

**Guilt, Trauma and Redemption in *The Whale*:
A Psychological Analysis**

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Abstract:

The concern of this study is to delve into the profound emotional and psychological struggles of the protagonist, Charlie, a morbidly obese man attempting to forgive himself for past mistakes. *The Whale* by Samuel D. Hunter, has been revolved around Charlie's efforts to reconcile with his estranged daughter, Ellie, hindered by the psychological barriers of guilt, leading to tragic consequences. This study endeavors to discuss the play from a psychological perspective to scrutinize how guilt, trauma, and the search for redemption have embodied in Charlie's character, and related to broader themes of human suffering, self-destruction, and healing.

Key Words: Charlie, Psychological Analysis, Guilt, Trauma, Redemption.

1. Introduction:

Hunter's *The Whale* is a portrayal of the complexities of the human psyche, guilt, and the desperate quest for redemption. Charlie is slowly surrendering to a life of isolation, obsessive overeating, and struggling with morbid obesity, which serves as both a literal condition and symbolic representation of his psychological trauma. Thus, his eating has cost him; mobility, health, the possibility of regular human interaction, and any impression of normality. The play is a dramatic work that delves into the life of Charlie, an online English teacher, residing in Moscow, Idaho. His deep sense of guilt and grief over the death of his partner, Alan, an event that haunts him throughout the drama. The self-blame and inability to forgive himself are central to his character's emotional turmoil. "*A barren road on the outskirts of a town in the Palouse region of northern Idaho, Charlie, a man in his late 40s weighing around 600 pounds*" "*Grabs his laptop, opens it up. His web browser is open to an online university message board for one of his courses.*" (Hunter, 2012, pp.1,2).

Struggling with overweightness and estrangement from Ellie, his teenage daughter, Charlie seeks redemption in his final days. The reconciliation with her becoming his most pressing goal, despite her initial rejection of his efforts. He acknowledges that he has failed as a father and his efforts may be too late, but the need to make amends before his death drives him to act. His existence revolves around brief interactions with just a few individuals: Ellie, his estranged and offended daughter, "*ELLIE, 17, holding a backpack, stands near the front door looking at Charlie, who is lowering himself onto the couch from his walker;*" Liz, a devoted friend who enables his habits by bringing him food; "*LIZ a nurse in her 40s, is taking his blood pressure,*" and Thomas, a young missionary seeking to share his beliefs. "*THOMAS, 19, wears a shirt and tie, holds a few books..... sharing Christ's message of love.*" (pp.7,19).

Unfortunately, a series of tragic and traumatic events have resulted in Charlie becoming cut off from the world, the only direct contact is with Liz. His separation is shortly broken by a reunion after eight years and a series of visits from his alienated daughter, and near the end of the play, his ex-wife Mary, "*a woman in her 40s.*" There are other regular but limited contacts: the pizza delivery driver, Dan who leaves the orders on the entrance to collect after he has left; and his class of students whom he teaches online but with his camera turned off, due to his fears to be considered "disgusting."

CHARLIE: “(*closes the laptop*)“I--keep the camera shut off” ... “Look, it’s been a long time. I just thought maybe we could get to know each other I thought we could spend some time with each other.”

ELLIE: “You teach online? Your students know what you look like.... “I’m not spending time with you. You’re disgusting.” (pp. 21,22).

When he finally starts suffering from congestive heart failure and refuses to go to the hospital, Charlie is given a prognosis of just a few remaining days. “Stop saying you’re sorry, go to the hospital. (*Pause, then firmly*) You have congestive heart failure. If you don’t go to the hospital, you’ll be dead by the weekend. You. Will. Die. Silence.” (p. 13). As his health worsens, he faces the task of making compensations. Charlie does not change his ways or seek proper medical attention, but he does finally tell Ellie that she can have the entire \$120,000 in his bank account if she agrees to see him without her mother knowing about it. She agrees. “Everything I have, all the money I have in the bank.” “A hundred-and-twenty thousand? Something like that. I’d have to check.” “Yes, just--. Don’t tell your mom, okay?” (p.22).

Carl R. Rogers (1902-1987), offers a perspective on Charlie’s journey to find meaning in his relationship with Ellie, even as he faces his physical decline. He further claims that: “Self-actualization is a subset of the overall organismic actualizing tendency, and begins with the infant learning to differentiate what is “self” and what is “other” within its “total perceptual field,” as their full self-awareness gradually crystallizes.” (Rogers, 1961, p. 487).

2. Practical and Theoretical Paradigm:

Hunter’s *The Whale*, first produced in 2012, served as the foundation for Darren Aronofsky’s 2022 film adaptation. Confronting his inevitable death brought on by years of self-neglect, Charlie embarks on a heartfelt journey to restore the broken bond with Ellie, driven by a desperate hope for redemption and meaningful connection in his final moments. The story takes place all within a single set: Charlie’s apartment, which creates a claustrophobic atmosphere that reflects Charlie’s physical and emotional confinement. This intimate environment allows for a deep examination of the characters’ interactions and personal struggles.

It could be argued that directors often use naturalistic staging to enhance the realism of the story, reinforcing the audience’s immersion in Charlie’s world. The blocking and use of close, intimate spaces force confrontations among characters, emphasizing the tension and emotional weight. As a viewer, we too feel enclosed within this space across the two hours, giving us a sense of just how limited and restricted Charlie’s world has become. “*A desolate two-bedroom apartment in a cheaply constructed building.*” (p.2). Charlie inflicted more pain and trauma on his body with every episode. He eats to traumatized his pain but also sadly to harm himself and particularly its ending. The play utilizes its metaphors as a way of revealing how characters feel about each other, which is both extremely clever and absolutely heartbreaking. We saw Charlie, the man, the father, the lover, the teacher, the good and decent person. According to Mandell (2023), “while the film adaptation received acclaim, the stage version offers a more intimate and emotionally powerful experience.”

The upbringing of Samuel D. Hunter (1981–) in a religious, conservative environment significantly informs the authentic depiction of faith and guilt in his works. Raised in Moscow, Idaho, Hunter attended a fundamentalist Christian high school,

where he faced personal challenges, including being outed as gay by a peer, which led to his departure from the institution. This educational experience uncovered him to severe religious doctrines during his formative years. Besides, the involvement of his sexual identity with the conventional religious teachings around him greatly influenced his perspective. Hunter's intimate familiarity with religious settings allows him to portray characters and narratives involving faith and guilt with nuance and authenticity. Hunter drew from his personal experiences to inform the narrative. This personal connection adds depth to the characters and their struggles.

The Whale has provoked a range of responses from readers and critics who have expressed fascination with the play's depiction of sexuality, relationships, isolation, regret, obesity, teenage angst, religion, and the search for redemption. In a review by *Vulture*, the play is noted for, "Its emotional depth, beginning and ending with the recitation of a student's essay on *Moby-Dick*, which frames the narrative." Additionally, *Curtain Up* praises its complex portrayal of the protagonist, Charlie, "touching yet repellent, sad but also funny," Sullivan (2013) in *Chicago Magazine* describes *The Whale* as "a huge story of disgust and compassion, a deeply moving and provocative work,". Besides, according to Johnson's review in *Chicago on the Aisle* (2013), stating that, "every person watching the play must feel something in common with Charlie, the 600-pound middle-aged man who occupies much of the stage." Yet, some critics argue that the portrayal of obesity risks reinforcing stereotypes rather than dismantling them. In an interview with *Playbill*, Hunter addresses these critiques, explaining that, "the work is not intended to be cynical but aims to present a deeply personal and human story."

Technically, the psychological theories will be conducted in this study to understand how guilt, trauma, and the search for redemption apparent in Charlie's character, and how they relate to broader themes of human suffering, self-destruction, and healing. Through the lens of psychological criticism, *The Whale* becomes a study of a man attempting to reconcile his fractured identity in a world of emotional and physical pain. Furthermore, it provides a unique approach by emphasizing the subconscious, suffering, and identity formation, all of which are essential to understanding the dynamics in the play. Charlie's struggle with his weight is not merely a physical condition but also a psychological indicator of his unresolved trauma. Several scholars have approached *The Whale* from various critical perspectives, including thematic and sociological frameworks. However, few have examined the play in depth through the lens of psychological criticism. This study analyzes the psychological dimensions, using theories from psychoanalytic and humanistic psychology.

2.1. The Role of Guilt and Self-Loathing: Freudian Psychoanalysis

Freud's theory of Guilt, Repression, and the Unconscious provide a framework for considerate the underlying psychological forces that govern human behavior. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), theorized that:

"The most famous model of the human psyche is sometimes referred as the structural model, which consists of three primary components: the *id*, the *ego*, and the *superego*. The *id* represents the instinctual, unconscious drives and desires. The *ego*, the rational, logical, waking part of the mind, mediates between the *id* and reality, while the *superego*

embodies the moral conscience and internalized societal values”. (Bressler,2011, p. 127).

Charlie’s search for redemption is complicated by his inability to fully address and recognize his repressed feelings. Due to the *ego* responsible for making decisions that allow the individual to navigate the demands of both internal and external realities, Charlie’s *ego* has overwhelmed by the intense pressure from both his *id* (as represented in compulsive need to eat) and his *superego* (which drives him to punish himself). The concept of *Self-Actualization* suggests that “individuals who cannot integrate their past mistakes into their sense of self are doomed to suffer from unresolved conflict and guilt.” Correspondingly his inability to forgive himself for his perceived sins and mistakes is reflected in his actions, he confesses that: “I ate myself to death.” His physical condition is a direct result of the emotional weight he carries.

In *The Whale*, Charlie’s irrational overeating can be viewed through the lens of Freud’s theory of repression, where unconscious guilt has revealed in physical form. The excessive weight has been further linked to repressed guilt and emotional pain, acting as a defense mechanism to avoid confronting his trauma, mainly over his past relationship and abandonment of his family. His *id* dominates, driven by impulsive desires (e.g., food) that prevented him from confronting the deeper moral issues tied to his guilt. Guilt is a core element of Charlie’s psychological condition. The concepts of guilt and the unconscious play a vital role in understanding Charlie’s inner turmoil. “Guilt often arises from repressed desires or unresolved conflicts between the *id*, *ego*, and *superego*, where guilt emerges as a key element of the *superego*’s role in moral regulation and internalized self-criticism.” (Freud,1923, p. 12).

The play introduces him as a man who cannot escape the consequences of his past. Charlie lives with the guilt of leaving his wife, Mary, and daughter, Ellie, eight years ago to be with the love of his life, Alan. Tragically, Charlie then loses Alan from suicide that caused by bullying related to his sexuality. We have learnt over the course of the play, that Alan faced dismissal from his family and church for his sexuality and relationship with Charlie. It has implied that this was a significant factor in Alan’s suicide. Charlie then finds himself alone, without Alan and estranged from his daughter.

THOMAS: “Charlie--Alan tried to escape God’s will. He chose his life with you over God. But this is why he was obsessed with this verse, he *knew* he was living in the flesh, not in the Spirit. He never prayed for salvation--but it’s not too late for you. Through the Spirit, you can put to death the misdeeds of the body and you will *live*.”

CHARLIE: “You think Alan died--because he chose to be with me? You think God turned his back on him because he and I were in love?” (p. 91).

When Ellie meets Charlie for the first time, she is shocked at his appearance. He has gained a significant amount of weight, to the extent that his mobility and independence are severely impaired. In the play, we are shown Charlie being trapped in a vicious cycle of binge eating to manage distress and regulate his emotions, as he attempts to deal with his grief and the blame and self-loathing he feels.

ELLIE: “(she takes the framed photo of Alan and Charlie from before in her hands, examining it). “Why did you gain all that weight?”

CHARLIE: "Oh, I don't-- Someone close to me passed away, and it--... It had an effect on me."

ELLIE: "(looks at the photo again). Your boyfriend!"

CHARLIE: "My partner. He wasn't that young; it was a night school course—

ELLIE: "Oh, I remember him. You had him over for dinner once when mom was in Montana visiting grandma. You made steaks. The good kind. Better meal than you ever made me or mom. I remember hearing the two of you talking after I went to bed."

CHARLIE: "I know I... I'm a lot bigger since the last time you saw me—"

ELLIE: "I'm not talking about what you look like. You'd be disgusting even if you weren't this fat, you'd still be that.... dad who walked out on me when I was eight." (p.36).

Through Charlie's multifaceted character and interactions with those around him, *The Whale* examines reflective psychological themes such as: self-worth, the need for forgiveness, and the trauma of past mistakes. Actually, one of the main themes in the play is the theme of guilt which shapes his self-destructive behavior and his relationships with others. It serves as a cornerstone of the narrative, shaping Charlie's actions as he seeks redemption and meaning in the face of his declining health. His guilt leads to self-loathing, as he feels unworthy of love or redemption, especially in his relationship with his daughter. His longing for a meaningful reconciliation has been complicated by his inability to forgive himself and thus, redemption remains subtle. Freud would argue that, "true redemption is unattainable for Charlie while he remains trapped in self-punishment, and his tragic end highlights the failure to reconcile with his past." In one of the play's most telling moments, Charlie says, "I'm disgusting. I don't deserve to die like this, but I don't deserve to die any other way." (p.38).

Moreover, repression theory suggests that when individuals experience traumatic events or intense feelings of guilt, they unconsciously push these emotions out of their awareness in order to cope with them. Charlie's obesity is a direct result of his repressed guilt and the emotional pain of his past. His relationship with food is not one of indulgence but of compulsion. Freud argued, "the unconscious mind often drives behaviors in ways that individuals cannot consciously understand." Charlie's guilt is moral in nature, that is to say, he believes that he has betrayed those he loves. His obsession with food is his way of punishing himself, as he feels that he deserves this physical decline as a form of retribution.

"Charlie is in the kitchen, leaning up against the counter. He is just finishing up a small bowl of plain oatmeal. He takes one last bite, then puts the bowl and spoon down onto the counter. Just then, he catches a glimpse of an old stash of candy bars hidden in the back of a half-open drawer. He opens the drawer, takes out one of the candy bars. He opens it up, looking at it. After a moment, he quickly wraps the candy back up, puts it back into the drawer, and closes it. He thinks for a moment, then goes to his laptop. Charlie types "congestive heart failure" into a search engine. He scans a few more results. His pulse is faster still. Finally, he types: "BP 238/134." (p.17).

Similarly, Freud's most famous pupil is Carl G. Jung (1875-1961) who asserts the idea of the *Shadow Archetype* to represent the parts of the self. It provides another layer of analysis. Charlie's shadow includes his self-perceived failures as a father, partner, and teacher. His willingness to confront these failures in his interactions with

Ellie and others in his life, illustrates his attempt to integrate these aspects into his conscious self, a step toward redemption. Charlie's neglect of his health and his estrangement from his daughter represent his shadow self, his unacknowledged guilt, and shame. (Jung 1968, p.21). In this respect, Charlie's inner struggle can be viewed through the lens of repressed emotions, as he desperately asserts that he needs to have done one thing right with his life. "I need to know I did one thing right in my life." (p.85).

2.2. Emotional Trauma and Its Impact: John Bowlby's Attachment Theory

Basically, Bowlby's Attachment Theory emphasizes the importance of early bonds between children and their caregivers. In this respect, the severed attachment to his family, his wife and daughter, due to his affair with Alan, leaves Charlie emotionally disconnected and unable to rebuild his bonds with them. His emotional trauma is evident in his longing for reconciliation with Ellie, despite her hardened and defensive attitude. These early emotional wounds, stemming from abandonment and loss, continue to shape his relationships and mental health, often leading to self-destructive behaviors. John Bowlby (1907-1990), has been argued that: "early childhood experiences of attachment shape an individual's emotional responses and ability to form future healthy relationships throughout their lives, especially under conditions of stress, loss, or emotional crisis." (Bowlby, 1980, p. 40).

Likewise, Ellie's emotive distance, anger, and hostility toward her father, can be seen as a result of his abandonment and the neglect she experienced during her formative years. This lack of early secure attachment leads her to form unhealthy emotional bond her father. Trauma, one might think, is not merely a past event but a present force that shapes the characters' interactions and their sense of self. The emotional absence from his daughter's life likely leaves Charlie with a constant fear of rejection and insecurity in his relationships. "You know what?! You can't throw me away like a piece of garbage and then suddenly want to be my dad eight years later. You left me for your boyfriend, it's really that simple. And if you've been telling yourself anything different, then you've been lying to yourself." (p.58).

Ellie's words express the confusion and uncertainty that often accompany an ambivalent attachment style. Bowlby suggested that, "children who experience inconsistent caregiving internalize a belief that they are not worthy of love, which can result in emotional withdrawal or anger in adulthood." His fear of rejection has been hindering him from fully engaging with her. He often withdraws or avoids confrontational moments, which further reinforces Ellie's belief that she cannot rely on him for support. This dynamic keeps both father and daughter trapped in a cycle of unresolved grief, with Charlie unable to repair their bond due to his emotional trauma. "When I left your mom... She didn't want me around you. I hoped she'd eventually change her mind, but she" ... "Sorry, I just... I'm sorry. (pause) I understand that you're angry. But you don't need to be angry at the whole world, just be angry at me." (p.59).

Bowlby identified four key attachment styles. Charlie's trauma and attachment difficulties likely result from a combination of avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles, where a caregiver's emotional unavailability or neglect. As Bowlby suggests that individuals with avoidant attachment tend to shut themselves off emotionally and avoid seeking help because they were either not shown emotional care or were rejected in the past. This is obvious when Charlie refuses to go to the hospital asserting to Liz: "I don't go to hospitals." His rejection of medical help typified his hesitancy to allow himself to

depend on others for emotional or physical support. Moreover, Charlie's intense anguish and blame over his partner's death is another example of Bowlby's concept of "Grief and Mourning," where prolonged attachment to a traumatic event disrupts emotional regulation. This leads to a cycle of self-destruction, where his emotional pain worsens his physical decline.

THOMAS: "But why did you have me read it to you?"

CHARLIE: "Because I thought I was dying. And I wanted to hear it one last time." (p.7).

This statement emphasizes Charlie's deep attachment to the past, specifically, to a time when he was more connected to himself and to his relationships. His yearning to hear the essay one last time reflects an anxious attachment to memories, as he clings to the past in the face of an uncertain future. It shows his fear of loss and his difficulty in letting go of his emotional wounds. Charlie's request for Thomas to read the essay symbolizes a desperate attempt to connect with another person before he dies. Bowlby's theory would interpret this as Charlie's longing for emotional intimacy, even though he is unable to form lasting attachments. The fact that Charlie chooses a stranger to fulfill this need highlights his difficulty trusting others and his unresolved attachment issues.

Charlie's interaction with Thomas, a young missionary, is another example of how his attachment style impacts his relationships. Unlike Ellie or Liz, Thomas is a stranger to Charlie, yet Charlie allows him into his home during a medical crisis. However, Charlie's attachment to Thomas is also deeply influenced by his emotional trauma. While Thomas attempts to help Charlie, Charlie's emotional scars prevent him from forming a secure attachment with Thomas, thus hindering his ability to heal emotionally. As a result, the relationship remains superficial and transient, even though Thomas demonstrates genuine concern for Charlie's well-being. This interaction can be seen as a momentary attempt to form a connection, but ultimately, it is also colored by Charlie's fear of rejection and self-loathing.

THOMAS (*CONT'D*): "Charlie, you have to understand-- God hasn't turned his back on you. If you accept him, he's going to release you from this, he's going to take your soul out of this body and give you a new body, one made of pure light. Don't you want that?"

CHARLIE: "I'm not interested in being saved. I appreciate you helping me out the other day, but you can go, this doesn't—"

THOMAS: "Okay, look--I really think God sent me here for a reason, there's a reason I knocked on your door when you needed someone the most. Isn't there any way I can help? That's why I became a missionary in the first place, right?"

CHARLIE: "tell me the truth. Do you find me disgusting?"

THOMAS: "No. I just want to help. Please, just let me help." (pp.44,45).

In addition, Bowlby believed that attachment bonds can be repaired if the individual finds a secure base from which they can safely process their trauma. Yet, his relationship with Thomas also elucidates how Charlie's attachment system is not fully functional. He is unable to form the kind of emotional intimacy necessary for healing. Charlie's attachment to Ellie is too fraught with guilt and rejection for him to achieve any substantial repair. His engagement with Thomas symbolizes a struggle for emotional repair, but his attachment to Ellie remains unaddressed, making his attempts at connection feel incomplete. Bowlby would suggest that Charlie's unresolved trauma

prevents him from establishing a secure attachment with Thomas or Ellie. “I didn’t want to be this person. But I was.” (p.34).

Besides, Liz is perhaps the only one who offers him the emotional support. Bowlby’s theory would argue that Charlie’s attachment to Liz is somewhat complex: since it has been rooted in a dependence on her care, but also characterized by emotional avoidance due to his sense of unworthiness. Liz provides with practical care, helping him with his basic needs, such as taking his blood pressure or helping him to the bathroom. Yet, Charlie’s difficulty with emotional intimacy prevents him from fully engaging with her on a deeper emotional level. Liz’s role in his life is functional, but her emotional connection to Charlie is limited because he cannot allow himself to depend on her for anything other than basic physical needs. His avoidant attachment style leads him to push her away emotionally, even when she offers him support

LIZ “You should have called an ambulance.”

CHARLIE: “With no health insurance?”

LIZ: “Being in debt is better than being dead. What’s wrong with you?”

CHARLIE: “I’m sorry. I don’t know. Just—sorry.” (p.7).

2.3. Charlie’s Isolation: Roland Barthes’ Theory of Semiotics

As a theoretical approach, Semiotics has signs and symbols which have been shaped by cultural and ideological structures. In *S/Z* (1970), Roland Barthes (1915-1980), offers “five levels of semiotic codes to unveil the text’s nuanced reading. Put gradually, symbolic code may reflect an image, which represents something else. It has hidden meaning; there is a connotation to it that readers somehow understand. While action code signifies something is going to occur as a result.” (Cited in Yousif,2024, p.E6).

It should be remembered that the recurring presence of pizza has been one key semiotic element in the play. Literally, pizza is a common and easily accessible fast food. But, as cultural meaning, pizza is in Western culture, associated with indulgence, convenience, and social bonding. It undermines the traditional myth of food as a source of happiness. The denotative meaning of pizza as food is overshadowed by its connotative associations with, alienation and emotional distress. Through Barthes’ concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth, pizza operates as a mythic sign of comfort and indulgence. “Signs had both a signifier, being the physical form of the sign as we perceive it through our senses, and the signified, or meaning that is interpreted.” (Barthes, 1970, p. 61).

One of the most expressive aspects of Charlie’s relationship with pizza is his unwillingness to interact with Dan. More pointedly he orders pizza regularly but never opens the door, asking the delivery man to leave it outside instead. Furthermore, at the level of myth, pizza reflects the broader existential weight of Charlie’s life, serving as a symbol of his inability to escape his past. This pattern can be read as an act of self-punishment, it is more than an individual behavior, rather it is a sign loaded with cultural meaning.

CHARLIE: “Charlie pauses, waiting for the delivery boy to take the money and leave the pizza. He doesn’t hear anything. Another moment passes.”

DELIVERY BOY (O.S.): “I’m Dan. I just--. My name, it’s Dan. (pause) I’ve been coming here for a while now.” (p.55).

Pizza takes on a mythic dimension as a symbol of Charlie's self-inflicted suffering, rather than the joy or nourishment it traditionally represents. His routine of ordering and consuming pizza without variation symbolizes the idea that he is trapped in a repetitive and self-destructive cycle. This repetition creates a mythic structure, a pattern that personifies stagnation rather than progress. The act of eating becomes more than sustenance; it becomes a ritualized performance of guilt and resignation. Barthes claims that, "The signifier is empty, the sign is full" that is to say, pizza appears to be an ordinary object, but within Charlie's context, it is filled with deeper symbolic meaning; "his avoidance of human interaction and preference for self-imposed solitude." (Budiman, 1999, p.22).

The physical concealment with the outside world functions as a semiotic system. Thus, one can observe that it symbolizes Charlie's alienation. The act of avoiding human contact represents the paradox of his existence. He teaches the students online with his webcam turned off. "Charlie, on the couch, is in front of his laptop with the virtual classroom on the screen, this time with a different group of STUDENTS. As before, his camera is not on." (p.31). Charlie's loneliness and isolation reinforce the myth of Grotesque Outcast, "a stereotype in literature and media where those who do not conform to physical ideals should remain invisible, and obese characters are often marginalized or ridiculed and depicted as tragic figures." His decision to be unseen emphasizes his participation in this myth, whether consciously or unconsciously. Additionally, his obsessive eating characterizes the semiotic act that has been tied to suffering and redemption. Barthes has been extended Semiotics into the realm of myth stating that: "Everything can be a myth if it comes by a discourse; it is defined by its message. Hence, uncountable myths can be produced since there is no restriction on describing things." (Cited in Jadou & Ghabra, 2021, p.3).

"Charlie is in his wheelchair, in front of the television, watching 2016 primary election coverage. A pizza box sits on the couch with one piece uneaten and a few crusts here and there. Charlie is ravenously eating the pizza, chewing and swallowing dangerously fast. Sweat pours down his face. Still eating the pizza, Charlie opens up his laptop. He logs on to his teaching software, then begins to write a post to all of his students in all of his classes." (p.88).

3. The Search for Redemption:

3.1. Viktor Frankl's Existential and Philosophical Psychology

Psychologically, redemption is the most elusive goal for Charlie throughout the play. Forgiveness plays a crucial role in his journey and becomes the driving force behind the interactions with the characters around him that he failed to achieve. Despite the numerous mistakes he has made in his life, Charlie continuously seeks clemency in an attempt to find a sense of peace before his inevitable death. However, this quest has been troubled with difficulty, as he is unable to fully reconcile with his past. Charlie pursues meaning in suffering, believing that his daughter's future can serve as his redemption. Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) emphasizes particularly in his concept of *logotherapy* that, "the search for meaning is central to human existence" "Meaning cannot always be found through external sources; it must come from within." (Frankl, 1946, pp. 45-87).

The play ultimately suggests that, redemption like Charlie's body is a fragile and perhaps unattainable goal. Yet, as Frankl asserts, "the search for meaning can be

elusive, and the struggle for redemption is often marked by failure.” Charlie’s interactions with Ellie, Liz, and the church reflect his navigation through these structures as he seeks understanding and redemption. The integration of body, mind, and spirit mirrors Charlie’s journey. Although his physical body is failing, his emotional and spiritual growth through his relationship with Ellie signifies his attempt to find wholeness. Nevertheless, Ellie rejects her father’s attempts at reconciliation.

CHARLIE: “I just wanted to do something good for once. I just want to see you be good, Ellie. That’s all. When I left your mom... She didn’t want me around you. I hoped she’d eventually change her mind, but she...”

ELLIE: (*stares down, not looking at him.*) “You could have just *called* me. All this time. You could have been part of my life.”

CHARLIE: “Ellie, look at me. Who would want *me* to be a part of their life.” (p.59).

Frankl’s theory would suggest that Charlie’s inability to find meaning externally through his relationships with Ellie and others, leads to his ultimate emotional and physical collapse. He believes that by mending their relationship, he will be able to redeem himself and find peace. In this respect, Charlie’s failure to create meaning out of his suffering leading to his definitive death. “without an internal sense of purpose, external validation cannot provide lasting redemption.” (Yalom, 1980, pp.234-245).”

CHARLIE: “I’m sorry for leaving you. I was in love. And I left you behind. You didn’t. Deserve that. I don’t know. How I could have done that. You’re so beautiful. You’re amazing.”

ELLIE: “Stop. Stop saying that.”

CHARLIE: “You’re *amazing*. This essay. Is amazing. This essay. Is *you*.”

ELLIE: “Stop saying that!”

CHARLIE: “You’re the best thing. I’ve ever done.” (p.102).

3.2.Charlie’s self-loathing: Alfred Adler’s Theories of Inferiority and Superiority Complexes

It is significant to note that Alfred Adler (1870-1937), was one of the most influential psychologists of the twentieth century, who is greatly overshadowed by two of his contemporaries, Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud. Adler’s approach to understanding human behavior, however, has an appealing aspect which these other two men sometimes lack, he is extremely practical. According to Adler if we are to understand why a person behaves as they do, we must first recognize that humans have a tendency to strive after self-created goals: “...[the] first thing we discover in the psychic trends is that the movements are directed toward a goal. . .This teleology, this striving for goals is innate in the concept of adaptation”. (Adler,1937, pp. 20-45).

The psychological theories of Inferiority and Superiority Complexes are used to deepen the understanding of Charlie’s behaviors and his journey toward self-worth and redemption in *The Whale*. His idea that individuals often compensate for feelings of inferiority through a superiority complex offers valuable insights into Charlie’s relationships, particularly with his daughter, Ellie. Adler’s concept of the Superiority Complex helps to explicate why Charlie in his pursuit of redemption, adheres to the idea that he must earn forgiveness and approval from others. His drive to be “good” or to do something meaningful is not necessarily an authentic expression of his own sense of self-worth, but rather a way to cover up his emotional marks and feelings of inferiority. Adler’s theory suggests that: “individuals often mask feelings of inferiority through the development of a superiority complex, using it as a defense mechanism.”

..... “Individuals develop a superiority complex to mask feelings of inferiority and inadequacy, often leading to self-destructive or compensatory behaviors”. (Ibid.).

It is argued that by integrating Alfred Adler’s theories of Inferiority and the Superiority Complexes alongside with the literary references of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), the analysis represents the interplay between the protagonist’s internal struggles and search for meaning. This intertextuality enriches the narrative, offering a layered representation of obsession and self-destruction, functioning both symbolically and thematically. Metaphorically, he is himself likened to the whale, both are massive, misunderstood, and central to the pursuit of understanding by those around them. Like Ahab, Charlie isolates himself physically through his obesity and emotionally through his guilt and shame. His apartment becomes a symbolic Pequod, a confined space where he navigates his inner storms. Adler’s theory suggests that Charlie may view his body as a reflection of his failure to maintain control over his life, relationships, and happiness. His self-destructive behavior can be interpreted as a form of overcompensation for these feelings. His repeated declarations, like, “I’m worried she’s forgotten what an amazing person she is. She’s amazing, Liz. She’s going to be okay,” (p.28), is an endeavor to find redemption or success through her achievements. His fixation on feeding himself to the point of immobility becomes a symbolic act of compensation, punishing his body for failing someone he loved. Charlie’s size, both physically and emotionally, could be interpreted as a form of overcompensation for his sense of helplessness. Charlie reveals an inherent drive toward self-actualization through his efforts to repair his relationships. His capacity for unconditional love, particularly toward Ellie, contrasts with her hostility and cruelty, as proved in this line, “You’re an amazing person, Ellie. I hope you know what an amazing person you are. I couldn’t ask for a more incredible daughter.” (p.60).

Symbols within the play, such as Charlie’s body, Ellie’s *Moby-Dick* essay, and Alan’s Bible, further illustrate themes of guilt, isolation, and the possibility of redemption. The whale represents fixation, trauma, and existential struggle which parallels Charlie’s battle with guilt and self-loathing. Charlie’s obesity and his emotional weight that he carries can be seen as metaphorical extensions of the white whale, while Ellie’s essay on the book represents both a critique of obsessive behavior and a reflection of Charlie’s hopes for redemption. His overweightness is a visible indication of his shame, stemming from his perceived failures as a partner and father. “This essay is honest. It’s a truth. It’s not just some book report. It’s a piece of her.” (p.76). Moreover, he recites the essay to himself often throughout the play, and another character read it to Charlie during his first health scare at the beginning of the play, because he wants it to be the last thing he hears before he dies.

CHARLIE: “PLEASE JUST READ IT TO ME! Just read it, any of it!”

THOMAS: “(Thomas grabs the essay from Charlie). Okay, okay--! (reading quickly) “In the amazing book *Moby Dick* by the author Herman Melville, the author recounts his story of being at sea.....” What is this, why am I reading this?! What was--? That thing you had me read to you?”

CHARLIE: “It’s an essay. It’s my job. I teach online college courses.”

THOMAS: “But why did you have me read it to you?”

CHARLIE: “Because I thought I was dying. And I wanted to hear it one last time.” (pp.4,7)

The essay is about *Moby-Dick* written by Ellie years earlier, expresses a deep sense of sympathy for the whale and its suffering, mirroring Charlie’s own pain. The

essay's critique of Captain Ahab's obsession exposes Charlie's own struggle. It criticizes the book's ending as overly bleak, offers a glimmer of hope and redemption. Ellie's observation that the whale is unfairly hunted uncovers an empathetic lens that corresponding with Charlie's desire for understanding and forgiveness. This suggests that Ellie views her father as her own kind of whale, not because of his size, but because of his estrangement. Ellie thinks Charlie is the cause of all the pain in her life and does not care about her, having not heard from him in years.

"In the course of the book, the pirate Ahab encounters many hardships. His entire life is set around trying to kill a certain whale." "I think this is sad because this whale doesn't have any emotions, and doesn't know how bad Ahab wants to kill him. "He's just a poor big animal.... I was very saddened by this book, and I felt many emotions for the characters. And I felt saddest of all when I read the boring chapters that were only descriptions of whales, because I knew that the author was just trying to save us from his own sad story, just for a little while. This book made me think about my own life, and then it made me feel glad for my--" (pp.104-105).

Charlie's insistence on Ellie reading the essay aloud and his repeated praise for its value elucidate his need to compensating for his feelings of insufficiency as a father.

CHARLIE: "You're perfect. You'll be happy. You'll care for people."

ELLIE: "(stops, unable to bring herself to leave). The ambulance is coming, they'll help you. You're going to the hospital. You just need surgery or something!"

CHARLIE: "No. They won't. Read it to me."

ELLIE: "What?!"

CHARLIE: "If you want to help. Read it to me. You can help me. If you read it. You'll help. If you read it. Please"

ELLIE: "(Ellie is holding back tears at this point, turns back to the door). Dad, please. (Ellie looks at Charlie, pleading. Ellie and Charlie are in the same position as they were at the end of their first scene together. The sound of waves continues to grow louder and louder. Ellie looks at the essay. She begins to read)."

Besides, Ellie proves a superiority complex, expressed through her intelligence and cutting remarks toward Charlie. Her cruel behavior hides her insecurities about her father's abandonment. This dynamic between Ellie and Charlie reveals how both characters grapple with feelings of inferiority and the need for validation, though in different ways. For Charlie, this interaction represents his struggle to show his worth, while Ellie's hostility signifies her own pain and need for reconciliation. In *Moby-Dick*, Ahab's obsessive quest for the whale mirrors Charlie's own fixation with reconciling with Ellie. Both Ahab and Charlie pursue meaning, but at great personal cost. Unlike the tragic ending of *Moby-Dick*, where Ahab's compulsive pursuit leads to his death, *The Whale* offers a more hopeful resolution. However, unlike Ahab, Charlie's redemption comes not from a solitary quest, but from his ability to connect with Ellie. Through his final act of standing and walking toward Ellie, Charlie finds meaning in his relationship with his daughter, leaving behind a legacy of love and understanding.

"Wheezing heavily and with a huge amount of effort and pain, Charlie attempts to stand up. Charlie, continues to rise. For the first time, he is standing fully erect on his own. The waves increase in volume. Charlie beams. Charlie takes a step toward Ellie, his eyes on hers the entire

time. Charlie takes one last step. The waves reach their loudest level. For the first time, Ellie smiles at Charlie. Charlie looks up. The waves cut off. A sharp intake of breath. The shot cuts out.” (pp. 104-105).

The essay becomes a bridge between Charlie and Ellie, offering hope that their relationship can transcend the failures of the past. Both the novel and the play scrutinize the possibility of finding humanity and forgiveness even in the face of immense suffering. Adler believed that “individuals are motivated by a fundamental drive toward self-improvement and achieving their ideal selves.” In this respect, Charlie’s ultimate act of sharing his essay, reconnecting with Ellie, and confronting his mortality, line up with Adler’s idea of striving for perfection. His physical decline contrasts with his emotional and spiritual growth, signifying a move toward a higher sense of self-worth and purpose. Because things get fantastical in the end, some viewers are left to question what is real and what is not in those closing moments. What is real is the emotional closure for both Ellie and Charlie, regardless of what really happens in the physical world. Though, the ending is slightly ambiguous.

The last moments of the play, Charlie having one last confrontation with Ellie. At their first meeting in years, the cold-hearted teenager challenges her father to walk toward her without the assistance of his walker. Charlie makes his way to where his daughter, unassisted, as she stands in his doorway. He fails at first, but he finally succeeds. She is initially mad at him for replacing her essay with the one she had written years ago as a child. At his insistence, Ellie reads him an analytical essay out loud about “*Moby-Dick*,” which finally provides a bit of reconciliation between the two. This is something he failed to do on her first visit. Charlie, after much effort, makes it to the door and is then seen levitating and disappearing into his fondest memory of his family. In this memory, he stands on the ocean shore with his feet in the water. Meanwhile, his young daughter plays in the sand and her mother watches on. He gets closure with his estranged daughter and, seemingly, finds some peace. Charlie avoids memories of his late partner, one of his male students, even the happy ones, and keeps them hidden away in a locked room or tucked into a bookshelf. But he does allow himself to ruminate on a happy memory of his family. As *The Whale* ended, Charlie went into a white light and the last thing he saw was an image of him, his wife, and their daughter on a beach from the past. It was a sign of hope. The stage play kept showing how bad things were getting until Charlie died. By integrating *Moby-Dick* into the analysis, *The Whale* emerges as an intertextual commentary on human struggles with guilt, trauma, and redemption. While *Moby-Dick* ends with destruction, *The Whale* suggests that connection and helplessness can pave the way for healing.

Conclusion:

In *The Whale*, Samuel D. Hunter presents a compelling narrative of a man tortured by guilt, struggling to reconcile with his past and find redemption. Through Charlie’s character, Hunter paints a complex portrait of a man whose past has irrevocably shaped his present. The psychological theories have been conducted in this paper: Freudian concepts of guilt, attachment theory, inferiority complex, Semiotics theory, and existential psychology, offer valuable insights into Charlie’s inner psyche. Struggling with overweightness and estrangement from Ellie, his teenage daughter, Charlie seeks redemption in his final days. The reconciliation with her becoming his most pressing goal, despite her initial rejection of his efforts. He acknowledges that he

has failed as a father and his efforts may be too late, but the need to make amends before his death drives him to act. Ultimately, the play uncovers the tension between the longing for redemption and the impossibility of escaping the consequences of one's actions. Charlie's journey is a poignant reminder of the human capacity for self-destruction and the elusive hope for healing.

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