

MAIN CHARACTER'S POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER IN THE MOVIE OF MANCHESTER BY THE SEA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the main character's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Kenneth Lonergan's film *Manchester by the Sea* (2016), focusing on Lee Chandler's psychological symptoms and personality traits before and after his traumatic experience. Using the diagnostic framework of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR, 2022) and McCrae and Costa's Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality, the research employs a descriptive qualitative method. The primary data are derived from the film's dialogues, scenes, and script, while secondary sources include scholarly books and journals on PTSD and personality theories. The findings reveal that Lee displays several PTSD criteria, such as intrusive memories, avoidance, negative alterations in cognition and mood, and heightened arousal, which manifest in his flashbacks, emotional detachment, and social withdrawal. Furthermore, the study identifies significant changes in his personality: before the trauma, Lee demonstrates openness, conscientiousness, and social connectedness, but afterward, his traits shift toward heightened neuroticism, reduced extraversion, and diminished agreeableness. This research contributes to the field of literary studies by illustrating how psychological theories can be applied in film analysis, highlighting the impact of trauma on human behavior and personality, and fostering greater awareness of mental health through cinematic representation.

Keywords: *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, DSM-5-TR, Five-Factor Model, psychology of literature, Manchester by the Sea*

INTRODUCTION

Literature has long served as a medium to explore the complexity of human emotions and psychological struggles. As (Wellek & Warren, 1962) argue, literature not only reflects human life but also provides insight into inner experiences and psychological conditions that shape individuals' responses to their world. Film, as a modern form of literature, similarly functions as a powerful medium that combines visual and verbal elements to represent complex emotional states and social realities (Joseph & Dennis, 2012). In particular, films that portray characters with psychological disorders allow audiences to engage with nuanced depictions of trauma, grief, and healing. Such representations invite scholarly inquiry that connects psychology and literature, broadening the scope of analysis beyond narrative and aesthetics.

One of the psychological conditions often depicted in literature and film is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to the American Psychiatric Association (2022), PTSD arises after individuals are exposed to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or violence, and its symptoms may include intrusive memories, avoidance, emotional numbing, and hyperarousal. Research highlights that PTSD not only affects daily functioning but also reshapes personality traits, influencing how individuals interact with others and perceive themselves (Lahey, 2009).

Consequently, the application of psychological frameworks such as the DSM-5-TR diagnostic criteria and McCrae & Costa (1999) Five-Factor Model (FFM) becomes essential for analyzing how trauma impacts literary or cinematic characters at both behavioral and personality levels.

Kenneth Lonergan's *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) provides a profound depiction of PTSD through its protagonist, Lee Chandler. After experiencing the traumatic loss of his three children in a house fire, Lee exhibits symptoms consistent with PTSD, including flashbacks, emotional detachment, guilt, and difficulty reintegrating into social life. His psychological struggle is further complicated by his new role as guardian for his nephew, which forces him to confront suppressed emotions and unresolved grief. As depicted in the film, Lee's trauma not only disrupts his daily life but also reshapes his personality, shifting him from a socially connected individual to one marked by isolation and self-punishment. This transformation makes the film a valuable object of study within the psychology of literature.

This article aims to analyze Lee Chandler's PTSD symptoms and personality traits before and after the traumatic incident in *Manchester by the Sea*. Using the DSM-5-TR diagnostic framework and the Five-Factor Model as theoretical lenses, the study investigates how trauma manifests in Lee's behavior and personality. By bridging psychology and literary analysis, this research demonstrates how cinematic narratives reflect real psychological conditions and contribute to broader discussions of trauma and mental health. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in literature, showing how psychological theories can enrich interpretations of characters and highlight the human dimensions of suffering, resilience, and identity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Psychology of Literature

The psychology of literature examines how literary texts reflect, represent, and explore human psychological conditions. According to Minderop (2013), psychological approaches in literature emphasize the analysis of characters' behavior, emotions, and mental struggles as depicted in narratives. Wellek & Warren (1962) also state that literature can serve as a means of studying human psychology since it portrays characters who mirror real human experiences. In this sense, film as a form of modern literature becomes an important medium for analyzing psychological conflicts, as it combines narrative, dialogue, and visual elements that depict the mental states of characters in nuanced ways.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a psychological disorder that develops after exposure to traumatic events such as life-threatening experiences, violence, or serious injury. Based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-V TR, 2022), PTSD symptoms are categorized into four clusters: intrusive memories, avoidance, negative alterations in cognition and mood, and alterations in arousal and reactivity. These symptoms influence the individual's daily functioning, social relationships, and self-concept. In the analysis of *Manchester by the Sea*, these diagnostic criteria are used to identify Lee Chandler's psychological condition, demonstrating how trauma affects his behavior and interactions with others.

Personality Traits: The Five-Factor Model

McCrae & Costa Five-Factor Model (1997) provides a framework for understanding personality through five broad dimensions: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. These traits represent relatively stable patterns of thought,

emotion, and behavior across situations. Trauma can significantly alter how these traits are expressed, often intensifying negative traits such as neuroticism while diminishing positive traits like extraversion or agreeableness (Lahey, 2009). Applying this model to Lee Chandler enables a deeper exploration of how his personality shifts before and after his traumatic loss, revealing the psychological impact of grief and PTSD on his identity and relationships.

By combining the psychology of literature, DSM-5-TR's diagnostic framework, and the Five-Factor Model, this study constructs a comprehensive theoretical basis for analyzing Lee Chandler's character in *Manchester by the Sea*. The integration of psychological theory and literary analysis highlights how cinematic representation can portray real mental health issues, while also emphasizing the value of interdisciplinary approaches in literary studies. This framework ensures that the analysis is grounded in both psychological accuracy and literary interpretation, providing insights into the complexity of trauma, personality, and human resilience.

METHODOLOGY

This study applies a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the psychological condition of the main character, Lee Chandler, in *Manchester by the Sea* (2016). As Cresswell (2013) notes, qualitative research emphasizes descriptive data and seeks to interpret phenomena based on context and meaning. In this research, the focus is on describing Lee's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms and his personality traits before and after the traumatic incident, as represented in the film.

The primary data of this study consist of dialogues, scenes, and narrative elements from Kenneth Lonergan's *Manchester by the Sea*. These were examined to identify signs of PTSD and changes in Lee's personality. Secondary data include scholarly books, journals, and articles on psychology of literature, PTSD, and personality theories, particularly the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR, 2022) and McCrae and Costa's Five-Factor Model (1996). These sources were used to support and validate the analysis.

The data collection process was carried out through repeated viewing of the film and close reading of its transcript. Relevant dialogues and scenes were documented, classified, and then interpreted according to the categories of PTSD symptoms and personality traits. The analysis followed three steps: (1) identifying evidence of PTSD symptoms as outlined in DSM-5-TR; (2) classifying Lee's personality traits based on the Five-Factor Model before and after the trauma; and (3) interpreting the findings within the framework of psychology of literature. This systematic process ensured that the analysis remained both theoretically grounded and contextually relevant.

Through this methodological approach, the study aims to reveal how Lee Chandler's trauma is represented cinematically and how psychological theories can be integrated into literary and film analysis. The findings contribute to broader interdisciplinary discussions on the portrayal of mental health in literature and film.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) of Lee Chandler

This section analyzes Lee Chandler's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in *Manchester by the Sea* using the diagnostic framework of the DSM-5-TR (2022). The DSM-5-TR categorizes PTSD symptoms into several criteria, including exposure to trauma, intrusion, avoidance, negative alterations in cognition and mood, alterations in arousal and reactivity, duration of disturbance, significant distress or impairment in functioning, and the exclusion of other factors.

Criterion A (Exposure to Trauma Symptom)

The analysis of Criterion A emphasizes Lee Chandler's direct exposure to traumatic events as the foundation of his Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) diagnosis in *Manchester by the Sea*. According to DSM-5-TR (2022), Criterion A requires experiencing or witnessing actual or threatened death or serious injury. Lee's trauma is rooted in the accidental house fire that caused the death of his three children, an event that fulfills Criterion A1 by placing him in direct contact with life-threatening circumstances. This experience became the central traumatic event shaping his psychological condition and establishing the basis for the development of further PTSD symptoms.



Fig. 1. Lee's directly experiencing trauma event
(00:55:44-00:56:11)

The data in Figures 1 illustrate how Lee's trauma aligns with both Criterion A1 and A2. As the one responsible for the fire, Lee directly experienced the devastating loss of his children, which fulfills the requirement of exposure to actual death. In addition, he also confronted the aftermath of their deaths, witnessing the arrival of emergency responders, the grief of his wife and community, and the subsequent legal process. These experiences reinforced the trauma by making him unable to escape its emotional and visual consequences. Together, these aspects demonstrate how Criterion A is fully met in Lee's case, providing the foundation for analyzing his PTSD in the film.

Criterion B (Intrusion Symptom)



Fig. 2. Lee goes to drop off his nephew, Patrick to school and sees him interacting with his schoolmates.
(01:33:34-01:33:39)

Figures 2 illustrate Lee Chandler's fulfillment of Criterion B4, which involves intense psychological distress when exposed to trauma related cues. His nephew Patrick's routine activities such as playing hockey, joking with friends, and enjoying life serve as painful reminders of the children Lee lost in the house fire. These moments trigger deep sadness and reinforce his emotional withdrawal, showing how unresolved trauma perpetuates intrusive distress and prevents him from moving forward, in line with the DSM 5 TR (2022) description of PTSD symptoms.

Criterion C (Avoidance Symptom)

The third criterion of symptoms PTSD is Criterion C (Avoidance Symptom). According to DSM-V TR (2022) identifies avoidance as one of the core symptom groups of PTSD, requiring

individuals to engage in efforts to avoid distressing thoughts, feelings, conversations, or activities that serve as reminders of the traumatic event.



Fig. 3. Lee talks to his nephew's at kitchen table
(01:32:52-01:32:58)

Figures 3 demonstrate Lee Chandler's fulfillment of Criterion C2 in the DSM 5 TR (2022), which refers to the avoidance of external reminders associated with trauma. His statement, "You can stay here until your school lets out. That'll give me some time to set things up in Boston better," reflects his reluctance to remain in Manchester with his nephew, revealing avoidance and emotional detachment. This behaviour indicates more than logistical planning; it highlights Lee's psychological struggle to confront his past trauma and his difficulty forming emotional connections, as guardianship responsibilities trigger painful memories of losing his children.

Criterion D (Negative Alterations in Cognitions and Mood Symptom)



Fig. 4. Lee cries in his aunt's arms
(02:00:43)

Figure 4 illustrates Lee Chandler's fulfillment of Criterion D3 in the DSM 5 TR (2022), which refers to distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of trauma leading to self blame. In this scene, Lee experiences an emotional breakdown marked by overwhelming guilt and shame, convinced that he is personally responsible for the fire that killed his children. His collapse into another person's arms symbolizes his deep emotional turmoil and self directed blame, reflecting maladaptive guilt that extends beyond normal remorse. This moment demonstrates how PTSD distorts Lee's perception of responsibility, trapping him in a cycle of self hatred, avoidance, and prolonged psychological distress.

Criterion E (Marked alterations in arousal with the traumatic events)



Fig. 5. Lee drinking alone at the Bar.
(01:58:44)

Figure 4D shows Lee Chandler meeting Criterion D3 of the DSM 5 TR (2022), which involves distorted beliefs about the cause of trauma that lead to self blame. Overcome with guilt, Lee believes he is solely responsible for the fire that killed his children, collapsing in despair as his shame overwhelms him. This scene reflects maladaptive guilt, where grief turns into irrational self hatred, reinforcing his psychological suffering and preventing recovery.

Criterion F (Duration of the Disturbance)

The analysis of Criterion F shows that Lee Chandler's PTSD symptoms persist well beyond the one month requirement stated in the DSM 5 TR (2022), confirming their chronic nature. Years after the fire, Lee continues to suffer intrusive memories, emotional numbness, avoidance of Manchester, irritability, and hypervigilance, demonstrating that his trauma is long lasting rather than temporary. His inability to rebuild relationships, accept new responsibilities, or reconnect with his hometown further reflects the enduring impact of his condition, aligning closely with Criterion F's emphasis on prolonged symptom duration.

Criterion G (Disturbance Causing Clinically Significant distress on Social/Occupational Function)

The analysis of Criterion G demonstrates that Lee Chandler's PTSD significantly impairs his social and occupational functioning, as required by the DSM 5 TR (2022). His withdrawal from relationships, choice of a low demand janitorial job, refusal to assume permanent guardianship of his nephew, and recurring anger outbursts reveal severe functional limitations. These patterns show that his trauma not only persists but also disrupts daily responsibilities and emotional connections, fulfilling Criterion G.

Criterion H (Distruption not caused by Other Factors)

Criterion H in the DSM 5 TR (2022) requires that PTSD symptoms are not caused by substances or medical conditions, and Lee Chandler's case in *Manchester by the Sea* aligns with this standard. His intrusive memories, avoidance, emotional numbness, and hypervigilance are consistently shown as direct effects of unresolved trauma rather than alcohol use or illness. Although he drinks at times, the persistence of his symptoms apart from intoxication confirms that his condition stems from psychological trauma, fulfilling Criterion H.

2. Five-Factor Model (OCEAN)

The Five Factor Model (FFM), or OCEAN model, explains personality through five stable traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. In *Manchester by the Sea* (2016), Lee Chandler's character shows how trauma reshapes the expression of these traits. Before the fire, his personality supported his family and social roles, but after the tragedy, PTSD symptoms distorted this balance, heightening neuroticism while reducing openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness. Examining Lee's

personality across these traits before and after trauma illustrates how PTSD disrupts not only emotional states but also the enduring characteristics that shape identity and relationships.

Openness to Experience



Fig. 6. Lee refuses back to Manchester

Openness in the Five-Factor Model includes imagination, adaptability, and curiosity. Before his trauma, Lee showed openness through fishing trips with his brother, community interactions, and social bonds that reflected flexibility and appreciation for life. After the loss of his children, however, this trait constricts, as shown in the scene where he refuses to stay in Manchester. His avoidance of the town demonstrates how PTSD narrows openness, redirecting it into rigid emotional withdrawal and routine work. From the FFM perspective, Lee's openness is not erased but transformed into fear of change and avoidance of anything linked to his pain.

Conscientiousness



Fig. 7. Lee tells the lawyer

Conscientiousness reflects responsibility, self-control, and dependability. Before the tragedy, Lee demonstrated conscientiousness as a steady husband and father who worked regularly and carried out family duties with responsibility. After the fire, however, this trait collapses, shown in the scene where he refuses guardianship of Patrick. His words reveal avoidance of responsibility driven by emotional paralysis from PTSD, turning order and stability into withdrawal and disorder. From the FFM perspective, his conscientiousness is fractured, as guilt and despair override his ability to act responsibly.

Extraversion

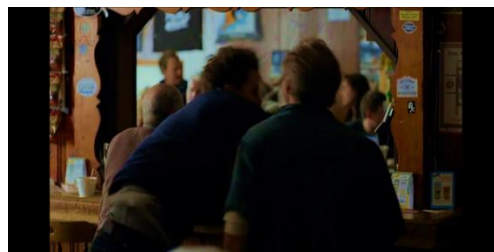


Fig. 8. Lee aggressive action

Extraversion reflects sociability, energy, and positive interaction with others. Before his trauma, Lee displayed extraversion by joking with friends, spending time with his brother Joe, and actively engaging in the community, showing vitality and openness to connection. After the tragedy, however, this trait shifts into withdrawal and hostility, as seen in the bar fight scene where he responds with aggression rather than warmth. From the FFM perspective, Lee's extraversion is not lost but distorted by PTSD, redirecting his energy from positive social bonds into defensive isolation and destructive behavior.

Agreeableness



Fig. 9. Lee comforts Patrick after Joe's death

Agreeableness involves compassion, cooperation, and trust in relationships. Before the trauma, Lee displayed high agreeableness through warmth toward his children, cooperation with Joe, and dependability within his family. Afterward, however, his agreeableness becomes unstable. In scenes with Patrick, he shows care and empathy, but in bar fights he reacts with hostility and aggression. From the FFM perspective, Lee's agreeableness is fractured by PTSD, leaving him capable of empathy yet unable to sustain it consistently due to emotional instability.

Neuroticism



Fig. 10. Lee breaks down and said "I can't beat it"

Neuroticism is defined by emotional instability, anxiety, and sensitivity to negative emotions. Before the traumatic event, Lee showed only moderate levels of neuroticism. Although he was emotionally sensitive, he was able to balance stress through the support of his family and his capacity to function in daily life as a husband, father, and worker. This stability kept his emotional vulnerability from overwhelming his personality. After the fire, however, neuroticism becomes Lee's most dominant trait. In the breakdown scene, his words and behavior convey overwhelming guilt and despair, illustrating how he cannot escape from intrusive grief. His trauma amplifies his emotional instability, leaving him unable to regulate his feelings or rebuild his life. From the FFM perspective, neuroticism has overtaken his personality, reshaping his worldview and interactions. The trait that was once balanced now defines him, overshadowing openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness. Lee's experience shows how PTSD magnifies neuroticism into chronic instability, trapping him in a cycle of self-blame and preventing the possibility of healing or growth.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the portrayal of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and personality traits of Lee Chandler, the main character in Kenneth Lonergan's *Manchester by the Sea* (2016). By applying the diagnostic framework of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR, 2022) and McCrae and Costa's Five-Factor Model, the research identified how trauma reshaped Lee's psychological condition and personality. The findings demonstrate that Lee exhibits core PTSD symptoms, including intrusive memories, avoidance, negative alterations in cognition and mood, and heightened arousal. These symptoms are evident in his flashbacks, emotional detachment, and difficulties in forming and maintaining social relationships.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed significant shifts in Lee's personality traits. Before the traumatic loss of his children, Lee displayed characteristics of openness, conscientiousness, and sociability. However, after the incident, his traits shifted toward high neuroticism, emotional instability, and social withdrawal, while his levels of extraversion and agreeableness declined. These changes illustrate how trauma profoundly impacts not only mental health but also enduring aspects of personality.

Overall, the study highlights the value of combining psychological theories with literary and film analysis. *Manchester by the Sea* demonstrates how cinema can serve as a medium to represent complex psychological conditions and human responses to trauma. By examining Lee Chandler's character through the lens of PTSD and personality theory, this research contributes to interdisciplinary discussions in literature and psychology, emphasizing the importance of understanding trauma not only as an individual struggle but also as a broader human experience depicted in cultural texts.

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