Familial Change and Crisis in Elizabeth Strout's Pandemic Novel *Lucy by the Sea*

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Abstract

Elizabeth Strout's *Lucy by the Sea* (2022) captures the unsettling experience of forced change during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring both personal and societal transformation through the lens of its introspective protagonist, Lucy Barton. This paper examines how the novel portrays intergenerational shifts and psychological adaptation in response to crisis, situating it within broader discussions of pandemic literature. The novel foregrounds the ways in which different generations experience and process global upheaval. Lucy and William, as aging individuals, are confronted with their own vulnerabilities and shifting priorities, while their daughters navigate the uncertainty of young adulthood. At the same time, *Lucy by the Sea* reflects on crisis as a catalyst for change, showing how external instability forces a reconsideration of relationships, emotional resilience, and the self. Through Lucy's deeply personal yet universally resonant narrative, Strout engages with themes of isolation, loss, and adaptation, raising questions about how individuals and families reconfigure their identities in the wake of collective trauma. By analyzing Strout's exploration of intergenerational change and psychological resilience, this paper considers how *Lucy by the Sea* contributes to contemporary literary responses to crisis and the evolving cultural memory of the pandemic.

Keywords: pandemic literature, Elizabeth Strout, grief, coping mechanisms, familial change

Introduction

Many truisms express that change is inevitable. As Heraclitus explains in *Cratylus*, one cannot walk twice in the same stream (Plato, 1892, p. 269). Even so, there are some events in a person's life that they cannot prepare for. Although changes such as the sudden

loss of a loved one, a traffic accident, or an unanticipated illness can shake up a person, they are not entirely outside of the realm of possibility. Comparatively, the COVID-19 pandemic was an unforeseen event in most people's lives, both on a physical and philosophical level. Suddenly, the interwovenness of humanity turned from a guarantee to a threat, uncertainty became a norm, and isolation quickly settled in across the world. Slavoj Žižek (2020) notes that "after the SARS and Ebola epidemics, we were told again and again that a new much stronger epidemic was just a matter of time, that the question was not IF but WHEN" (p. 64). He notices that despite all the warnings, "we somehow didn't take them seriously and were reluctant to act and engage in serious preparations—the only place we dealt with them was in apocalyptic movies like *Contagion*" (Žižek, 2020, p. 64). This sentiment starts off Elizabeth Strout's *Lucy by the Sea* (2022). The main character, Lucy Barton, opens her lockdown memoir with this statement. "Like many others, I did not see it coming. But William is a scientist, and he saw it coming: he saw it sooner than I did, is what I mean" (Strout, 2023, p. 3).

Lucy by the Sea is the fourth novel in the Amgash series, following Lucy Barton, a novelist whose life gets tied up with her ex-husband William's as the pandemic sets in. Elizabeth Strout's novel is written in the first person, singular; it reads like a memoir of Lucy, who recounts her experiences during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Anca Peiu (2023) describes the novel as "a poem of reality in prose of the mind" (p. 109). She explains that "this is achieved as a candid confessional text, devoid of sensational sentimentalism, often likely to remind us of Sylvia Plath's haunting metaphorical voicing" (Peiu, 2023, p. 109). Peiu also notices the characteristics of bildungsroman, realist novel, conversational fiction, and metafictional novels. Upon first glance, the novel promises only the thoughts of an aging American woman during the pandemic, but it delivers much more. Strout gives a poignant analysis of the class divide, violence, fear, political turmoil, and much more as her protagonist lives through historic events (e.g., George Floyd's murder and the following protests, the January 6 riots, the 2020 presidential election, etc.).

Grief in Lockdown

In Lucy Barton's life, the changes brought on by the COVID-19 outbreak seem to be outside of her understanding. Lucy does not feel the panic settle in as much at first. She is not ready to leave her New York apartment; seemingly, she does not feel the need to move. When her ex-husband brings up the possibility of moving to Maine, she resists but finally lets William take control of the situation. "It's odd how the mind does not take in anything until it can" (Strout, 2022, p. 7), she notes as her daughters start making changes in their lifestyles and living situations. Even when William lets her know that his old friend

died from the virus and his wife is in the hospital, she "did not get it, the importance of what was happening" (Strout, 2023, p. 7). Finally, after the death of William's friend, he insists on taking Lucy out of New York, "[j]ust for a few weeks" (Strout, 2023, p. 7). In a review for *The Guardian*, Alexandra Harris (2022) points out that "Lucy goes where she is put, resisting engagement in a way that is hard to fathom until we understand how deeply it is connected with grief for her second husband, and separation from the city they shared (para. 3). Lucy is already in a state of tremendous change: she lost her second husband, David, quite recently, and she is still working through her grief. This is shown in the shift in her behavior and the muted understanding of the world around her. David was a cellist for the Philharmonic. With his loss, Lucy's relationship with classical music changes as well. She confesses that she:

> could not listen to the classical music he had played. I had the station on my phone, and once when I turned it on during a walk to listen through my earphones, the music seemed to absolutely assault me with a screeching kind of vengeance. (Strout, 2023, p. 37)

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion describes the grief after the loss of her husband as a strange clash between reality and the unreal. She remembers insisting on spending the first night alone after her husband had passed. "I needed to be alone so that he could come back. This was the beginning of my year of magical thinking" (Didion, 2005, p. 33). While Didion is fully aware that her husband is dead and not coming home, she experiences flashes of what she calls "magical thinking", where this reality is not settled in. For example, she is disturbed by the obituaries written about her husband. "I had allowed other people to think he was dead. I had allowed him to be buried alive" (Didion, 2005, p. 35). In this instance, the changed reality of Didion's condition as a widow clashes with the normalcy of her married life in which her husband was alive and in the right place, so to speak. Lucy Barton also reports experiencing this so-called magical thinking when William moves her away from her New York apartment. Her changing condition is twofold. Not only does she feel a sense of unreality due to the passing of her husband, but she also drastically changes her environment: from the hustle and bustle of New York City to the grey seaside of Crosby, Maine. Lucy reports that the Philharmonic, where David used to work, is no longer open. "All Lincoln Center was closed down. This baffled me, I could not grasp it; I mean it made David seem even more gone to me somehow. When I went for my walks, I would think: David! Where *are* you?" (Strout, 2023, p. 37). Moreover, Lucy reverts to a life with her first husband, William, whose infidelity ended their relationship. Although they were friendly for the twenty years after their divorce, William and Lucy only truly became close after David's passing and William's third divorce. In *Lucy by the Sea*, William himself is in a state of uncertainty.

In most of her relationship with William, even through what she calls the "Difficulties" (Strout, 2022, p. 132), Lucy views her ex-husband as a figure who has authority. She likens them to "Hansel and Gretel lost in the woods, I always felt safe in his presence" (Strout, 2022, p. 132). The third book in the Amgash series, titled *Oh William!*, focuses on William and Lucy's losses. Lucy notes that William lost his authority after his younger wife left him, and he discovered that his mother had abandoned an infant daughter to start a life with a German ex-soldier. William struggles to come to terms with this reframing of his life, the knowledge that he has a half-sister who refuses to meet him, the dark past of his family, and the loss of his third wife and young daughter. Megumi Tanji (2024) points out that while Lucy was grieving her second husband at the beginning of 2020, "William mourned the prime of his life" (p. 18). At the culmination of *Oh William!*, Lucy recognizes that William no longer exerts this aura of authority, which shocks her. The illusion of Hansel and Gretel in the woods shatters. "I was no longer the kid looking at Hansel as a guide, William was just—quite simply—not the person who made me feel safe any longer" (Strout, 2022, pp. 235–236).

Changing Familial Relationships

William is viewed as the dependable, safe head of the family unit that consists of him, Lucy, and their two adult daughters, Chrissy and Becka. William seemingly enjoys this perceived authority and feels comfortable in the role, so he is not ready to relinquish it. He goes through his pain alone, without involving his immediate family. For example, when Lucy notices that he washes his jeans very often and inquires about it, William tells her that he had prostate cancer. "Then he closed his computer rather hard, I thought, and looked out the window at the dark. He glanced at me and said, 'I had my prostate out, Lucy. I had prostate cancer in late October. I found out a few weeks after you and I had gone to Grand Cayman. And I had it out'" (Strout, 2023, pp. 89–90). William's authority and self-respect are affected by this health scare as well. "Swiping his hand down toward the lower middle of himself, 'I'm through,' he had said" (Strout, 2023, p. 91). Although Lucy reconnects with William and even goes on a trip with him to help him come to terms with the loss of his marriage and the discovery of his family secret, she can only notice such small changes in his behavior when they quarantine together.

Although Lucy and her family go through some major traumatic events during the first year of the pandemic (e.g., cheating, separation, physical distancing, a miscarriage, etc.), the main character's tone remains calm and intimate. Hamilton Cain describes Strout's voice as conversational, "evoking those early weeks and months of the pandemic with immediacy and candor. These halting rhythms resonate: Physically and emotionally,

Lucy is all over the map. Her feelings swing, pendulum-like, stirring up discord" (Cain, 2022). Lucy's musings about lockdown are much less collected and thought out. Strout gives her character a sense of uncertainty and disconnectedness not characteristic of her earlier works. Lucy is isolated from everything that gives her comfort, her home, her children, and her social circles. Still, this isolation does not stop her from reaching out to others.

Katherine Montwieler (2022) views Elizabeth Strout as "an explicitly social writer" (p. 11). She points out that Strout's characters often simply listen to other voices. These qualities are best personified in media by Oprah Winfrey, as Montwieler explains. Both Winfrey and Strout use their privilege "to listen and to elevate others" (Montwieler, 2022, p. 11). Lucy Barton, who Anca Peiu (2023) speculates could be "a possible alter-ego for the writer herself" (p. 109), represents this philosophy well. Montwieler (2022) claims that Strout's work "shows us we bear a collective responsibility for others" (p. 11), and Lucy's interactions with her close family, friends, neighbors, and passersby in her life support this auctorial goal. Although Lucy does not initially participate in the decision-making process, she allows her ex-husband, a parasitologist who understands how viruses spread, to take her to safety. As mentioned previously, William suffers through his own identity crisis during this time, which Lucy calls "some sort of midlife crisis, or older man crisis" (Strout, 2023, p. 4). Still, William has to fulfill the role of calm head of the family. In *Oh William!*, Lucy finally sees through the myth of William after over forty years of knowing each other, but she is also keenly aware of the fact that their daughters have yet to dismantle their own myths about their father.

> I thought of our girls. I thought of how Becka was the one who needed him most: the sense of her father as having authority, although she had never used that word. But it touched me deeply as I sat and thought of her sweet, childlike face. And I thought of Chrissy, who also, probably, still thought of him that way; he was her father, after all. But she seemed—to my eyes—more prepared to deal with him than dear Becka had ever been. And who knows why? Whosoever knows why one child turns out one way, and another a different way? (Strout, 2022, p. 236)

These thoughts end Lucy's musings about William and his personal mythologies in *Oh William!*, but they do not seem to carry through into *Lucy by the Sea*. Lucy does not question William much at all. She also notices that the relationship between her and their daughters and William and their daughters is different. Their roles as parents within the family unit are in contrast: Chrissy and Becka instinctively look to William for action, while Lucy remains their source of emotional support. William's scientific background and more composed demeanor make him the default authority figure during the pandemic.

Around the first week of March 2020, William asks the girls, who both live in Brooklyn, to leave the city and spend a few weeks away from their crowded living situation. He also instructs them not to tell their mother about their move, and the girls respect his wishes. "And so they hadn't told me. Which is interesting because I feel that I am close to our girls, I would have said closer to them than William is. But they listened to him" (Strout, 2023, p. 6). While these roles are representative of traditional gender roles within a family unit, Strout does not devalue Lucy's role in the family. Montwieler (2022) praises Strout's ability as a "social writer" (p. 11) to connect different parts of society seamlessly. "The affluent New York parasitologist and socialite share a world with the family who eats beans and bread for dinner" (Montwieler, 2022, p. 11). In the case of Lucy Barton, this starts within the family unit. Montwieler (2022) notes that "willingness to listen is often coded as a particularly feminine virtue; women are socialized to listen, to help others, to put others before themselves" (p. 11), but these virtues are not viewed as less than William's more collected approach. The girls select who to contact depending on their needs; they do not play favorites with their parents.

A good example of these roles in action is when Becka, the younger daughter, goes through a crisis. She first calls her mother, who offers her emotional support, listens to her, and gives her space for her feelings.

> As I came through the door after my morning walk, this was toward the end of April, my telephone rang; it was Becka, and she was screaming, crying, "Mom! Mom! Oh Mommy!" She was crying so hard it was difficult for me to hear her, but the gist of it was this: Her husband, Trey, was having an affair, he had been planning on leaving Becka, he told her, but now they were stuck in lockdown. Becka had found texts in his phone. (Strout, 2023, p. 61)

When the big emotions are expressed and talked through with her daughter, Lucy gives the phone to William, who has a very different approach. "William spoke with precision. He asked her certain things: how long had it been going on, where had Trey thought he was going to live, was the other person married" (Strout, 2023, p. 61). Lucy even notes that William asks her questions that she could not even think of, but his methodical approach helps calm Becka. "And I could hear her voice getting calmer as she spoke to him" (Strout, 2023, p. 61). However, when William hands the phone back to Lucy, the tears come back again. "And I listened and I said, I know, I know. I took the phone and went back outside with it, and I walked back and forth as my poor child sobbed" (Strout, 2023, p. 62). Therefore, while William is the family's more pragmatic, steady planner, Lucy's emotional support is just as important for the girls.

Coping Mechanisms

As mentioned previously, from the beginning, Lucy has trouble grasping the reality and dangers of the pandemic. The experience of grief compounds her inability to process the very real threat of living in a megacity during such times. Lucy's "magical thinking" (Didion, 2005, p. 33) is defined by her inability to accept the loss of her husband, which in turn leads to a sense of disorientation. She struggles with the changed reality of David's absence and the turmoil of the world. Fear and grief function similarly in that they can make the mind recoil. We are prone to look away and not acknowledge difficult things. Lucy's coping mechanism is to look down and turn her gaze away from the news about the pandemic. Even though she is exposed to it (she talks to people, she watches the news with William, etc.), she reports that there seemed to be a distance between her and reality in the early days of the pandemic. For example, when a doctor tells her that he expects the lockdown to last a year, she feels concerned, but the feeling seeps in slowly.

> This was the first time I felt really—really—deep apprehension, and yet it was slow, that piece of knowledge, making its way into me, weirdly slow, and when I told William the doctor had said that, William was not surprised. "Did you know that?" I asked him, and he only said, "Lucy, none of us knows anything." So what came to me then was the—slow, it seemed very slow—understanding that I was not going to see New York again for a very long time. (Strout, 2023, p. 26)

Lucy's response to the pandemic is marked by a paradox: while she acknowledges the crisis intellectually, she resists fully absorbing its implications on an emotional level. This distracting mechanism allows her to maintain a sense of normality even as the world around her becomes increasingly unrecognizable. In *Pandemic 2*, Žižek (2021) claims that the "rejections of the lockdowns are a rejection not of stillness but of change" (p. 110). He also criticizes the way people cling to the idea of normality. "To ignore [the reality of COVID-19] means nothing less than a kind of collective psychosis. I hear in the outcries against lockdown an unexpected confirmation of Jacques Lacan's claim that *normality is a version of psychosis*" (Žižek, 2021, p. 110). Of course, it is worth clarifying that Žižek speaks of Covid deniers and conspiracy theorists, but in the case of Lucy Barton, a similar coping and survival strategy takes place. While Lucy does not deny the existence of the virus, and she does not fight against quarantining and lockdowns, she is also aware of her strange psychological response. As she watches the news with William, she notices that she feels detached from the information:

> It was as though there was a distance between the television and myself. And of course there was. But my *mind* felt like it had stepped back and was watching it from a real distance, even as I felt the sense of horror. (Strout, 2023, pp. 27–28)

Lucy also mentions a physical change in her behavior as she watches the news on TV.

> Which is that my eyes would drop to the floor, I mean I could not look at it all the time. I thought: It is as though somebody is lying to me. I did not think the news was lying to me—as I said, I understood it was all true; I only want to tell you that for a number of days—and it turned into weeks—I looked at the floor frequently as we watched the news at night. (Strout, 2023, p. 29)

Lucy exhibits a selective engagement with reality. While she avoids direct confrontation with distressing information, she continues to watch the news, even reporting that she feels addicted to it. Lucy's descriptions of these feelings of uncertainty and unreality align with Freud's theory of the uncanny. "The uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (Freud, 2003, p. 124). Watching the news, going for a walk, talking to friends on the telephone or in the yard are all familiar concepts. However, they become strange and frightening when the new element, the virus, is introduced into the regular interactions. Zhang uses the psychoanalytical term "uncanny" to better understand the traumatic impact of lockdown on our psyche. "The pandemic itself engendered a new 'norm' that overturned what was previously familiar within society. As a result of this sudden invasion of overwhelming unfamiliarity into familiar life, a feeling of uncanniness arose" (Zhang, 2024, para. 12). Zhang highlights the weirdness that clashes with the normalcy of everyday life as examples of the uncanny. This is also found in Lucy Barton's experiences. For example, she is shocked by the doctor's suggestion that they should wash their clothes every time after going grocery shopping. William's early prevention methods also put her off. On their way to Maine, she notices that her ex-husband has surgical gloves and masks in the backseat of the car. When she asks William to explain what they are, he simply tells her not to worry about it.

> But he put on a plastic glove to hold the gas nozzle, I did notice that. I thought he was really overreacting to all of this, and I kind of rolled my eyes, but I did not say anything to him about it. (Strout, 2023, p. 14)

Lucy's early reactions to the pandemic and her grief take place at the same time, so her coping mechanisms reveal the complex interplay between grief and magical thinking. Just as she struggled to accept David's death, she hesitated to accept the full weight of the pandemic's reality. "It's odd how the mind does not take in anything until it can" (Strout, 2023, p. 7), Lucy comments as she reflects on her early reactions. Her resistance to integrate within this new world is subconscious, but it also keeps her from a deeper understanding and results in disorientation. Time moves strangely, understanding

comes in waves. This is only fixed by the process of habituation. As days become weeks and months, Lucy settles more and more into her new environment. She no longer misses the life she left behind in New York; moreover, she decides to settle in Maine with William—an act that she could not even fathom at the beginning of the pandemic.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Strout's *Lucy by the Sea* is an intimate portrayal of grief, change, and the shifting dynamics of familial relationships during a period of global crisis. Through Lucy Barton's perspective, Strout captures the disorientation and emotional weight of the COVID-19 pandemic, intertwining personal and collective trauma in a narrative that is both deeply introspective and socially engaged. Lucy's journey, marked by her move to Maine and her evolving relationship with her ex-husband William, highlights how grief and uncertainty shape human behavior, often in ways that defy rationality.

Strout's novel not only recounts the pandemic's effects, but it also situates these changes within the broader themes of identity, loss, and adaptation. Lucy's "magical thinking," similar to Joan Didion's reflections in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, reveals the psychological complexities of mourning, further complicated by the external upheaval of a world in crisis. Meanwhile, William's struggles with his identity and authority illustrate the fragility of perceived control in the face of life's unpredictability.

Ultimately, *Lucy by the Sea* serves as a meditation on how people navigate change and loss, finding meaning in relationships, memories, and shared experiences. Strout's signature conversational prose makes Lucy's reflections feel both deeply personal and universally resonant, offering a quiet but powerful commentary on how crisis reshapes our understanding of self and community. As Lucy comes to terms with her past and present, her story underscores the enduring human need for connection, empathy, and the acceptance of life's inherent uncertainties.

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