emerges as a means of coping with the loss and resisting the overwhelming sensation of helplessness.

Bargaining: "Please, let it not be so": According to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, attempts to change the reality of loss through negotiation with fate or a higher power are what define the bargaining stage of the grieving process. "The bargaining is really an attempt to postpone…" (Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* 67) The mourner tries to reclaim control over an uncontrollable circumstance at this stage, which frequently takes the form of a succession of "what if" or "if only" scenarios. This stage is delicately traversed by the poet in Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," who captures the universal human need for comfort or some measure of control in the face of overwhelming grief. As the grieving spirit longs for a method to reverse or lessen the anguish of loss, bargaining in sorrow often combines with expressions of hope, longing, and the search for meaning. The bargaining stage is echoed in Whitman's elegy, especially in his desire to bridge the gap between life and death, even if it is primarily a meditation on acceptance and reconciliation. A need for direction and comprehension is implied by the poet's use of nature as a witness and his attempts to communicate with lilac and thrush, two symbols of rebirth. This is consistent with the emotional framework of the bargaining stage, in which the bereaved individual looks for order in the midst of chaos or trades their own grief for more general truths or spiritual remedies. Whitman's underlying wish to uphold Lincoln's legacy while accepting his death is reflected in this process, which involves a profound engagement with symbols of continuity and transformation.

During the bargaining stage of mourning, people frequently try to postpone or undo their loss by negotiating with fate, a higher power, or their circumstances. This stage is metaphorically reflected in Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," where the poet makes peace with death's finality through rituals and symbolic offerings. Whitman writes, "O Death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies" (Whitman 259), as though the poet is attempting to lessen the severity of death; the act of covering death with flowers functions as an emotional negotiation. The flowers, which stand for beauty and fleetingness, symbolize his attempt to conceal the hurt of loss and to make a gesture of acceptance of the unavoidable. Whitman also writes, "The breath of my chant, I'll perfume the grave of him I love." (261). The "breath of my chant" represents the poet's artistic homage, an offering to death that honors Abraham Lincoln while also attempting to ease the loss by preserving his memory through art. These symbols point to an underlying yearning to find comfort in meaningful rituals and to make sense of the loss. Whitman metaphorically deals with death by bringing beauty and music to the tomb, turning his grief into acts of adoration and artistic expression. The emotional complexity of this stage of mourning is captured by this bargaining, which represents a human yearning to find meaning and solace in the face of an irreversible loss.

Depression: "How can I leave this behind?": According to Kübler-Ross's model of grief, depression is a deep consciousness of the loss and the emotional burden it bears. This stage is characterized by self-reflection, hopelessness, and a strong sense of closure. Ross claims that if someone "is allowed to express his sorrow, he will find a final acceptance much easier, and he will be grateful to those who can sit with him during this stage of depression without

constantly telling him not to be sad." (*On Death and Dying*, Kübler-Ross, 71) As people struggle with the reality of their loss and its ramifications, this stage often shows up as a retreat from reality. This stage coincides perfectly with Walt Whitman's expression of deep melancholy in his elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," as he loses himself in the grief of Abraham Lincoln's passing and the wider suffering brought on by the Civil War. Whitman's failure to come to terms with the emptiness left by Lincoln's death is highlighted by his poignant observations and the meditative tone that characterizes certain of the poem's sections.

"How can I leave this behind?" (Gross 15) sums up the emotional paralysis that characterizes this stage. In Whitman's poem, depression is not only a personal experience but also a collective grieving that permeates the poet's recurrent themes of death and remembrance as well as the natural imagery. The cyclical representation of nature—the mourning thrush, the persistent star, and the blooming lilacs—reflects the poet's sense of being stuck in his grief and implies an inability to move on while paying respect to the departed. As he explores the depths of his grief, Whitman uses solemn imagery and meditative chants to further heighten this emotional tension.

The poet battles with the enormity of loss and the unresolved dilemma of how to go on without a cherished leader as he faces his suffering. The mourner finds comfort in solitude and introspection during this stage, which represents a turning inward, frequently expressing feelings of hopelessness and longing. Whitman depicts this stage in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" with grim imagery and moving reflections on death. The devastating toll of the Civil War is evoked in the line "And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them" (Whitman 265), which extends the poet's sorrow for Lincoln to encompass the indescribable lives lost. The poet's personal despair is amplified by the stark imagery of "skeletons," which emphasizes the collective sorrow and represents the permanence of death.

Whitman also uses the line "The great cloud darkening the land" (Whitman 259) to express a general feeling of national mourning. In addition to reflecting the poet's internal conflict over grief, the "great cloud" is a metaphor for the oppressive sadness that permeates the country. Depression is portrayed in this imagery as an unavoidable emotional state in which melancholy becomes a pervasive and overwhelming presence.

This stage is further deepened by Whitman's acceptance of death's inevitable nature, as evidenced in "Passing the visions, passing the night—passing, unloosing the hold of my comrade's hand" (Whitman 266). The phrase "unloosing the hold" refers to the agonizing process of letting go, which is a defining feature of depression, in which the bereaved person starts to distance themselves from the departed. Whitman captures the collective grief of a country experiencing severe loss in these reflections, in addition to expressing his own sorrow.

Acceptance: "I'm ready to move forward.": According to Kübler-Ross's model of grief, acceptance is the last stage and is marked by a feeling of resolution and a willingness to move on while still remembering the loss. This stage refers to the mourner's ability to find repose and bring the experience of loss into their life, not the absence of grief. According to Kübler-Ross and Kessler, "this stage is about accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone and recognizing that this new reality is the permanent reality." (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, "Acceptance") The poet's journey through grief in Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" culminates in acceptance, as evidenced by his reflective and reconciling tone in the elegy's later sections. In contrast to the previous phases, which were characterized by denial, rage, bargaining, and depression, acceptance represents Whitman's emotional and spiritual preparedness to accept death as a normal aspect of life. The lilac turns into a recurrent symbol of rebirth and memory, signifying Whitman's timeless homage to Lincoln and the persistence of life despite death's shadow.

Whitman's developing relationship with death culminates in a calm acceptance of mortality as a normal part of life's cycle. The lines "Come lovely and soothing death, / Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving" (Whitman 264) beautifully capture this metamorphosis. Death is personified here as "lovely and soothing," a force that is accepted rather than opposed. Whitman's profound acceptance of death as a universal, unifying phenomenon is demonstrated by the tone change from sorrow to serenity. Whitman's statement, "I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death," (265) further demonstrates his acceptance of death. The "carol" turns into a symbolic offering that expresses the poet's reverence for death's role in the continuation of life. His use of the phrase "with joy" again emphasizes his psychological healing and readiness to move on, turning his sorrow into a celebration of Lincoln's lasting legacy.

A sense of acceptance is embodied in the lilac flower's recurrent image. In "And the lilac with mastering odor holds me" (Whitman 262), the fragrance of the lilac, which represents rebirth and memory, provides the poet with solace rather than suffering. Whitman's acceptance of life's natural cycle and his comfort in the timeless beauty of nature are highlighted by this change, which also demonstrates his reconciliation with loss. "The poem is driven by Whitman's desire to find a road back from isolate grief to the social realm and to locate a method and language to enable the restoration of the body and of the body politic, his democratic hope" (Baker). Thus, acceptance in Whitman's elegy becomes an affirmation of hope and the resilience of the human spirit.

Conclusion: Grief is an intensely personal but shared experience, and the Kübler-Ross model—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—provides a useful topography for mapping its emotional landscape. Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," a richly detailed tapestry of poetry, illustrates these phases. Incredulity and grief give way to symbolic acts of reminiscence in his elegy, which reaches a placid acceptance of death as a part of life. Whitman's mourning adheres to the model's broad

structure, but his distinctive voice and scope of emotion lend the poem its continuing force. Beyond personal bereavement, the elegy presents a generic vision of loss and recovery.

Although acknowledging the uniqueness of every individual's experience, this research illustrates how the structure of these stages can enhance our understanding of the intricacies of mourning. Ultimately, Whitman's elegy presents an ageless commentary on loss, recovery, and human resiliency that transcends individual mourning. The elegy celebrates the deeply personal nature of mourning while reiterating its commonality through the lens of Kübler-Ross's stages.

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