

Queering Refusals, Secrets, and Deceit in Representations of Gay Male Grief in the Aftermath of the Sudden Death of a Loved One

Tore, Good Grief and The Razor's Edge

ABSTRACT

I examine queer grief in personal, cultural, and historical terms. I explore the secrecy, avoidance, and sudden emotional outbursts found in representations of male queer grief both well before and long after the initial outbreak of the AIDS pandemic. I address these themes through an analysis of complex portrayals of gay grief in two Netflix television series – *Tore* (2023) and *Good Grief* (2023) – as well as the character of Larry in W. Somerset Maugham's novel *The Razor's Edge* (1944). What links these three cultural products is the queer (specifically gay male) experience of grappling with the sudden death of a significant person who is somehow deceitful or appears to have secret. The grief does not conform to normative expectations. My analysis suggests that when grief comes suddenly, contains deceit and refuses to follow expectations of normative grief, it could queer our understandings of grieving as non-productive time. The characters of Larry, Tore, and Marc compel the (queer) cultural and political imagination to both pause and move beyond the stagnant present to imagine a brighter grief. Across these three examples, grief is shattered, unmasking the normative theatricality but also the duality of existence: death is ever-present but the expectations surrounding grief are as normative as those of life itself. If grieving is too narrowly defined, it risks bursting out in unanticipated ways, temporarily or permanently severing the mourner from relational connectedness.

Keywords: Queer grief, gay death, queer secrets, gay cultural products, queer crises

Solomon cruised the streets at night at the height of the AIDS crisis, hoping for a fatal sexual encounter that could hasten his end, sparing the greater anguish he believed he would cause his family and friends by committing suicide. Imagining his sudden death through illness, he recalls, 'I felt such a sense of release and of gratitude.'

– Lynne Segal, *Radical Happiness*, 2017, 45

THIS ESSAY EXAMINES queer grief in personal, cultural, and historical terms. It explores the secrecy, avoidance, and sudden emotional outbursts found in representations of male queer grief both well before and long after the initial outbreak of the AIDS pandemic. I address these themes through an analysis of complex portrayals of gay grief in two Netflix television series – *Tore* (2023) and *Good Grief* (2023) – as well as the character of Larry in W. Somerset Maugham's novel *The Razor's Edge* (1944). What links these three cultural products is the queer (specifically gay male) experience of grappling with the sudden death of a significant person who, in two of the three cases (*Tore* and *Good Grief*), harbours a secret, i.e., is somehow deceitful. In *The Razor's Edge*, it is the mourner himself who appears to have secret: his grief does not conform to normative expectations.

These three depictions of struggles with queer loss are set in different societies and eras, with varying social and cultural settings, categories and concepts of queer desire and identity, but they all share a connection to the aftermath of war or major crises (such as the AIDS pandemic). There is an important theme – that of deceit – that emerges in intriguing ways, consistently linked to queer grief across all three narratives. Therefore, I will explore the coupling or kinship of deceit and queer grief across these three cases of queering grievance. In this way, the analysis interrogates the subtleties, complexities, and agony of modern gay male grief.

The ghosts of the pandemic and of deceit are unavoidable aspects of gay male sexuality, as Lynne Segal notes in her reference to *The Noonday Demon* by Andrew Solomon (2001). The same anguish reappears in *Tore* and *Good Grief*. HIV and generational trauma were discussed early on by Tim Dean (2009), who suggested that HIV is inherent in how

gay men animate the controversy surrounding barebacking as a form of risky intimacy – one that forces the abandonment of psychological defences and exposes individuals to vulnerability. Segal (2017, 44), for her part, has advocated a general notion of radical happiness as a means of overcoming and surviving structural depression, psychic sorrows, and the grief endemic to our times. She notes that “the pressure we are under to banish all specters of sadness and failure is one of the reasons many people feel unhappy in the first place [...]”.

Tore and *Good Grief* implicate the audience and render it complicit in the act of witnessing queer death and grief. In doing so, they provide evidence of how television series and films can cultivate empathy. They achieve this in part through an age-old literary device: the use of deceit or secrecy surrounding death. I will examine this via the normative – specifically, via the stages of Freytag’s (1894) classic dramatic structure. To introduce a new angle, my final case focuses on a literary example of queer male grief: *The Razor’s Edge*. This allows for a study of how a classic novel’s character might be linked to recent Netflix series that explore the sudden loss of a loved one amid postwar, post-grief cultural expectations.

Both *Tore* and *Good Grief* respectively imperfect and overstage stereotypical expectations of grief, thereby queering grief for a potentially normative audience. Where *Tore* invests in raw emotion and grotesque acts, *Good Grief* is stylized to the extreme. It is all about soft voices, whispering, designer carpets, private viewings, and mohair scarves softly brushing against the neck – a world of nuance and subtlety. In *The Razor’s Edge*, the main character, young Larry, is a “real man” in that he is a war-decorated pilot, though a “damaged” one on a queer quest. In the novel, Larry is contrasted with an older man, Elliot, an aesthete and socialite who dies bitterly alone. The AIDS pandemic drastically altered perceptions of what constitutes a real man (Silvola 2023, 93–94). While Larry and Elliot belong to an earlier, postwar generation (the US Civil War and World War I), *Tore* and *Good Grief*’s central figure, Marc, represent post-pandemic, post-grief gay identities in the contemporary Western context.

Then again, in *The Razor's Edge*, the queering of Larry's peaceful, albeit restless, grief unfolds in a setting devoid of any liberal discussion on LGBTIQ+ rights or legal recognition of queer lives. It is as if the brute force of grief breaks through Larry – not in the form of pathological melancholy or cathartic tears, but as a kind of mental sobbing. Something is stuck and it cuts Larry off from what is seen as socially normative. At the same time this “something” is also visibly present yet ignored as too disturbing a force. As if to point this out, *The Razor's Edge* opens with an author's note stating that the story will not end in (Larry's) death or marriage, leaving the reader hanging in thin air. Larry – the one who survives after witnessing his comrade's death – is imprisoned in unending grief among the living, yet there are openings for a better future in this postwar, pre-pandemic setting, as Larry's search for meaning reaches beyond Western rationality. For this reason, I will first discuss the recent Netflix series *Tore* and *Good Grief*, and only then return to the earlier novel, *The Razor's Edge*.

Tore: Running away or running into grief in (anti)coming of gay age

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.
– W. H. Auden, “Funeral Blues” or “Stop all the clocks,” *The Ascent of F6: A Tragedy in Two Acts* (by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood), 1936

In the Netflix series *Tore*, we follow the crisis period of a twenty-seven-year-old Swedish–Asian gay man. Tore has not yet moved out of his family home when he loses his closest person – his father – in a horrific accident, where the father is crushed by a garbage truck before Tore's eyes – and ours.

The main character, Tore, is portrayed with finesse by the series' creator, William Spetz. Some of Sweden's most acclaimed contemporary

actors appear in supporting roles. In this way, the series also queers casting: every key role is inhabited by a powerful, charismatic actor. *Tore* is – and is not – a Bildungsroman. While it contains strong elements of comedic drama, it also unfolds as a kind of public coming-out narrative, featuring an old-school gay boat club with drag queens, substance use in sleazy restrooms, and drunken escapades culminating in ill-fated sexual encounters – a sort of dark, back-alley romance. There is intertextuality, as the story is set in Sweden, a leading liberal society that has already watched, read, and widely reflected upon Jonas Gardell’s popular trilogy and television series *Don’t Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* (2012) – a story about the horrors of the AIDS pandemic among Swedish gay men in the 1980s.

Tore stands as a third- or fourth-generation entry in gay television, drawing partly on *Don’t Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* in its depiction of post-AIDS gay sexual encounters, partly on *Queer as Folk* (2000) through its portrayal of drug use and cruising scenes, and partly on *Beautiful Thing* (1996), with its gay pub, drug-related plot turns and Bildungsroman form. The series also presents a sensitive first love with a settled older gay man – an escape from grief, but also something more “social” amid the stormy mess of Tore’s emotions. However, this first love is also about bitter deceit and leads to additional grieving.

Tore’s father is a white Swedish man nearing retirement age. We learn almost nothing about Tore’s mother, except perhaps that she is dead. Tore’s race, like his sexuality, is not discussed. It is present but unspoken, not used as the starting point for a story plot about deceit in the same way as suppressed grief. Shortly before – and more so after – the sudden and unexpected death of his father, Tore discovers that his father and his closest friend, Lynne – a single, straight, white Swedish mother – had been planning several major changes to his immediate future. These included letting him go from his job at the family-run funeral parlour. Tore also learns that his father had a new partner with whom he had planned to move in, and that he had intended for Tore to move out and live on his own. In a sense, Tore’s queerness is normalized while his father’s straight, but older sexuality is silenced.

As a result of all this, grief builds up inside Tore and erupts in forceful – and often destructive – ways. In this turmoil of neglected grief, juxtaposed against the more “appropriate” mourning rituals performed at his former workplace, Tore infiltrates a professional grief counselling conference after having been fired, nearly wrecking all his social relations, including the newly found gay boat club contacts and even the cross-species connection with the family dog. This descent appears to function as a kind of necessary rite of passage – particularly as the “damage” may ultimately prove more productive than the normative forms of grieving displayed at a conventional funeral.

Tore’s flaws – in his attempts to avoid grief or to grieve in alternative ways, i.e., by exploring sexuality and seeking connectedness to others, substances, and to himself – are presented boldly, in a raw, unfiltered manner resonates with the messiness of everyday life. It is not that Tore comes out to his family, to himself, or to those closest to him; from the outset, it is clear to everyone that Tore is gay. Rather, the story centres on that Tore has not been active in his autonomous (sexual) life. He begins to explore relationships, desire, emotional connectedness, and adulthood beyond his immediate circle – to figure out what it means to be a twenty-seven-year-old nonwhite gay man in contemporary Swedish society.

There is thus an “authentic” feel to the turbulence that – unlike “normal” grief – any queer person, especially a grieving and deceived one, might experience when entering the gay scene *and* broader adult society for the first time, alone. In Tore’s case, this unfolds in a highly charged emotional journey through some of the most profound questions that modern individuals face: how to navigate sex, feelings of desire and lust, emotional emptiness, substance use as a temporary escape from overwhelming emotions, betrayal, high hopes, desperation, and love. Although Tore’s darker or antisocial actions are portrayed in a raw manner, there is also an intriguing subtlety with deeper emotional and cultural layers. Many of Tore’s explorations unfold in the gay queer bar, which functions as both a physical setting and an ambiguous stage – a communal estrade – for those experiencing confusion, alienation, or searching for modes of being and feeling that the dominant culture does not fully support.

One might recall here Turner (1974a, 1974b), who argued that if liminality is understood as a time and space of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can also be seen as a period of heightened scrutiny of a culture's most deeply held values, a period in which rooted or habitual limits to thought, self-understanding, and behaviour are dismantled. Viewed through this lens, Tore's dramatic explorations and queering of modern rites of passage – staying put at home, repressing grief at all costs, experiencing emotional confusion in his bond with the family dog, and trying out new relationships in the queer community – are not only understandable, but culturally necessary.

Tore also addresses social attitudes towards suicide, particularly in the aftermath of a scene in which Tore jumps from a balcony while under the influence of drugs. He is found on the ground by his straight female friend Lynne, who later stages her own suicide in an attempt to bring Tore back into her life. However, suicide, and stagings of suicide, are different to sexuality. The audience is left to ponder whether the adult world in Sweden is, in fact, as mature as it appears: why would a white working mother stage such a dramatic scene to “teach a lesson” to a younger, non-white Swedish gay man who is clearly going through a painful period of profound grief. Lynne's staged suicide, in its attention-seeking quality, is the very opposite of Tore's drug-induced accident and underlying anguish. It is also worth noting that faking one's death is a common literary trope used to move grief-driven plots forward. For example, in Shakespeare's (1905) *Much Ado About Nothing*, Hero's faked death is used to increase her perceived desirability.

It is as if *Tore* suggests that there are unresolved emotional issues embedded within Swedish middle-class citizenship and adult identity. However, Lynne's staged suicide may also function as a deliberate plot device, designed to shape how the audience relates to Tore. In a Shakespearean vein, Tore temporarily loses Lynne (and his dog), only to come to value them more deeply upon regaining them. This, again, takes place in a Shakespearean tradition, evoking the Forest of Arden scenes in *As You Like It*, where the narrative plays around cross-dressing.

At the beginning of the series, the Tore we encounter is reluctant to

move out of his family home and is therefore either unable or unwilling to embody the role of an axiomatic young adult Swedish man. Following his father's death, Tore refuses to care for the family dog or allow it upstairs to his late father's room. The dog must go, as it becomes a living reminder of the loss Tore is not ready to face – so he sells it. Yet, as the series progresses, Tore finds other forms of support beyond his father's circle, which also included his job at the funeral parlour. He eventually attempts to retrieve the dog, even steals it back with Lynne's help. Tore thus first disavows the dog – and, by extension, normative family grief – by selling it. Then, he queers the act of (re)claiming ownership through an ethical queer artifice: dressed in drag, he reclaims what he believes is rightfully his.

The viewer may be led to perceive Tore not as a (grown) child rejecting adult norms, but as someone whose necessary explorations render him more adult than those who believed they were protecting him – namely Lynne and his late father. This shift reframes our perception of Tore: he appears more as an adult refusing to take his inevitably non-(hetero)normative place in society, than as someone refusing the normative rite of passage (grieving at the funeral). His queerness is a starting point, not an endpoint. This is not, by nature, a coming-out story, but rather a socialization narrative grounded in an intersectional and post-normal position (marked by nonwhite skin colour and queer sexuality). That position is not fully embraced, even within a liberal society such as Sweden. For all its queerness, *Tore* nevertheless follows a fundamentally normative structure, not only in its use of a Shakespearean plot device (the staged death) but also in its adherence to Freytag's (1894) classic five-stage model of dramatic composition. These stages are: Exposition (the accident in which Tore's father is crushed by a truck), Rising Action (Tore's avoidance of grief and efforts to escape it), Climax (the emotional outburst of grief, which results in Tore jumping from the balcony while on drugs, selling the dog, falling in love, and being deceived), Falling Action (Lynne's staged suicide and the attempt to steal the dog back), and finally, Resolution or Catastrophe (reconciling with Lynne and accepting the reality of his father's death).

Returning to the opening verse of Auden's poem cited at the start of this section, in *Tore*, the telephone keeps ringing, the dog refuses to be sold, secrets abound as people make plans for Tore's future without his knowledge, and there are no pianos. Yet Tore loses his job and faces the threat of police intervention for having given acid to an elderly woman. Who owns his grief? And what forms of control over others do we morally, and legally, legitimize? *Tore* queers these questions by suggesting that when grief comes suddenly, contains deceit, and resists the norms and expectations of normative mourning it can also queer our understandings of gender and age norms. Tore, for whom destructive behaviour is to die, survives an LSD-induced suicide attempt and a sexual encounter bordering on assault. Tore lives. Perhaps that is what is essentially queer about the deceit of grief. It is the antithesis of the AIDS pandemic.

Good Grief: Whom to grieve and whom with

He was my North, my South, my East and West,

My working week and my Sunday rest,

My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;

I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

– W. H. Auden, "Funeral Blues" or "Stop all the clocks," *The Ascent of*

F6: A Tragedy in Two Acts (by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood),

1936

As a film, *Good Grief* is a sensitive and subtle queer death melodrama, whereas *Tore* presents melodrama in a more raw form, interspersed with elements of comedy. In *Good Grief*, the plot employs a familiar trope also used in *Tore* – that of a sudden loss – to elicit an emotional response from the viewer (Exposition): the husband (Oliver) of the main character (Marc) dies suddenly in a car accident, much like Tore's father, and under the eyes of the grieving character and the audience. However, surrounding details (the house and the car) differ significantly. In *Tore*, the death occurs via a truck outside a care home, as Tore and his father arrive to collect a body for their work at the funeral parlour. In *Good*

Grief, it is a New York City cab that carries the older and wealthier husband off to Paris following a lavish birthday celebration at their upscale apartment. The younger husband, Marc, hears the crash and runs to the scene, where he finds the cab wrecked – with Oliver inside.

As in the second verse of Auden's poem (above), in *Good Grief*, the older gay husband who dies suddenly is everything to the younger gay spouse. The film opens amid a scene of gay celebration and artistic expression – centered around a piano – but there are no dogs, drugs or elderly women, as in *Tore*. Smartphones, too, are kept out of sight and sound. However, secrets and deceit are very much present. Oliver had quietly planned a future divorce; he maintained another apartment, another lover and an entire parallel life that Marc knew nothing about. The death is sudden and, like in *Tore*, caused by a car crash.

In *Good Grief*, Marc grieves in a manner that aligns with normative expectations: he remains in the couple's well-appointed New York apartment and mourns for a year, supported by a close circle of friends. Yet, as in *Tore* – where *Tore* discovers that his deceased father had made plans for the future, with a new female partner, that excluded him – Marc learns that his husband, too, had life-changing plans (Rising Action). In the fatal cab ride Oliver was thus heading toward a new future – one without Marc.

In *Good Grief*, the director and the lead actor are one and the same: the film is directed by and stars Daniel Levy, widely known for his role as the queer son in a formerly wealthy family in the Canadian television sitcom *Schitt's Creek* (2015–2020). As an intertextual reference, Levy's dual role in *Good Grief* may have afforded him greater creative control – a freer hand to shape the film as he wished. In this way, the film also functions as an entry point into the discourse of queer grief and its disconnections, drawing attention to how certain emotional experiences become visible – and consumable – for mass audiences. This, in turn, raises an interesting question about intentionality and intended audience versus the response.

Good Grief clearly aspires to be a beautiful façade for exploring complex grief issues. Levy and the writing team may have intentionally opt-

ed for subtle performance and delicate artifice to queer the normative sombreness of male grieving – rendering the uncanny aspects even more grievable in their ethereal fragility. However, certain opportunities to explore the deeper emotional complexities of queer grief – and render them more alive to viewers – are left underdeveloped. Perhaps, then, we might take a step further and consider Netflix itself as a hegemonic force in Western cultural (re)production. Could it be time to queer Netflix itself?

The main elements in *Good Grief* are, *an sich*, queer – death within a queer marriage, gay betrayal, and even the presence of a lonely yet sexually assertive straight female best friend (echoing a similar figure in *Tore*) – in a sympathetic, everyday sort of manner. These expansive queer themes – friendship, death, and love – are presented through a series of small, day-to-day episodes, even as the tone of melodrama and drama comedy remains present, and the narrative follows a normative drama pyramid structure – again much like in *Tore*. Tore also, even at his most outrageous – his (anti)rite of passage explorations – stands out from those around him as somehow more “polished” or at least less drab.

The viewer – along with Marc’s friends – is invited to grieve with him, over the fact that he has lost a year mourning something, or someone, that was never fully there. This plot development in *Good Grief* once again queers the rite of kinship passage (Turner 1974a). The secret future life of the deceased is revealed when Marc discovers a note from Oliver, suggesting he had planned to end the marriage (Climax). We are left wondering whether Marc had overlooked the note and other direct or indirect signs of what was going on with Oliver. Had he chosen to avoid the real loss – the betrayal – by grieving according to what is normatively expected of a bereaved widower, over a spouse he had lost long before the death of that spouse (Falling Action)? What, then, is queer about this refusal to grieve the *actual* loss (divorce and deceit) in favor of grieving according to a socially sanctioned narrative of mourning, as a gay widower?

It is precisely the surprise of the Other that makes *Good Grief* of such interest. The film raises essential questions: How does one grieve when

grief is complicated by secrets – both in the mourner and in the one mourned? What does it mean to experience misplaced queer grief and can such a thing even be said to exist? *Good Grief* examines the bonds of queer friendship: loving, yet stretched to their limits. Marc, the widower, has spent a year grieving under false pretences, concealing the reality of the situation from the friends who supported him. He even takes them to Oliver's Paris apartment without telling them what the space truly is and represents. When Oliver's new lover arrives at the door, Marc effectively denies him the right to grieve (*Catastrophe*).

There are thus multiple layers of deceit in the plot. As a result, the viewer is prompted to ask what is *good* about a misplaced grief? Why does grief in *Good Grief* insist on presenting itself as good, normative grief, while in *Tore* it is initially refused altogether? *Tore* needed time to grieve queerly, time away from Lynne and the dog. He needed to spit on his father's grave and trash his room as well as wander alone on the gay boat. Marc needs a year to grieve alone, though the object of his grief is not what the external world assumes it to be. In this way, both *Tore* and *Good Grief* leave the viewer to ponder what genuine grief is, who is entitled to it, and how the queer condition influences grieving in the gay male age cohort that was socialized prior to recent expansions of legal and social recognition. The scenes of liminal glamour in the gay boat bar in *Tore*, alongside the substance-infused expressions of grief and misery in the semi-privacy of its bathroom, stand in striking contrast to the legal landscape in *Good Grief* – i.e., the (deceived or not?) promise of inheritance and the one-year ritual of wedlock widowhood. Together, these narratives highlight the complex and often contradictory conditions of queer grief in a postnormal liberal society.

Because a significant part of *Good Grief* is set in Paris, the turning point (Resolution) unfolds during a date scene set in a museum gallery featuring Monet frescoes painted as the artist was losing his eyesight. This scene speaks to misplaced grief and its right to exist. It suggests that we must learn to see differently – to rely on other senses, other modes of perception – to perceive what has been hidden in culture, or by culture.

In the fields of the spirit / Can the dead grieve?

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one

Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,

Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;

For nothing now can ever come to any good.

– W. H. Auden, “Funeral Blues” or “Stop All the Clocks,” *The Ascent of F6: A Tragedy in Two Acts* (by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood), 1936

In the fourth verse of Auden’s poem, the skies are called on to shut. This imagery resonates with Larry (Laurence Darrell), the central character in W. Somerset Maugham’s *The Razor’s Edge* (1944). At the beginning of the novel, the narrator-author recounts his first meeting with the twenty-year-old Larry – and his nineteen-year-old fiancée Isabel – at a dinner table hosted by members of the Chicago social elite in 1919 Paris. The narrator first notices Larry’s beautiful hands, his curious tranquillity and social distraction. Larry is introduced to the narrator through Isabel’s uncle Elliot, an aesthete and socialite. We learn that Larry’s best friend, the pilot Patsy, died before Larry’s eyes after saving his life on the battlefield (Exposition). Due to his grief, Larry refuses to resume a “normal” life after the war.

During the war, the teenage Larry had run away from his high school in the United States to Canada, where he lied about his age and enlisted in the air force. He served in France around the time of the armistice and, following the war, spent an entire year doing nothing. The social circle around him now expects him to recover from whatever grief he carries from the battlefield. He is expected to take a respectable job, in order to maintain his good social standing, and support a family in post-war Chicago, where there is a lot of money to be made for an industrious young man.

For Isabel, Larry’s refusal to pursue a career, just sitting there, expecting to live on his war decorations alone, is deeply unsettling. All the other young men in her circle are preparing for a profession or have already entered the business world. This mirrors how Tore just wants to

stay at home and withdraw from everything after witnessing his father's death. Similarly, Marc in *Good Grief* insists on having his culturally sanctioned year of mourning – yet he also extends that grief beyond its expected limits, even as doing so requires him deceiving his friends.

But Larry shows no interest in the life expected of him by his fiancée or the social world around him. Larry thus queers liminality: he declines to become industrious, refuses to relinquish his grief for Patsy. Instead, he studies psychology, Spinoza, Greek, Latin, Hugo, Balzac and Ruysbroek in his Paris bedsit, enrolled at the Sorbonne. His soul-searching takes him in multiple directions (Rising Action).

Isabel, increasingly confused, pleads with Larry to choose a career – stockbroking, law or medicine – but Larry insists that all he desires is to idle around. Ultimately, Isabel decides to divorce her great love for class and status reasons (Climax). Isabel declares that she wants to live like “other people do”: attending balls and social events, playing golf and riding horses – not residing in cheap hostels or traveling second class.

Although Larry refuses to be “busy” in the normative sense, he ultimately accomplishes a great deal. He becomes a healer for other war-damaged men – men who have followed the norm of reintegrating into society and putting their war trauma behind them. One of these men, whom Larry eventually helps, is Gray – now the husband of Isabel and father to her children. The trauma, buried underneath the industriousness of Gray and other social norm-following men, later forces itself back out, in unforeseen and damaging ways, echoing patterns seen in *Tore* and *Good Grief*. Larry, sympathetic – if not loving – helps Gray to help himself calm down and perhaps meet his own repressed desires and longings (Falling Action).

Larry then goes on to work in a mine in northern France, walks across Europe to Cologne, and eventually disappears into India for several years to explore its spiritual traditions. His desire is unconventional. His pilgrimage through the French and German post-war countryside can be read as a homage to time and the human body. In Cologne he takes up work at a farm, where he is sexually deceived, and arguably assaulted, by a woman he believes to be the farmer's wife, but who later turns out

to be the daughter-in-law, Ellie – widowed by the war. She enters his bed one night and pushes sex on him (Catastrophe). In response, Larry flees the farm and continues on to Bonn. This episode can be interpreted either as queering the conventional expectations of freedom or a critique of war and patriarchy – both of which assert control not only over alliances and borders, but also over sexuality and grief. These systems force emotional and erotic energies into repression, only for them to erupt later in unexpected and often violent ways. Grief, when allowed to be fully felt rather than avoided or repressed, can feel as though one is falling apart. Larry, perhaps, permits himself to be undone by grief – unlike Tore, whose destructiveness ultimately gives way to a form or resolution, or Marc, who clings to deceit and almost destroys his social circle in the process. But is all well that seems to end well? The suggestion that Larry might be grieving not only the death of a battle comrade but also the loss of a queer love object – a desire for another man – may facilitate his stepping out of the sphere of what is expected and seen as “normal.” His antisocial grief, paradoxically, renders him more social: he becomes a healer of those who returned from the extraordinary intimacies of the war to the norm, to the world of marriage, heterosexual reproduction and industrious professional life (Resolution).

Larry’s grief is about the failure to sustain a bond with a dead comrade who also was the object of his desire. In this, death establishes an asymmetry – a failure to form a living–dead union. How could Larry surrender himself to a love that is no longer there (Sorainen 2023)? Larry chooses a long, slow and partly esoteric path in life, one that positions him at the edges of the normative and rational spheres. The smoldering grief – a grief that evades the demand to become “real” – is not the same as being social, normative or publicly observable.

Conclusion: Getting lost and queering grieving

And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.

– Edgar Allan Poe, “The Raven”, *Great Tales & Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*,

1953, 377–383

The three examples of queer grieving discussed above draw upon classic, normative literary tropes, narrative structures, plot devices, and formal conventions. This allows the mass audience of the Netflix series (*Tore* and *Good Grief*) and the popular readership of W. Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* to engage with the complexities of attachment to a lost love object. The progression in these three cultural products is ultimately driven by something more relational and associative than linear chronology.

The characters of Larry, Tore, and Marc compel the (queer) cultural and political imagination to both pause and move beyond the stagnant present to imagine a brighter grief. Each of them contributes to a complication and diversification of what might be considered a legitimate queering and un/re/description of gay male grief. Their distinct negotiations with the familiarity, strangeness, and danger of mourning work deepen our understanding of queer grief. Across these three examples, grief is shattered, unmasking the normative theatricality but also the duality of existence: death is ever-present but the expectations surrounding grief are as normative as those of life itself.

If grieving is too narrowly defined, it risks bursting out in unanticipated ways, temporarily or permanently severing the mourner from relational connectedness. *Tore* addresses this through a post-queer, destructive path which ends relatively well; *Good Grief* by showing how a normative period of mourning may work against queer individuals, especially if the reality of the loss is hidden or distorted; and *The Razor's Edge* by suggesting that Larry's refusal to interrupt his exploration of queer grief allows him a better future, as a healer of others broken by the norm.

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