



Grief As A Catalyst For Post-Traumatic Growth: Reconstructing Meaning And Identity After Bereavement In Judith Guest's *Ordinary People*

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Abstract: The study identifies key themes of grief, coping mechanisms, and identity reconstruction as central to the characters' experiences in the novel *Ordinary People* by Judith Guest with an emphasis on post-traumatic growth. The analysis draws on theoretical frameworks of PTG to understand how the characters navigate the stages of grief, confront emotional pain, and ultimately experience significant shifts in their self-perception, relationships and life goals. By analyzing Conrad's transformation and the dynamics within his family, the study sheds light on the complex interplay between trauma and personal development, demonstrating how grief can lead to profound changes in meaning and identity. This research enhances the understanding of grief, viewing it not only as a challenging experience but also as a potential catalyst for growth, particularly through timely psychological interventions that foster resilience and self-discovery.

Keywords - grief, trauma, identity reconstruction, post-traumatic growth, catalyst, resilience.

The sudden loss of a family member can have a profound impact on the family dynamic, potentially destabilizing the entire structure and severely affecting the emotional well-being of those left behind. The shock of an unexpected death creates an overwhelming sense of chaos, catching individuals off guard and unprepared to handle both the emotional and practical consequences. This abrupt change can serve as a constant reminder of the loss, further complicating relationships within the family. Each member's grief manifests differently, influenced by their past experiences with loss. The untimely death of a loved one brings an irreversible disruption, leaving the surviving family members grappling with the emotional weight of their new reality. Facing such a crisis can be emotionally draining, as those left behind struggle with the anguish of losing someone irreplaceable, enduring a deep trauma that reshapes their lives forever.

In Judith Guest's *Ordinary People*, grief plays a pivotal role in the development of the characters, especially in the context of post-traumatic growth (PTG). The narrative follows the Jarrett family's struggle after the death of their eldest son Buck. The article is a poignant exploration of how personal tragedy shapes the emotional and psychological trajectories of those left behind. The characters, in particular Conrad Jarrett and his mother Beth, demonstrate how grief can function not only as a force of despair but also as a catalyst for profound personal transformation, leading to what we understand as post-traumatic growth.

Literature Review

Judith Guest's novel *Ordinary People* (1976), provides a rich narrative for exploring themes, especially in the aftermath of loss and bereavement. Guest skillfully captures the internal struggles of Conrad, making his pain palpable and relatable. Critics have widely praised the novel for its sensitive and nuanced portrayal of grief, mental illness and family dynamics, as well as its exploration of Survivor's guilt. Guest authored several other novels, including *Second Heaven* (1982), *Errands* (1991), and *The Tarnished Eye* (2004). Critics have observed that while these works share thematic elements with *Ordinary People*, such as the exploration of family relationships and personal struggles, they also showcase Guest's evolving narrative

style and thematic interests. In his article "The Troubled Adolescent: Teaching Judith Guest's *Ordinary People*," Workman remarks, "Judith Guest has given us a fine novel which allows us to explore with students this grim problem of teen suicide and its searing effects on family and friends" (26). Judith Guest's realistic depiction of the healing process and her ability to evoke deep emotional responses from readers have established *Ordinary People* as an important and influential work in contemporary literature.

Objectives

In exploring Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG), the study seeks to address two primary objectives:

- To investigate the connection between grief intensity and post-traumatic growth and the impact of bereavement on personal relationships and social identity.
- To assess the effectiveness of therapy as an intervention and the significance of support networks to promote PTG in grieving characters following bereavement.

Methodology

The objectives of the study will be investigated by implementing a qualitative analysis of the novel. The novel is closely studied to deconstruct relevant segments of the text that address themes of grief, trauma, healing and identity. These might include emotional struggles, therapy sessions, interactions with family members, and the evolving sense of self of the primary character chosen for study. Theories on grief, post-traumatic growth and identity reconstruction, will be used to support and contextualize the thematic analysis. The study will focus primarily on Conrad's journey, which might limit the exploration of grief in secondary characters such as his mother, Beth, whose grief process is different. This limitation will be addressed by briefly discussing the grief experiences of all key characters. The analysis will use a post-traumatic growth framework to examine how the characters experience meaningful change following their grief. This will include references to the theoretical model of PTG, proposed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), which suggests that growth after trauma may occur in areas like self-perception, relationships with others and life philosophy.

The death of a sibling is often viewed as particularly traumatic because it involves the loss of someone who has been a constant presence throughout one's life. Siblings typically share a deep and lifelong bond, which makes the loss feel like losing a part of one's own identity. This intense emotional connection can make the grief particularly complex, as individuals must navigate both the pain of their loss and the void left behind by the absence of someone who has been integral to their personal history and development.

The three of them were always together, why does he think of it as only his grief? Because damn it is. His room no longer shared, his heart torn and slammed against this solid wall of it, this hell of indifference. It is. And there is no way to change it. That is the hell. His heart pounds painfully in his chest. He slows down his breathing with an effort, staring out of the window at nothing. (Guest 182)

The work of J. Dunn and C. Kendrick (1982) helps to explain why this bond can be so impactful. They suggest that sibling relationships are characterized by a wide range of emotions and behaviors. These relationships often include expressions of positive emotions like affection, love and amusement, but also negative feelings such as jealousy, aggression, and frustration. This mix of emotions shows that sibling relationships are dynamic and multifaceted. Hogan and DeSantis in their research on "Basic Constructs of a Theory of Adolescent Sibling Bereavement," have remarked that,

The death of a sibling alters the constant, interactive, dyadic, comparison through which personal identity is learned reciprocally by siblings during adolescence. In addition, bereaved siblings coping with the developmental crisis of adolescence must now cope with the accumulated stresses of the situational crisis of sibling death and its aftermath. (236)

Conrad, the surviving son, is the most direct representation of how grief can initially lead to psychological turmoil but eventually becomes a catalyst for healing and self-awareness. His trauma is primarily driven by the guilt and pain he feels over his brother Buck's death, which he survived despite being present during the accident. This guilt and grief manifest in Conrad's deep depression, suicidal thoughts and a series of emotional breakdowns. His mental state after the incident can be viewed through the lens of traumatic stress, where Conrad is unable to function in the world without being haunted by the memories of the traumatic event. This is further exacerbated by his strained relationship with his mother, Beth, who, while grieving in her own way, cannot offer him the emotional support he needs.

However, Conrad's journey through grief and trauma is also a key example of post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth, according to psychologist Richard Tedeschi, refers to the positive psychological changes that some individuals experience after enduring adversity, such as greater appreciation for life, improved relationships, and a new sense of purpose. According to Tedeschi and others, "The emergence of PTG requires a complex interaction between intrapersonal processes and interpersonal processes, following

exposure to highly stressful and traumatic life events. Positive psychology alone, although a positive influence, is not a sufficiently comprehensive framework within which to understand the phenomenon of PTG” (14). In Conrad’s case, his initial spiral into despair is eventually countered by his ability to confront his pain and to seek help through therapy. The catalyst for this growth is his choice to begin healing: Conrad starts to reshape his sense of self and understanding of his trauma through therapy, his own introspection, and the support he finds in his relationships, specifically with his therapist, Dr. Berger.

In particular, Conrad’s relationships with others begin to transform, signifying the emotional growth associated with PTG. His budding friendship with a classmate, Karen, and his efforts to reconnect with his father, Calvin, highlight his emotional healing. Where once Conrad was closed off and trapped in a world of guilt and confusion, he starts to open up to others, becoming more vulnerable and willing to share his grief. This is a key aspect of post-traumatic growth: the ability to transform trauma into a source of personal strength and to see new possibilities for future growth, despite the adversity.

Beth Jarrett’s response to grief is more complicated. Her inability or unwillingness to process her grief in a healthy manner initially prevents her from engaging in any form of post-traumatic growth. Unlike Conrad, who actively seeks help and faces his grief head-on, Beth suppresses her feelings and attempts to maintain a facade of normalcy. Her grief manifests in detachment, not only from her son Conrad but also from her husband, Calvin. In fact, she seems to view Conrad’s emotional turmoil as a weakness, and rather than helping him through his grief, she withdraws further into herself, unable or unwilling to confront the depth of the tragedy. Her grief remains buried beneath a veneer of control and perfectionism. In an article on “How the Death of a Child can Impact a Marriage,” published in the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy (JMFT)*, the author highlights that,

Parents may start to develop negative feelings towards their spouse after the death and may find themselves unable to support each other and start to withdraw, . . .exacerbate that strain, making it even worse to work through. Grieving couples may also start to place the blame and guilt on their spouse, and may start to feel anger and resentment, as well as feel depressed and alone. (Schoenberg)

After the incident, Calvin focused all his attention on Conrad, leaving Beth feeling ignored and overlooked. Still deep in her grief over Buck’s death, she and Calvin never discussed their emotions or how the tragedy had affected them. Instead, they carried on as though life had returned to normal, but tension grew when Calvin began to harshly criticize Beth’s behavior toward Conrad. This added strain put their relationship at risk, creating a wedge between them at a time when open communication was needed most. The following lines clearly illustrate Beth’s nature, “self-possessed is what she is; he emphatically does not own her, nor does he have control over her, nor can he understand or even predict with reliability her moods, her attitudes” (Guest 26).

Beth’s inability to process grief effectively highlights a critical aspect of the PTG process: the necessity of acknowledging and engaging with one’s trauma in order to facilitate growth. Beth’s emotional stagnation contrasts sharply with Conrad’s evolution. While she does not demonstrate clear post-traumatic growth, her journey does reflect a kind of tragic regression, where her inability to heal isolates her from her family and prevents any sense of meaningful personal growth. She becomes a character whose grief transforms into emotional numbness, further exacerbating the fracture in the family dynamic.

The contrast between Conrad’s and Beth’s responses to grief underscores the importance of emotional expression and connection in the post-traumatic growth process. Calvin, as the father, is the figure caught between the two. His grief is largely internalized, and he attempts to be a support for both his wife and son, though in different ways. Calvin’s response to grief leads to a complex form of post-traumatic growth, as he begins to recognize his own emotional needs and the dysfunction in his marriage. By seeking out his own emotional support through therapy, Calvin embarks on his own healing process, albeit in a quieter and more indirect way than Conrad. The contrast between Calvin and Beth also highlights the different ways people cope with loss, and how these coping mechanisms can either promote healing or inhibit it.

Therapy as a Safe Space for Expression

When Conrad struggled with intense feelings of guilt, grief, and anger following the death of his older brother, Buck, he tried to end his life. These emotions manifest in a variety of harmful ways, including depression, self-destructive behavior and emotional withdrawal. Conrad’s inability to express or process his feelings resulted in a sense of emotional isolation, which only deepened the trauma he has experienced. Therapy, as introduced through Dr. Berger, provided Conrad with a safe, neutral space in which he began to confront and express the emotions he had been suppressing. Dr. Berger’s office became a refuge from the weight of expectations placed upon him by his family, particularly his emotionally distant mother, Beth. Through this therapeutic relationship, Conrad begins to understand that it is okay to feel pain, to grieve, and

to acknowledge his vulnerabilities. Dr. Berger, as a figure who listens without judgment, offers Conrad a space where he can freely articulate his inner turmoil without fear of rejection or misunderstanding.

Psychotherapy, commonly known as "talk therapy," has been shown to be highly effective in helping individuals cope with complicated grief. According to a 2024 report by the World Health Organization (WHO), 75 percent of those who underwent psychotherapy reported significant improvements in their emotional and psychological health. While therapy has proven valuable for managing chronic depression and complicated grief symptoms, many people still face cultural and societal barriers, along with the stigma surrounding mental health care, which often discourages them from seeking professional support.

Therapy also provided Conrad with a structured way to make sense of his feelings, which are chaotic and overwhelming at the novel's outset. The very act of speaking about his experiences began to create a sense of order in Conrad's mind. As he worked through his grief and guilt in therapy, he started to make connections between his emotions and his actions, understanding how his past trauma continues to affect his present well-being. One of the most significant elements of Conrad's therapy is Dr. Berger's use of therapeutic communication. Dr. Berger does not simply listen to Conrad's words; he also actively engages with him, asking probing questions, challenging his assumptions, and helping him unpack his emotional baggage. This type of communication encourages Conrad to think more deeply about his emotions and experiences.

When Conrad tries to explain his suicide attempt as a result of feeling out of control, Dr. Berger presses him to confront the deeper emotions beneath the surface. Through questions and reflections, Dr. Berger helps Conrad recognize the self-loathing and guilt that drove him to harm himself. These moments of self-reflection are vital for Conrad's growth, as they allow him to see his actions from a new perspective and start to reframe his self-perception. Dr. Berger's communication style helps Conrad see that his trauma does not define him and that he has the power to reclaim control over his life. "The worst, the first session has been gotten through. And the guy is not bad; at least he is loose. The exchange about the razor blades reminded him of something good about the hospital; nobody hid anything there. People kidded you about all kinds of stuff and it was all right; it even helped to stay the flood of shame and guilt" (Guest 44).

Therapeutic communication also helped Conrad develop self-compassion. Through Dr. Berger's guidance, he begins to recognize that the guilt he feels over Buck's death is misplaced and that he cannot change the past. This realization does not happen overnight, but as Conrad works through his emotions with the help of Dr. Berger, he starts to forgive himself. The therapist's patience and empathetic listening are crucial to this process, as they allow Conrad to develop a sense of agency and responsibility for his own healing. Dr. Berger's role in Conrad's healing process cannot be overstated. Although he is not portrayed as a mentor or a comforting figure, his unconventional approach to therapy creates a crucial space for Conrad's growth. Dr. Berger pushes Conrad to confront uncomfortable truths about himself, his family, and his grief, and he often challenges Conrad's resistance to discussing certain topics. This confrontational yet compassionate approach is vital for Conrad's recovery, as it forces him to engage more deeply with his emotions rather than avoiding them.

Dr. Berger's therapeutic communication is not limited to passive listening; it is dynamic, involving an active exchange between therapist and patient. By calling Conrad out on his defensive behavior and encouraging him to push past his walls, Dr. Berger enables Conrad to break through his emotional paralysis. These were Conrad's remarks when asked about the incident: "Okay, I'll tell you some things. He turns his head slightly, taking in the narrow window at the left of the bookcase." He then continued, "I had a brother. He's dead. It was an accident on the lake. We were sailing. He drowned." When Dr. Berger asked if he liked talking about it, Conrad gave a perfunctory shrug and admitted, "It doesn't change anything" (Guest 42-43). During their sessions, Dr. Berger consistently encourages Conrad to face his feelings of anger toward his mother, Beth. This is an important moment of growth for Conrad, as he has been avoiding the topic due to the complicated and strained nature of his relationship with her. Dr. Berger does not let Conrad avoid the issue; he helps him understand the emotional significance of his anger, which ultimately contributes to Conrad's ability to accept his feelings and start healing.

While Dr. Berger's approach may seem blunt or even harsh at times, it serves to dismantle the emotional barriers that Conrad has built up as a defense mechanism. This therapeutic breakthrough is critical in Conrad's ability to move forward with his life, as it allows him to integrate the painful aspects of his experience into a more cohesive and self-accepting narrative.

Therapy and Transformation: Integrating Healing and Personal Growth

Conrad's journey through therapy is not linear, and it is often filled with setbacks, doubt, and emotional pain. However, therapy allows him to confront these difficulties in a constructive way. In the course of his sessions, Conrad learns to open up to those around him, including his father, Calvin, and even his peers. Therapy gives him the tools to rebuild his relationships, particularly with his father, who is also struggling

with his own grief and guilt but is unable to express it. Through their shared experience of grief and healing, father and son begin to reconnect in a way that wasn't possible before.

One of the key aspects of therapeutic success in Conrad's case is that therapy enables him to integrate his painful past into his sense of identity. It doesn't erase his trauma, but it does allow him to make peace with it. As he progresses, Conrad becomes more comfortable with the idea that healing is a long-term process and that he does not have to be "perfect" in order to move forward. Therapy, in this sense, becomes both a source of immediate relief and a foundation for ongoing personal development. Through his work with Dr. Berger, Conrad learns to confront and express his grief, guilt, and anger, which have been stifling his ability to heal. The safe, non-judgmental space that therapy provides allows Conrad to develop self-awareness and self-compassion, essential components of post-traumatic growth. Dr. Berger's active, challenging, yet empathetic communication with Conrad serves as the catalyst for much of his personal growth, allowing him to process his trauma and gradually reclaim control over his life. Ultimately, Conrad's journey demonstrates how therapeutic communication can foster healing, resilience, and emotional transformation in the wake of tragedy.

Discussion

The research emphasizes the ways in which people can change when they face their grief rather than bury it. It presents a deeply personal look at how trauma can lead to transformation, but it also explores the ways in which unresolved grief can prevent growth. The contrast between Conrad's emotional healing and Beth's emotional shutdown reveals how grief can act as both a force for breakdown and a potential catalyst for renewal, depending on how one chooses to engage with it.

Post-traumatic growth is neither a simple nor a linear process. The characters demonstrate that while grief is initially debilitating, it can ultimately lead to increased psychological resilience, deeper self-awareness, and more meaningful relationships if individuals are willing to face their trauma. "Naturally, most of the triggering events in PTG literature are potentially traumatic in nature, because the initial emotional, cognitive, and physical reactions are so painful and overwhelming that they elicit the cognitive processing that plays an important role in PTG processes" (Tedeschi et al. 191).

Conrad's journey is the central embodiment of this idea, as he grows from a place of profound despair to one of gradual hope. Jarrett family's exploration of grief, emotional isolation, and the search for healing paints a complex portrait of how individuals and families can navigate the difficult terrain of post-traumatic growth. Conrad's journey from despair to healing is a compelling illustration of post-traumatic growth, whereas Beth's refusal to face her grief shows the potential for stagnation when trauma is repressed.

The research ultimately provides a nuanced exploration of how grief can function as both a destructive force and a catalyst for emotional renewal, making it a powerful exploration of the psychological effects of trauma and the possibility for growth in the aftermath of tragedy. Through therapy, Conrad begins to rediscover his sense of self and cautiously work on mending his relationship with his father, hinting at his journey towards post-traumatic growth. This implies that although the sorrow from Buck's death may linger, Conrad has taken the first steps toward acceptance, self-forgiveness, and emotional resilience.

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