

Varya's Individual Confrontation with Grief and Mortality in Chloe Benjamin's *The Immortalists*

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ABSTRACT

Death and grief, while universally experienced, manifest in profoundly different ways across individuals, shaped by personal history, psychological makeup, and existential circumstance. Literature has long served as a powerful medium for examining these individual differences in confronting mortality, offering readers an intimate lens into the diverse human responses to loss. Through this study, titled "Varya's Individual Confrontation with Grief and Mortality in Chloe Benjamin's *The Immortalists*," examines Varya who is the only one left among her siblings, a minority within her own family. "Burden" captures the inequality she faces in the face of death compared to her siblings. Using the framework of character and characterization, and the five stages of grief proposed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This descriptive qualitative research highlights Varya's transformation from an innocent eldest sister to someone cautious about death. Initially, Varya denies the prophecy predicting her death, followed by anger and frustration. Her pursuit of science serves as a form of bargaining, seeking to extend her life and assert control over her fate. As she confronts these challenges, she ultimately reaches acceptance, finding meaning in her relationships, particularly with her son, Luke. This study addresses that gap by examining how Varya's grief reflects both the universal dimensions of loss and the deeply personal differences that distinguish individual experiences of mortality. The study offers literary representations of grief by demonstrating that individual differences in confronting mortality are not signs of psychological fragility but rather dimensions of human resilience, empathy, and the enduring pursuit of a meaningful life.

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INTRODUCTION

The response to death is a complex and unique aspect that touches upon many aspects of human experience, operates within the human mind, and influences behaviour (Cholbi, 2023). Death is frequently understood in a variety of religious contexts not just as an end but also as a transition or a passage to another realm of existence. This perspective affects how people and societies perceive morality, the afterlife, and life (Willis *et al.*, 2006).

Perceptions of death are heavily shaped by culture, which also influences the ideas about the nature of death, the afterlife, and how people should grieve (Barbaran *et al.*, 2023; Silverman *et al.*, 2020). The way people perceive death and grief varies depending on their cultural perspective, which may see death as a transitional state or a definitive conclusion.

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Death can initiate societal customs of mourning that strengthen social ties in tightly united tribes, but modern societies tend to respond to loss in more personalized ways (Klass & Chow, 2021). Empathy and group solidarity thrive in collectivist societies, but self-protective behaviors are more common in Western cultures in response to mortality value (Coronado *et al.*, 2023). To address the different ways that people experience grief and create meaning around death, we must understand these cultural frameworks, because cultures vary in how they conceptualize death and what happens when a person dies (Miller & Morton-Rias, 2001).

Literary works' responses to death are important because they examine basic human feelings and experiences (Harris, 2021). It enables individuals to explore existential questions and the meaning of life as well as face their mortality. Denham (2024) argues that literature provides readers with a means of coping with loss and developing empathy by allowing them to identify with the hardships individuals face. Furthermore, how death is portrayed influences the customs of society and cultural attitudes, providing social commentary and enhancing stories through metaphor and symbolism as Lammon's research (2022). Moral motivation and conflict are frequently driven by death, which makes for gripping narratives that deepen readers' knowledge of the complexity of loss and life.

This study specifically examines *The Immortalists* (2018) by Chloe Benjamin, a contemporary American novel that presents a uniquely compelling exploration of mortality, grief, and individual difference. The novel follows four siblings, Simon, Klara, Daniel, and Varya, each of whom receives a prophecy predicting the exact date of their death from a fortune teller in their childhood. Unlike her siblings, who each die on or around their predicted dates, Varya, the eldest, is left as the sole survivor, carrying the compounded weight of anticipatory grief about her own mortality and the traumatic losses of those closest to her. This singular narrative position makes Varya a particularly rich subject for examining how individuals respond to death differently, not as mourners reacting to loss, but as survivors negotiating their entire existence under the shadow of predicted mortality.

A review of relevant prior studies reveals that, while the application of Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief to literary and artistic works has grown considerably, significant gaps remain. Madden (2023) applied the Kübler-Ross framework to Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, focusing on how grief operates non-linearly within a liminal space of bereavement, following the suicide of a family member in an Irish domestic context. Similarly, Nurjanah (2023) examined grief stages in C.S. Lewis's autobiographical novel *A Grief Observed*, tracing how the protagonist navigates loss and ultimately attains spiritual peace following his wife's death. Wijaya (2023) extended the framework to *The Shack* by William Paul Young, exploring the relationship between grief and religiosity in a Christian-inflected narrative, while Novia and Widianingtyas (2023) applied a psycholinguistic approach to the song "Burn" from Hamilton's musical, demonstrating how grief stages can be traced through lyrical expression. Most recently, Fitriansal (2025) drew on Kübler-Ross's model in an analysis of the Indonesian film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*, reading grief through the lens of cultural anthropology and the representation of marginalized women.

While those studies collectively affirm the theoretical versatility of the Kübler-Ross framework across diverse literary and cultural texts, they share notable limitations that this study seeks to address. First, none of the existing studies examines *The Immortalists* by Chloe Benjamin, a novel that occupies a distinctive position in contemporary American fiction for its unflinching engagement with mortality and prophetic fate. Second, no prior study has analyzed a character whose grief is not only reactive, in response to the deaths of others, but

also anticipatory, shaped by the foreknowledge of one's own predicted death. This dual dimension of grief, experienced simultaneously as witness and as subject of mortality, constitutes a significant gap in the existing scholarship. Third, the intersection of grief and scientific rationality as a form of bargaining, a defining feature of Varya's characterization, has not been explored in prior applications of the Kübler-Ross model to literary texts. Fourth, none of the reviewed studies addresses individual survival guilt within a sibling group, nor the particular psychological burden of being the sole survivor among intimately bonded family members who all face the same prophecy.

In light of these gaps, this study aims to examine the manifestation of the five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – in Varya Gold's individual responses to death and loss in *The Immortalists* by Chloe Benjamin; and explore how Varya's journey through grief ultimately leads to life fulfillment, demonstrating that individual differences in confronting mortality are essential dimensions of human resilience and the pursuit of meaning.

METHOD

In analyzing *The Immortalist* by Chloe Benjamin, the writer uses descriptive qualitative research methods. Descriptive qualitative attempts to describe everything, regardless of whether it directly or indirectly relates to the research problem (Creswell, 2014). In addition, Leavy (2025: 9) states that qualitative research is employed when a researcher's main goal is to examine, describe, or explain on what they write in the research.

The primary data source of this study is the novel *The Immortalists* (2018) by Chloe Benjamin, published by Penguin Random House LLC. The unit of analysis consists of all textual evidence directly related to Varya Gold's psychological responses to death, grief, and mortality – including her dialogue, interior monologue, narrative descriptions of her behavior, and her interactions with other characters. Secondary data sources consist of scholarly works related to Kübler-Ross's grief theory, character and characterization frameworks, and prior studies that have applied the five stages of grief to literary and cultural texts.

Therefore, based on the previous explanation, the descriptive qualitative research method is relevant to this study since this study aims to discover, explore, understand, describe, and investigate how an individual navigates and deals with her approach to response to death, and how these conflicts shape her experiences and opportunities in life. In doing so, Kübler-Ross's theory of the five stages of grief is also applied in this study to help the writer conduct the study and discover the result as expected.

Data collection and analysis in this study was conducted through a systematic process of close reading and purposive textual selection. First, initial reading served to familiarize the researcher with the plot, the relationships between characters, and Varya's conflicts, particularly those concerning fate, mortality, and family, that contextually frame Varya's grief journey. Next, collected textual passage was then classified into one of the five grief stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, or acceptance, based on the behavioral, emotional, and psychological indicators associated with each stage as defined by Kübler-Ross. Last, interpretive analysis, in which the researcher examined the meaning, significance, and psychological implications of Varya's responses within the context of her characterization and conflicts.

FINDING AND RESULTS

Findings

Varya's Response to Death

To gain a deeper understanding of Varya's response to death the theory of five stages of grief will be used to gain a better understanding of the research. Varya represents a profound exploration of the fear of mortality throughout the narrative. A fortune teller provides her with a premonition that reveals the exact day of her death, which significantly impacts her character. This knowledge leads to a deep-seated fear of dying, manifesting in behaviors that illustrate her struggle with mortality. Varya's response to death is not only about her grief but also encompasses that of her siblings. The deaths of her siblings further intensify her quest to research ways to prolong life.

Varya's overarching approach to her own death is fundamentally defined by "control-seeking", a persistent, intellectually driven refusal to surrender to the passivity that mortality demands. Unlike her siblings, each of whom responds to the prophecy through emotional or physical extremity, Simon through hedonistic liberation, Klara through mysticism, and Daniel through obsessive investigation, Varya's response is characteristically rational and self-disciplining. From the moment she receives the fortune teller's prediction, she channels her existential terror not into visible emotional expression but into the construction of behavioural and professional systems designed to assert agency over the length and quality of her life. Her strict caloric restriction regimen, meticulously documented on a spreadsheet taped to her refrigerator, "*each meal's caloric count, as well as its vitamin and mineral content*" (Benjamin, 2018:269), is perhaps the most visceral illustration of this approach: every measured gram of food is an act of negotiation with death, a daily ritual of bargaining masquerading as scientific discipline. Similarly, her career at the Drake Institute, where she champions longevity research with near-evangelical conviction "*We aim to reduce human suffering. Is that not as much a moral imperative as saving the whales?*" (Benjamin, 2018:220) reveals a woman who has transformed her terror of dying into a professional identity, using the language of science to dignify what is, at its core, a deeply personal and emotional struggle for survival. Varya, in this sense, does not confront her death so much as she attempts to outmanoeuvre it. Perpetually bargaining, perpetually building walls of logic and discipline between herself and the inevitability she cannot escape.

Among the five stages, "bargaining" emerges as the most significant in illuminating the particular texture of Varya's inner life, precisely because it is the stage that persists the longest and penetrates the deepest into every domain of her existence. While denial initiates her grief and anger surfaces in moments of crisis, it is bargaining that structures Varya's entire adult identity, her career, her diet, her emotional withdrawal, and her relationship to time itself. This is what distinguishes her grief from those of the characters examined in prior studies: where Lewis in *A Grief Observed* (Nurjanah, 2023) bargains through theological questioning, and where Eliza in "Burn" (Novia & Widianingtyas, 2023) bargains through emotional confrontation, Varya bargains through science, a mode of negotiation that is socially sanctioned, professionally respected, and therefore far more difficult to recognize as grief at all. It is only when her experiment collapses, her life's work is compromised, and she is asked to resign, that the scaffolding of her bargaining finally gives way, and in that collapse, the most significant insight of her arc is revealed: "*She has lost her work, which was meant to be her contribution to the world – her repayment. The worst has happened, and amidst the hollowing loss is the thought that now there is much less to fear*" (Benjamin, 2018:278). This moment crystallizes

the paradox at the heart of Varya's character: that it is precisely the destruction of her bargain, the dismantling of the system she built to control death, that finally liberates her from it. The conclusion that can be drawn, therefore, is that for intellectually oriented individuals whose grief is embedded within professional and rationalist frameworks, acceptance does not arrive through emotional catharsis but through the involuntary collapse of the systems they have constructed to avoid it. Varya's grief is not resolved, it is surrendered to, and in that surrender, she begins to truly live.

A better understanding of Varya's fear of mortality will be divided into five stages of grief, starting denial, anger, bargaining, depression to finally acceptance. A central theme in Varya's storyline is the tension between surviving and truly living. As a researcher at the Drake Institute for Research on Aging, she grapples with whether a longer life equates to a better life. Her strict diet to caloric restriction experiments on Rhesus monkeys raises philosophical questions about the sacrifices made for longevity. Varya ultimately faces the dilemma of whether she is living at all or simply prolonging her existence through fear. Her journey illustrates the complexities of living with the knowledge of her mortality and her sibling's death by balancing the instinct for survival against the need for genuine human connection and fulfillment.

Denial

Varya's first denial stage is when she finds out about her death date from the Rishika. Varya denies the fact about her death date because of her logical thinking and does not believe in uncertainty like fortune tellers and such. For a moment, Varya's heart unlatches and lifts. Two thousand forty-four would make her eighty-eight, an altogether decent age to die. Then she pauses. *'How do you know?' 'What did I say about you trusting me?' The rishika raises a furry eyebrow and frowns. 'Now, I want you to go home and think about what I said. If you do that, you're gonna feel better. But don't tell anybody, all right? What it shows in your hand, what I told you – that's between you and me.'* (Benjamin, 2018: 13).

Varya's reaction captures the denial phase of grieving, in which she alternates between accepting and doubting her mortality through a psychological buffer. Although her initial response is one of hope, her skepticism is evident in her question regarding the facts. Denial, a coping strategy used to protect oneself from the agony of loss or approaching death, is what defines this stage. The denial stage also captures Varya's isolation as one of her responses to death. Daniel's death also matches his death date exactly like Rishika's prediction. Moreover, Daniel is the closest sibling to Varya, and that makes Varya create her isolation unconsciously.

"That fall, her anxiety about Daniel's date had become acute. She did not know what would happen that day, did not think she could stand to witness it – or perhaps it was that, if she were there, she would feel responsible. She still feared she might catch or transmit something terrible, as though her luck was both bad and contagious. The best thing she could do for Daniel was stay away" (Benjamin, 2018: 236).

The text reflects a sense of denial, which is the first stage of grief as described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. In this stage, individuals often struggle to accept the reality of a situation, the feelings of confusion and anxiety lead to isolation. Varya's anxiety about Daniel's date illustrates this denial, she is unable to confront the situation directly, fearing the emotional confusion it brings. This isolation also shows a subconscious refusal to acknowledge the potential outcomes of Daniel's actions, indicating that she is not ready to face the reality of

her feelings or the situation itself. Overall, her journey through denial encapsulates how individuals may grapple with their mortality and the impending loss of loved ones. Her experiences reflect a profound struggle to accept reality, characterized by confusion, skepticism, and isolation as the key elements of the denial stage in the grieving process.

Anger

The second phase of the five stages of grief that Varya goes through is Anger. This stage is indicated by her feeling of guilt that she experiences after she and her siblings meet Rishika to get their death date prediction. As the Gold family got older, they had a family meeting to talk about the future and the fortune teller's prediction. *'I don't know. Variety? She can't tell everyone the same thing.'* Varya's face is flushed. *'I'm sorry we ever went to see her. The only thing she did was lodge the idea in our heads.'* (Benjamin, 2018: 15). Varya expresses disappointment and annoyance, showing that she believes she was misled by a previous encounter. Her statement, *"I'm sorry we ever went to see her,"* represents a typical anger phase reaction in which people usually project their guilt and blame other people responsible for their emotional suffering. This is consistent with the angry person's tendency to wonder, *"Why is this happening to me?"* and look for someone to hold responsible for their pain.

As the reality of Gertie's stroke sets in, Varya's feelings of anger finally emerge. Varya directs this anger toward themselves or others questioning why they were not able to prevent this incident or feeling frustration at the unpredictability of life and health.

"Silence stretched on, and in it Varya heard what she already knew to be true, the source of her rage in the first place. I hoped I was. I wanted to. Gertie didn't have to say it. Varya knew. She also knew why – of course, she knew why – and yet it seemed unbearably cruel to think of Gertie leaving her now, of her own volition, when they were the only two left". (Benjamin, 2018: 221-222).

Varya's internal conflict reveals her awareness of the source of her anger, which is tied to the impending loss of Gertie. This stage of grief often involves a sense of guilt, betrayal, and anger towards the situation. Varya's awareness of her anger's roots complicates her emotions, as she feels justified in her anger yet is aware of its roots. The helplessness in grief amplifies her feelings of bitterness, as she shows sadness not only about the loss itself but also the connections she fears losing. The phrase *"it seemed unbearably cruel"* captures the deep emotional pain associated with grief, often directed as anger towards others or as self-blame.

Varya captures an intense moment of loss following Gertie's stroke, as well as the psychological stress that comes with seeing a loved one suffer, especially when viewed through a perspective of anger. In the context of the text, Gertie's deteriorating condition after her stroke evokes feelings of guilt in Varya. This guilt may not be directed outwardly but can manifest as frustration towards the situation itself. The phrase *"Gertie's face is darkening"* shows a transformation that is not just physical but emotional, leading Varya to confront her feelings of helplessness and rage over Gertie's suffering and loss of self.

Not only Gertie's condition, but the death of Daniel also has an impact on Varya's anger stage of grief. Varya's story demonstrates a long-suppressed sadness that suddenly comes to the surface. Giving Luke his protective gear brings back memories of Daniel, who has already passed away. This situation demonstrates how unresolved sadness can show up in commonplace circumstances, reminding Varya of her loss and arousing feelings of injustice and annoyance. Instead of being focused externally, the sadness becomes an internal conflict as she struggles with the feelings and memories connected to Daniel's passing. This

fits the description of the five stages of grief, and anger, where people may lash out at their situation or even themselves because they believe that their loss was unfair.

Six months after her brother's death, Varya is still looking for Daniel's murder. This shows that Varya is still angry and looks for someone to blame regarding Daniel's death. Varya's anger stems from her broader dissatisfaction with the circumstances surrounding Daniel's murder, not just her fury over the exoneration of Daniel's colleague. She shifts her perspective from a physical wound (the bullet injury) to one that is mental, focusing on the deeper effects of loss and how it impacts her sense of justice and truth. This reflects the traits of rage experienced during grief, where individuals may assign blame to others or feel envious of those who have not endured similar losses. Ultimately, Varya's journey through the anger stage reveals the complexity of grief, a process that is non-linear and deeply personal. Her experiences highlight how grief can evoke emotional responses, leading individuals to confront not just their loss but also their vulnerabilities and frustrations in the face of life's unpredictability.

Bargaining

The third stage that Varya goes through is bargaining. The first time Varya shows her bargaining in life is when she meets Rishika. The prophecy serves as a focal point for Varya's bargaining stages. She may subconsciously negotiate with her circumstances, hoping that by understanding this prophecy, she can alter its impact on her family.

"When did it begin? She had always been anxious, but something changed after her visit to the woman on Hester Street. Sitting in the rishika's apartment, Varya was sure she was a fraud, but when she went home the prophecy worked inside her like a virus. She saw it do the same thing to her siblings: it was evident in Simon's sprints, in Daniel's tendency toward anger, in the way Klara unlatched and drifted away from them". (Benjamin, 2018: 247).

The text highlights the start of the Varya bargaining phase. During the bargaining stage, one usually tries to make amends or lessen a loss by negotiating with oneself or a higher authority. When people think back on past deeds that they feel could have changed the course of their grief, they frequently play "what if" or "if only" scenarios. During this phase, people experience desperation and remorse as they try to take back control of their situation.

Varya is strict with her diet also a major cause of her response to death. The way she tries to bargain or extend her life is by choosing to eat less calorie intake to prolong her life and live as long as possible. The door hangs open. From the living room, Varya can see the rows of prepacked meals inside. On the top shelf are her breakfasts, mixed fruit in plastic bags with two tablespoons of high-fiber cereal. On the lower shelf are her lunches: nuts with beans or, on weekends, a slab of tofu or tuna. Her dinners are in the freezer, cooked weekly and then divided into foilwrapped portions. Taped to the side of the refrigerator, the side that faces Luke, is an Excel spreadsheet with each meal's caloric count, as well as its vitamin and mineral content. Varya's detailed organization of her meals, including caloric counts and nutritional content, suggests a strong desire to get control over her life during emotional turmoil. This aligns with the bargaining phase where Varya negotiates with herself, by seeking to change their reality or improve her situation. Her structured approach to meals can be seen to cope with feelings of helplessness, reflecting a need to feel in command of her health and body after experiencing significant weight loss.

As Varya works as a scientist, she engages in a critical discussion about the moral background of healthcare and research, particularly with diseases that affect human lives deeply. The text explores the concept of bargaining in grief, showing the moral implications of healthcare and research. It highlights the need for individuals to seek control over uncontrollable circumstances, such as illness and death, to cope with grief and find purpose in the aftermath. Varya emphasizes the influence of personal experiences with loss on one's stance on these issues, as they may feel validated by their own experiences. The moral need to bargain human suffering serves as a defense mechanism against the helplessness often felt during grief. Varya's internal struggle also shows individuals who have lost loved ones, questioned their past actions, and wished they had acted sooner. Varya captures how bargaining serves as an emotional strategy to regain control over mortality, highlighting the compromise to extend life and seeking control in the aftermath of loss.

Varya is known for her severe worry and compulsive behaviors, especially when it comes to longevity and health. She became a biologist researching longevity studies, concentrating on how diet could prolong life. This indicates her way to bargain life by finding ways to extend life as long as possible. Her wish to take charge of her destiny and steer clear of her weaknesses shows a strong wish to extend life. Varya's conversation regarding anti-aging is an example of bargaining. It is possible to understand the goal of extending health rather than just life as an effort to negotiate for better results for those who are elderly. Researchers are essentially attempting to bargain for a higher standard of living in old age by focusing on treating illnesses like Parkinson's disease and heart disease. This is in line with the bargaining stage, during which people could hope for improvements to their situation or to lessen their pain. Finally, the text emphasizes how Varya's internal conflicts and obsessive habits are expressions of her efforts to take back control of her life while dealing with loss and sadness. Her acts demonstrate the common human desire to bargain for more time and better conditions when faced with death and sorrow.

Depression

Varya's navigation of grief, particularly focusing on her experience of depression as one of the stages of grief. Varya's journey illustrates how grief can manifest through emotional turmoil and isolation, compounded by her guilt over surviving her siblings. Varya navigates her response to death through the lens of depression, as one of the five stages of grief. In the following Varya's depression stage started when she worked at the Drake Institute.

"She took the job for another reason, too. Varya had always told herself that she did her research out of love – love for life, for science, and for her siblings, who hadn't lived long enough to reach old age – but at heart, she worried that her primary motivation was fear. Fear that she had no control, that life slipped through one's fingers no matter what. Fear that Simon and Klara and Daniel had, at least, lived in the world, while Varya lived in her research, in her books, in her head. The job at the Drake felt like her last chance. If she could push herself to do this, in spite of what misery it would cause her, she could chip away at her guilt, that debt her survival had engendered". (Benjamin, 2018: 230-231).

Varya uses her research as a coping mechanism for her emotional turmoil in addition to being a research project. Varya's decision to immerse herself in work rather than contact with the outside world is indicative of the tendency for people in the depression stage to isolate themselves from social interactions as they process their grief. Her admission that she was living "in her head" instead of living life to the fullest highlights the emotional burden that comes with this phase. Varya's brother's memory lingered in her thoughts after his death.

Depression stages show how sadness can be complicated, especially when it comes to the depressive stage. Since her brother was the closest of her siblings, his passing shocked her.

Varya's pounding heart and intense sweating are physical signs of her anxiety that correspond to the depressive stage. At this stage, people may feel overwhelmed by their emotions and experience feelings of emptiness and hopelessness. Varya's choice to call Daniel despite her earlier decision not to, implies an internal conflict with her emotions of shame and guilt, which are common at this point. Her self-hatred and disappointment are described, which highlights the intense emotional strain that is common throughout this stage. When Varya is confronted by her son Luke, whom she believes to be a mere journalist, she begins to wonder if she is conducting the research for her benefit or that of her siblings. Because he is concerned and needs Varya to recognize that what she is doing is wrong, he starts to try to persuade her. Luke and Varya's conversation offers a deep examination of sadness, especially the feeling of isolation that can result from it. A key stage of depression marked by isolation and a feeling of entrapment is illustrated in Varya's circumstances.

Additionally, this text highlights a state of physical presence but emotional and psychological imprisonment, which is consistent with the social isolation symptoms frequently observed in those with depression. The complicated connection between depression and sadness is perfectly captured by Varya Gold's experience. Her experience serves as a reminder that dealing with loss frequently entails facing up to difficult realities about individuals and the decisions made in the face of terrible suffering.

Acceptance

In the context of the acceptance stage of grief, Varya's reflections reveal a profound struggle with unresolved feelings and the eventual recognition of her loss. This stage, as outlined in the Kübler-Ross model, signifies a crucial turning point where individuals begin to acknowledge the reality of their situation and the permanence of their grief. Acceptance does not imply that the pain of loss dissipates; rather, it indicates a shift in perspective, allowing individuals to integrate their experiences into their lives moving forward.

Varya's perspective on belief and mental health illustrates a complex interplay between coping mechanisms and the stages of acceptance, particularly in the context of isolation. Her recognition that her belief in the power of thought and rituals serves as a "necessary fiction" highlights her struggle with mental health issues, which is indicative of the Recognition stage of acceptance. In this stage, individuals acknowledge their problems but often resist fully accepting them, leading to a conflict between understanding and denial.

"Varya's views reveal how belief and mental health are intricately entwined. She understands that her belief in thought power and rituals is a necessary fiction, a coping strategy for her problems. She struggles with the belief that if one truly believes in anything, it might have meaning and influence their life, even though she is aware that these ideas could not be based in fact". (Benjamin, 2018: 240)

As Varya navigates these thoughts, she eventually reaches the acceptance stage. This stage involves recognizing her mental health challenges without the need for struggle or denial. It signifies a shift from viewing her beliefs as purely coping mechanisms to understanding them as part of her reality. Acceptance does not imply that she no longer experiences pain or confusion, but rather it reflects a willingness to coexist with these feelings while exploring new ways to cope and find meaning.

In the debate with Luke, she realizes that she made a mess in her research, even sacrificing her beloved test subject that had failed. After she knows the mess that she has made, her co-worker, Annie, proposes to Varya that she has already talked with the boss of The Drake Institute to offer Varya a "voluntary resignation". The beginning of acceptance on Varya's journey on the five stages of grief is shown in the story. After Varya agrees with Annie's suggestion, acceptance is hinted at in the text as Varya begins to confront the reality of her situation. While she struggles with feelings of shame and regret, there is an implicit understanding that she must face the consequences of her actions. Acceptance does not equate to happiness but rather an acknowledgement of her new reality. This suggests that while Varya may still feel pain and regret, she is starting to come to terms with what has happened and how it will shape her future.

The statement that "*now there is much less to fear*" (Benjamin 2018:278). draws attention to an essential aspect of acceptance. At this point, people start to understand and accept their new reality, knowing that although loss is painful, it also saves them from the anxiety of what might have been. This illustrates the core of acceptance, which is accepting the loss and finding a way to go on without necessarily experiencing joy over it.

In the event of self-forgiveness, Varya tries to fix her relationship with her son Luke. Varya's story of acceptance and her acknowledgment of her loss without feeling denial and anger about it encapsulate the themes of grief, guilt, and the journey toward acceptance. Varya starts her acceptance journey by forgiving herself and her son. When Luke responds, Varya feels relieved, suggesting a brief connection and a wish for forgiveness. This relief, though, is contrasted with fear, a fear that she would not have much time to gain his forgiveness. Varya's apologies to Luke for his brother's suffering represents a start toward acceptance, which often involves feelings of guilt and emotional changes, to achieve the feeling of joy. She encourages Luke to forgive himself, saying that holding onto guilt will prevent him from living life to the fullest. Acceptance is a recognition of reality and the need for life despite suffering, not happiness.

Three months after Varya quits her job and tries to talk to her son Luke, Varya regains her relationship. She runs across Robert, her youngest brother's boyfriend, who is one of the people she knows. The intricacies of grief are perfectly captured by Varya's statement that she regrets not visiting Simon while he is in San Francisco. She struggles with sentiments of bitterness and hatred, not only toward Simon but also toward herself for failing to overcome the emotional gap. This internal struggle serves as an example of how acceptance means facing up to difficult realities about relationships and individual decisions. As Varya considers lost chances for connection, the chapter demonstrates how acceptance is frequently linked with feelings of regret and longing.

Varya also starts to reflect more deeply on her previous decisions and relationships, which shows an essential connection to stages of acceptance. Varya's thoughts ultimately conclude acceptance. She realizes that she wants to be free of worries rather than immortal. Although this acceptance does not take away from her pain, it does signal a change in perspective and a move toward incorporating her experiences into her life story. Kübler-Ross explains that acceptance is about accepting loss and learning to live with it. She manages to reach a point where she may enjoy memories without becoming overwhelmed.

In sum, Varya realizes that she prefers free-of-concern living rather than immortality. This acknowledgment of loss while incorporating circumstances into her life story without becoming overwhelmed is a sign of an adjustment in perspective. Thus, Varya's journey

exemplifies the essence of acceptance according to Kübler-Ross: accepting loss and learning to live with it, albeit with continued emotional depth and complexity.

Varya's Life Fulfillment

As Varya finally passes the five stages of grief, she tries to live her life to the fullest. Varya shows up as a character whose sense of fulfillment is closely linked to how she views life and death. Her experience exemplifies the more general themes of fate vs choice, the significance of family ties, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment in the face of unavoidable death. Varya's development shows how resilient she can be in the face of fear and sorrow as she learns to live for herself.

Varya starts to enjoy life, as she finally begins to forgive herself, even though everything is not following her plan but accepting fate that has already been written is important rather than changing it, "*She'd tell herself that what she really wanted was not to live forever, but to stop worrying*" (Benjamin, 2018: 273). As she has accepted the fact that what she truly wants is to not live forever but stop worrying about the uncertainty, she lives her life more peacefully and begins to accept her fate.

Varya's hope for life represents a yearning for agency and fulfillment beyond her predicted fate. Her character illustrates the conflict between reason and emotional sensitivity, stating that accepting potential and ambiguity is the core of life and illustrating the interaction between fate and free will, *Varya knows that stopping aging is as improbable as the idea that a compulsion can keep something bad from happening. But she still wants to shout: Don't go* (Benjamin, 2018: 278). The text highlights aging, life's limitations, and the human condition. Varya's cries to "Don't go" represent everyone's need to cling to memories and loved ones despite change. It draws attention to the emotional conflict between resistance to change and acceptance, toward the progress of life fulfillment by showcasing how important it is to treasure the present despite life's temporary nature. It reminds her of human common vulnerability and the importance of living in the present.

Varya's narrative perfectly captures the complex interplay between fate and free will. Her story illustrates the notion that living genuinely, accepting connections, and negotiating the difficulties of human connection are all important components of fulfillment in addition to reaching objectives. Varya increases her sense of wholeness and purpose as she faces her anxieties and develops open communication skills that bring her one step closer to living a life that aligns with her goals and beliefs. Varya and Luke's communication via snail mail, pictures, and postcards is an example of their evolving relationship. These symbolic expressions of love symbolize Varya's search for comfort in the face of uncertainty as well as their developing relationship. This activity emphasizes how crucial communication is to building relationships that support a feeling of fulfillment and belonging.

Varya's journey towards life fulfillment can be seen as a reflection of her evolving understanding of success and purpose. Varya's experience encapsulates the essence of finding fulfillment through teaching. It highlights how confronting fears, embracing one's passions, and redefining success can lead to profound personal growth. By focusing on the impact that she has on her students. Varya embodies the belief that true fulfillment comes from meaningful connections and contributions to others' lives. This journey reflects a broader narrative about the importance of aligning one's career with personal values and passions, leading to a more enriched and fulfilling life.

Varya's experience of loss and her subsequent search for meaning in life demonstrate a significant transformation influenced by her connections and her acceptance of life's change. Varya eventually moves out of the five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – with an entirely new perspective on enjoying life to the fullest even when death is unavoidable. Varya's story is a touching illustration of the difficulties of grieving and finding meaning in life. She regains control over her life through her acceptance of life's limitations and her emphasis on building relationships. Varya illustrates the idea that happiness is about living truthfully, cherishing relationships, and finding significance in the present time rather than just reaching predetermined objectives by facing her anxieties and enjoying life. To live a successful life, this journey emphasizes the crucial balance between exercising free will and accepting fate.

The most pressing question left unanswered in Varya's is not *whether* she will die, but *how* she wants to live. When Luke asks her directly, "*What do you want?*", the honest answer Varya constructs in her mind is profoundly revealing: "*To go back to the beginning. She would tell her thirteen-year-old self not to visit the woman. To her twenty-five-year-old self: Find Simon, forgive him. She would tell herself to take care of Klara, to sign up for JDate, to stop the nurse before she took the baby out of Varya's arms*" (Benjamin, 2018:273). What this interior monologue exposes are not only regret, but also a clear and achingly specific vision of the life Varya actually wanted, one built around human connection, presence, and love, rather than controlled isolation and scientific achievement. The life Varya wants is relational at its core: she wants to have been a sister who showed up, a woman who allowed herself to be loved, a mother who did not surrender her child. Every item on her imagined list of corrections is an act of connection that fear prevented, and it is in enumerating these absences that Varya finally articulates, with devastating clarity, what she has been bargaining *for* all along. She did not want more years. She wanted the years she had to have *meant* something to the people she loved.

This vision of a desired life is further elaborated *acted upon* in Varya's turn toward teaching and her rebuilding of her relationship with Luke. Her quiet declaration, "*I think I might like to teach*" (Benjamin, 2018:276), carries far more weight than it might initially appear. Teaching represents a radical reorientation of Varya's relationship to knowledge: rather than hoarding scientific understanding as a personal defense mechanism against death, she imagines *giving* it away, sharing it with "*all those upturned faces, waiting to see what she had up her sleeve*" (Benjamin, 2018:276). More importantly, she admits that the students she liked best were those who were sleeping as shown "*She was determined to wake them up*". A metaphor that speaks directly to the life she herself is now choosing, one of engagement over withdrawal, wakefulness over the long sleep of fear. This desire for genuine human impact is mirrored in her rekindled correspondence with Luke, through which she gradually rebuilds what isolation had destroyed "*They've begun to exchange snail mail, photos and postcards and other small things*" (Benjamin, 2018:275). The life Varya wants to lead, therefore, is one of deliberate presence. What did want to discuss is present to her students, present to her son, present to the memories of her siblings rather than paralyzed by them, is a life measured not in years extended through caloric restriction, but in moments of authentic connection, and it is this realization, more than any stage of grief she passes through, that constitutes her most profound transformation.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how Varya Gold, the eldest surviving sibling in Chloe Benjamin's *The Immortalists* (2018), responds to death and loss through the lens of Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief and how this individual grief journey ultimately concludes in life fulfillment. The findings confirm that Varya traverses all five stages, though not in a rigid or linear sequence. Rather, her grief manifests as a deeply individualized, non-linear process shaped by her dual position as both a scientific rationalist and a guilt-ridden survivor. Varya's denial is rooted in intellectual skepticism; her anger is displaced onto external circumstances including her siblings' deaths and perceived injustices; her bargaining takes the unprecedented form of scientific research into longevity; her depression is characterized by emotional isolation and professional overcommitment; and her acceptance is achieved not through spiritual resolution, but through relational reconnection with her estranged son, Luke. Together, these findings paint a portrait of grief that is simultaneously universal in its emotional architecture and profoundly unique in its individual expression.

The findings of this study carry significant interpretive weight, particularly in what they reveal about the relationship between professional identity and grief. Varya's scientific vocation does not insulate her from grief, it becomes the very medium through which her grief is channelled and disguised. Her obsessive caloric restriction research at the Drake Institute, her dietary self-regulation, and her advocacy for longevity science all function as elaborate bargaining mechanisms: rational, socially legitimized attempts to negotiate with mortality rather than accept it. This was, in part, an expected outcome given Varya's characterization as the most logically oriented of the Gold siblings, yet the depth to which rationalism permeates every stage of her grief, including denial and anger, exceeded initial expectations. What was particularly striking was the discovery that scientific pursuit, often framed in literature as a triumph of human agency, here becomes an expression of profound psychological vulnerability. This suggests that grief does not always manifest through emotional outpouring or spiritual seeking; in intellectually oriented individuals, it may instead calcify into hyperrational behaviors that serve as unconscious avoidance of emotional confrontation.

When situated within the broader landscape of existing scholarship, the findings of this study both confirm and meaningfully extend prior research. Consistent with Madden's (2023) analysis of *The Gathering*, this study affirms that grief as framed by Kübler-Ross operates non-linearly in literary characters, manifesting across fragmented and overlapping emotional registers rather than through sequential progression. Similarly, the finding that acceptance does not equate to the cessation of pain but rather signals a shift in perspective aligns with Nurjanah's (2023) examination of C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, in which the protagonist achieves peace not by overcoming grief but by integrating it into a reconstituted worldview. However, this study diverges markedly from both Wijaya's (2023) reading of *The Shack* and Nurjanah's analysis in one critical respect: where those studies locate the resolution of grief within a religious or spiritual framework, Varya's acceptance is achieved through secular, relational means – specifically, through self-forgiveness and the rebuilding of her bond with Luke. This distinction highlights how individual differences in belief systems, professional identity, and family dynamics produce meaningfully different grief trajectories, even when the same theoretical framework is applied. Furthermore, in contrast to Novia and Widianingtyas's (2023) psycholinguistic study of "Burn" from Hamilton's musical – in which grief is most prominently expressed through anger, Varya's most dominant and sustained stage is bargaining, a finding that reflects the unique

circumstance of anticipatory grief under prophetic foreknowledge of one's own death. Finally, while Fitriansal's (2025) study of *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* reads grief through the lens of cultural marginalization and collective national identity, this study foregrounds the interior psychological experience of a single individual which is a methodological and thematic contrast that underscores the importance of individual-level analyses in grief scholarship.

One of the more unexpected findings in this study concerns the compounding effect of anticipatory grief on Varya's psychological responses. Unlike the characters in the previously reviewed studies which are all of whom grieve retrospectively in response to losses that have already occurred differently to Varya grieves both retrospectively and prospectively, simultaneously mourning her siblings and dreading her own predicted death. This dual temporality of grief, grieving backward and forward at once, produces an emotional intensity that is qualitatively different from conventional grief narratives and was not anticipated as a central finding at the outset of the study. It also complicates a straightforward application of the Kübler-Ross model, which was originally theorized in the context of terminal illness, where the dying individual grieves their own impending death. The model, therefore, required a more flexible interpretive application in this study than in prior works, which treated it as a framework for reactive rather than anticipatory grief.

Notwithstanding its contributions, this study acknowledges several limitations that qualify its findings. First, as a descriptive qualitative study focused on a single character from a single novel, its findings cannot be generalized to broader populations or applied universally across literary traditions. The analysis is necessarily interpretive and contingent on textual evidence drawn from one author's fictional construction of grief, which may not fully reflect the psychological complexity of real-world grief experiences. Second, the study does not account for the multiple other characters in *The Immortalists* whose grief trajectories, though peripheral to this study, would provide valuable comparative data for understanding how individual differences within the same family unit produce divergent responses to the same prophetic knowledge. Future research should conduct a comparative character analysis across all four Gold siblings, examining how factors such as gender, sexual identity, and professional ambition differentially shape grief responses within a shared existential circumstance. Additionally, future studies might apply alternative psychological frameworks to Varya's character in order to determine whether different theoretical lenses yield complementary or contrasting insights. Cross-cultural or cross-textual comparative studies that juxtapose *The Immortalists* with non-Western literary representations of grief would also enrich the field, building on the cross-cultural work initiated by Fitriansal (2025).

In sum, this study demonstrates that grief, even when framed by a well-established theoretical model, is irreducibly individual. Varya Gold's journey through the five stages of grief shaped by rationalism, survivor guilt, anticipatory mortality, and the slow reclamation of relational connection constitutes a case study in how personal identity and circumstance transform the universal experience of loss into something singular and irrepealable. By situating this analysis within a comparative conversation with prior scholarship, this study establishes that the Kübler-Ross framework retains both theoretical utility and interpretive flexibility across diverse literary and cultural contexts, while simultaneously revealing the limits of any single model to fully capture the breadth of human grief. The central take-home message of this research is this: to understand how individuals confront mortality, we must look not only at the stages they traverse, but at *who they are* as they traverse them, for it is in

those individual differences that the most profound truths about human resilience, connection, and the will to live are found.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to achieve three interconnected objectives: to trace the manifestation of Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief in Varya Gold's responses to death and loss in Chloe Benjamin's *The Immortalists* (2018) and to explore how the resolution of that grief ultimately enables a reconstituted vision of life fulfillment. All two objectives have been achieved. Yet, the significance of the findings extends well beyond confirmation of the theoretical framework. What this study ultimately reveals is something more challenging and more illuminating than a straightforward application of Kübler-Ross's model: it reveals that grief, when embedded within a life structured by rationalism, professional identity, and the foreknowledge of one's own death, does not simply pass through stages it colonizes them, transforming every domain of a person's existence into an unconscious instrument of survival. Varya's grief is not a response to death; it is a way of life constructed against it, and it is precisely this distinction that reframes the five stages not as a psychological sequence but as an existential architecture.

The most critical reinterpretation that this study offers concerns the stage of bargaining, which proves to be the dominant structural force governing Varya's entire adult life. The textual evidence is unambiguous in these examples: Varya's meticulous dietary regimen, her professional advocacy for longevity science as a "moral imperative", and her compulsive self-restriction all confirm that bargaining for Varya is not a stage she passes through but one she inhabits, builds institutions within, and derives her entire sense of purpose from. This finding demands a reinterpretation of what bargaining means when it intersects with professional identity, rather than manifesting as private, supplicatory negotiation which it becomes publicly rationalized, socially legitimized, and therefore far more resistant to dissolution. The collapse of this bargain, when her research is compromised and her resignation is requested, is thus not merely a professional failure, it is the structural undoing of the mechanism Varya had used to survive for decades.

Second, exploring how grief resolution enables life fulfillment which has been achieved through the finding that Varya's vision of fulfillment is irreducibly relational, and that this relational vision was always present beneath the control-seeking behaviors that grief produced in her. When she imagines what she would tell her younger self, the list she is not a list of scientific achievements or longevity milestones, it is a catalogue of connections severed by fear. The life Varya wants is the life grief prevented, one of presence, love, and mutual vulnerability. Her turn toward teaching and her rebuilt correspondence with Luke through are not incidental details of narrative resolution, they are the enacted counterargument to everything her grief had constructed. Together, they demonstrate that fulfillment, for Varya, is not found in the extension of life in the willingness to be present, impermanent, and connected.

The contributions of this study to future research are both theoretical and empirical. Theoretically, it proposes that the Kübler-Ross framework requires modification when applied to characters who experience anticipatory grief alongside reactive grief – a distinction that has significant implications not only for literary analysis but for psychological research on individuals who live under the foreknowledge of terminal illness or hereditary mortality risk. Empirically, this study opens productive avenues for future

investigation, including a comparative analysis of all four Gold siblings in *The Immortalists*, which would illuminate how gender, sexual identity, and vocational orientation produce divergent grief responses to the same prophetic knowledge within a single-family unit.

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