

Medicine on the big and small screen: **Grief observed: *Manchester By the Sea* and *Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri***

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Casey Affleck and Lucas Hedges in *Manchester by the Sea*.

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Frances McDormand in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*.

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Reviewed by Therese Jones, PhD

Manchester By the Sea

Starring Casey Affleck, Michelle Williams, Lucas Hedges, Kyle Chandler, Gretchen Mol.

Written and directed by Kenneth Lonergan. Film release January 2016; DVD release February 2017. Rated R. Running time 137 minutes.

Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri

Starring Frances McDormand, Sam Rockwell, Woody Harrelson, Lucas Hedges, Caleb Landry Jones.

Written and directed by Martin McDonagh. Film release December 2017; DVD release February 2018. Rated R. Running time 115 minutes.

Philosophers, theologians, artists, and mental health professionals have struggled with how to express and endure the ineffable and intractable human experience of grief. C.S. Lewis chronicles his emotional and spiritual journey following the death of his wife, Joy, in *A Grief Observed*. Lewis was tortured by her death and by his loss of faith in a God whom he refers to as a “cosmic sadist.” He writes of the disorientation and helplessness of grief in which “nothing stays put. One keeps emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Am I going in circles, or dare I hope I am on a spiral? But if a spiral, am I going up or down it?”¹

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion’s account of loss and her “attempt to make sense” of it, she begins with her husband’s sudden death, “Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.”² She turns to literary works, studies on mourning, and even books of etiquette to understand what is happening to her.

Literary scholar Sandra M. Gilbert also turns to the humanities and the arts—history, memoir, poetry, and photography—to explore what she learns is the changelessness of grief across cultures despite indigenous customs and idiosyncratic rituals around mourning. *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* was prompted by the unexpected death of her husband after a surgical error. Gilbert records the shock and disbelief of the event, “Nothing to do because once the calamity has happened, it is, of course, inexorable; it will always have happened.”³ However, she does do something, channeling her personal experience of grief and the search for meaning into a major work that is part literary criticism, instruction manual, and comfort book.

Recently, health professionals have been compelled to think more intentionally about the complexity of the grief experience since the publication of the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Version 5* (DSM-5) in 2013. What was known as the bereavement exclusion was eliminated by the diagnostic criteria for a Major Depressive Episode, leaving it to clinicians to differentiate between clinical depression and depression in the context of grief. The removal of the bereavement exclusion has been one of the most controversial changes in the DSM-5 with critics arguing that it will medicalize ordinary grief and encourage over-prescription of antidepressants. Supporters argue that there is no clinical or scientific basis for excluding patients from a diagnosis of major depression simply because the condition occurs shortly after the death of a loved one.⁴

The persistence of grief, the hope of respite from it, and redemption because of it, is a theme as timeless as poetic lament and dramatic tragedy. It is also the focus of two recent Academy Award-winning films, *Manchester By the Sea* (2016), and *Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri* (2017). In both, it is an especially cruel and particularly devastating kind of loss that precipitates grief: the tragic and violent deaths of children. The various responses of the parent characters, Lee Chandler (Casey Affleck) in *Manchester By the Sea*, and Mildred Hayes (Frances McDormand) in *Three Billboards*, are recognizable touch points along the range of human emotions in such situations—sorrow, guilt, bitterness, anger, exhaustion, confusion, and resignation. However, each character eventually stakes a claim to a singular emotional construct and coping mechanism. For Lee it is a shame so painful that he is effectively mute and nearly paralyzed; for Mildred it is a thirst for vengeance so extreme that she crackles in fury and stomps in rage.

Both films share other similarities including a supporting performance by Lucas Hedges, the nephew of Lee in *Manchester By the Sea*, and the surviving son of Mildred in *Three Billboards*. The writer-directors of both films are playwrights by training, and Irish in ethnicity. *Manchester By the Sea* creator Kenneth Lonergan grew up in the Bronx with a mother who is Jewish and a psychiatrist, and a father who is Irish and a physician. Lonergan jokes about spending his childhood listening to dinner table stories about patients, their personalities, motivations, and psychopathologies.

McDonagh holds dual British and Irish citizenship, and is among the most acclaimed living Irish playwrights. His most successful plays include *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, set in a small village on the west coast of Ireland; *A Skull in Connemara* in which a man is employed to exhume skeletons in an overcrowded graveyard where he encounters the wife he was once accused of killing; and *A Behanding in Spokane* in which the main character has been searching for his missing left hand for 25 years. McDonagh's characters, including those in *Three Billboards*, are exaggeratedly rural, and gleefully misanthropic.

Both films seem imbued with a Celtic melancholy that is most noticeable in their respective soundtracks. The music of *Manchester By the Sea* provides a counterpoint to the characters' inability to communicate their pain, regret, and love to one another. The film begins with a wordless, harmonized vocal performance that sounds like a children's chorale, and returns at key intervals during the action. Many of the scenes, such as the funeral of Lee's brother, are played solely against music and without dialogue, thereby calling attention to the inadequacy of language, and also to the awkward rituals of bereavement.

McDonagh begins *Three Billboards* with a scene of low-lying fog against the green hills of the Ozark Mountains and the voice of Renee Fleming singing Thomas Moore's *The Last Rose of Summer*. It is then that Mildred stops to peer at the three dilapidated billboards along a lonely road into town and hatches a plan to avenge her daughter's rape and murder.

Finally, both directors successfully employ and exploit the elements of American regionalism. Lonergan's landscape is that of the quaint and picturesque Manchester-by-the-Sea with its anchored trawlers, weather-beaten colonial buildings, endless winter, and stoic townspeople. McDonagh's small town feels less confined spatially with its lush Missouri forests, small businesses, and dusty main street. Its denizens are few and familiar, any of

whom could be lifted right out of a Thomas Hart Benton painting or a Flannery O'Connor story (the owner of the billboard company is reading O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find* when we first see him).

Manchester By the Sea

Lee Chandler is summoned back to his hometown by the news that his older brother, Joe (Kyle Chandler), has died. Joe was diagnosed with congestive heart failure years before, so his death, while untimely, is not unexpected.

What Joe's son, 16-year-old Patrick (Lucas Hedges), and Lee face together might fall under the heading of ordinary grief: sad, but manageable.

However, Lee lives with an extraordinary grief. The control necessary to contain and conceal such pain is frightening, and there are several harrowing moments including when Lee, alone and drunk in a bar, deliberately provokes a fight by throwing a punch at a stranger. His motivation is less about venting this pent-up emotion than about inflicting terrible punishment on himself. Lee carries within him a pointless and unspeakable tragedy which not only prompts self-destruction but also demands isolation.

Viewers first see Lee in his work as a janitor for several apartment buildings near Boston—shoveling snow, dumping garbage, replacing light bulbs, and unclogging toilets. His interactions with residents are fleeting, and his existence is monastic. He lives in a sparsely furnished basement room and moves throughout the building like a silent ghost. The lonely drive to Manchester after the news of his brother's death doesn't really seem to affect him.

Loneragan uses flashbacks to convey narrative detail and provide depth and color to Lee's past relationships with his brother, nephew, and former wife Randi (Michelle Williams), showing him to be a vulnerable, playful, flawed, but loving man. When the fragments of the story begin to snap into place, the source of Lee's anguish is revealed halfway through the film. It is one of unimaginable horror, and viewers then understand his private torture and relentless shame.

Affleck's performance, which won him the Academy Award for Best Actor, is searing and wrenching. Viewers can actually feel his pain in the halting gestures, the blank stares, and the long silences.



Casey Affleck in *Manchester by the Sea*. © Roadside Attractions/Amazon Studios

When Lee learns that he has been named Patrick's guardian he panics. The relationship of reluctant guardian and orphaned teenager turns on moments of clumsy conversations, deep fears of responsibility and abandonment, and comic bickering. Much of the film consists of the daily routines and petty disruptions of ordinary life that happen against the backdrop of catastrophe.

The film grapples with the complexity of forgiveness, of others and of oneself. An ensemble drama, it turns on how one person and one community choose to deal, or not deal, with the consequences of a fatal mistake. In an unforgettable scene between Lee and Randi, she tearfully apologizes for her condemnation of him, her avowal of his responsibility for their children's deaths, and desperately attempts to find some comfort in their shared loss. Viewers see the depth of Lee's suffering, which he cannot speak: "I can't...I'm sorry...there's nothing there." There is much there, but it can neither be articulated nor escaped.

The film does not end with any conventional restoration of family, but it does end with both Lee's and Patrick's awareness and acceptance of how life simply must move through tragedy, loss, death, and remembrance. The final scene of the two fishing recalls the film's initial flashback of a young Patrick being teased by his goofy uncle and his smiling father.

Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri

While long pauses and few words are the hallmarks of *Manchester by the Sea*, *Three Billboards* is all about dialogue: the profanities, witticisms, and poetry of small town characters who eschew political correctness. The attention to, and play with, language recalls Shakespeare. The film actually includes a fool, a dwarf, a Falstaffian drunk, and an obsessed hero.



Woody Harrelson and Sam Rockwell in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. © Fox Searchlight Pictures

The film also recalls the absurdist tradition of modern drama as the characters, actions, and setting are grotesque. The tone is comic, but the pretext for, and consequences of, the action are tragic. It teeters on the edge of nihilism in which all institutions (law, religion, society) are woefully inadequate or downright corrupt in the face of senseless violence.

One of Flannery O'Connor's most oft-quoted comments is that the truth does not change according to our ability to stomach. The drive toward truth and justice, in the person of Mildred Hayes, becomes the catalyst for old grudges, new losses, long histories, and short bursts of brutality among the residents of Ebbing.

Seven months after the rape and immolation of her daughter Angela, Mildred marches into Ebbing Advertising, plunks down \$5,000 in cash, and rents the billboards with three messages:

"Still No Arrests?"

"How Come, Chief Willoughby?"

"Raped While Dying."

Chief Willoughby (Woody Harrelson) appreciates her action as a grieving mother, but also understands it as a declaration of war in the small town. All matter of mischief is unleashed because of it. The ethical, soft-spoken, and family-oriented Willoughby is dying of cancer, and his dim-witted deputy, Dixon (Sam Rockwell), can't be trusted to respond accordingly or professionally as he is a racist, homophobic, and hot-headed mamma's boy.

The local pastor attempts to persuade Mildred to reconsider, prompting one of the most withering attacks on the venality and hypocrisy of the Catholic priesthood in cinematic history.

McDormand's relentless performance—which won her the Academy Award for Best Actress—of Mildred's

fury, determination, and wit is tempered with quiet, tearful revelations of pure heartbreak. She feels a wrenching guilt when she recalls her off-hand but characteristic retort to Angela who huffs out of the house angry with her mother for not lending her the family car: "I hope I get raped on the way!" "I hope you get raped on the way, too!"

As a murder mystery there is no resolution, and as tale of rural vigilantism there is a hint that something else such

as healing might ultimately prevail. The simple platitude of a bookmark shared by Mildred's ex-husband's 19-year-old girlfriend, "All this anger begets greater anger," recalls the transformative conclusion of Sophocles' *Orestia* in which the righteous vengeance of the Furies, justice through retaliation, is replaced with justice through the law.

Acknowledgments

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