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# Widow Narratives on Film and in Memoirs:

## Exploring Formula Stories of Grief and Loss of Older Women After the Death of a Spouse

by

Jennifer R. Bender

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Communication
College of Arts & Sciences
University of South Florida

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Keywords: Communication, thematic analysis, displaced populations, identity

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# CHAPTER ONE:

# INTRODUCTION, RATIONALE, & LITERATURE REVIEW

## Introduction

This dissertation analyzes narratives (written and mediated) about widows' post-loss experiences—specifically the ways in which these women embody and adjust/adhere to their post-loss widow identities—and whether or not the canonical/formula stories about widows reflect current experiences of widowhood. I look at older widowed women—both those in well-read widow memoirs and also in media portrayals of widows on film. The canonical view of widows as not attractive, not useful, and not interesting needs to be reexamined in light of changing ideas about gender roles and increased longevity. Surely older women have experiences, desires, and goals that encompass more than being socially invisible and caring for grandchildren. Given that 80% of women outlive their husbands (Mastekaasa, 1994; Peters & Liefbroer, 1997) and are an understudied and often overlooked population (Lopata, 1996), this heartfelt research is important.

## Rationale & Literature Review

What do we know about older widows? This section will address that question by looking at the intersection of existing widowhood research and the gaps that exist in scholarship on widows. First, we know that widows are incredibly understudied in human sciences (Lopata, 1996). To clarify the population being studied in this dissertation, it is generally agreed upon that

a widow is defined as, "a woman who had been married and whose husband has died" (Lopata, 1996, p. 1). The ACL defines a woman of older age as women who are ages 65+ (Administration for Community Living, 2007). So for this project, an "older widow" is a woman age 65+ who has lost a spouse. Research on widowhood both in historical and across interdisciplinary studies has been relatively absent. Hard science research (particularly medical research) has dominated widowhood work because scholars in this field tend to offer a set of objective directives for a widow to follow post-loss or the literature available in these fields is heavily situated in grief work. The Kübler-Ross (1969) Model, for example, offers five "stages of grief" that a widow should undergo—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Because of the seemingly simplistic model offered by Kübler-Ross, models like these about grief are attractive to those who are looking to overcome grief but they are not often applicable to all individuals. As one of the authors of the memoirs studied in this dissertation writes, "there was a body of sub-literature, how-to guides for dealing with the condition, some 'practical,' some 'inspirational,' most of either useless… that left the professional literature, the studies done by psychiatrists and psychologists and social workers who came after Freud and Melanie Klein, and quite soon it was to this literature that I found myself turning" (Didion, 2005, pp. 45-46). Finding this work also unsatisfying in helping her comprehend her new identity of "widow," Didion goes on to explore the work of Worden, who talks about post-death coping rituals, work by the National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine (1984) on death responses (i.e.: shock, numbness), a slew of medical texts from the United Kingdom about widowers (studies on men who have lost a spouse), literature on brain function and neurotransmitters and endocrine levels post-loss, etc., and she even discusses literature about complicated and uncomplicated grief. Ultimately her greatest guide in literature isn't scholarly literature at all, it's actually a book about etiquette

written by Emily Post that explains how to behave appropriately immediately after the loss (for example, what to wear at the funeral, how to dress, where to sit, etc.) but, the shortcoming of this work is that Post only explains "how-to" guidelines for recently widowed women. There are no "how-to" guidelines that extend beyond immediate death duties that the widow is burdened by. Noting that the literature on widowhood falls short, even for the widow herself to read and understand, shows that there is something humanistic about the widow experience missing in research. Because many of the authors of the memoirs studied in this dissertation "write their way through/out" of grief, telling their stories is an essential part of the coping process, yet this isn't studied beyond the few existing sociological works done by scholars like Lopata (1996) and Chambers (2018) who interviewed widows.

Much of the early Western research on widows and widowers was grounded in the history discipline, which talked about how some widows were thought to be witches or have some kind of evil spirit that caused the death of their husband. This ultimately led to a widow being shunned from a community or hung (Lopata, 1996, Blom 1991). There was a shift that took place in the 60's and 70's where widowhood began to be examined from a medical model perspective (Blom, 1991). Furthermore, to shift away from the medical model of widowhood, because it problematically emphasized widowhood as a "disease" curable by medicine, interdisciplinary sciences began researching the widow experience in the late 70's through the 90's, doing so from an ethnographic perspective in which widows had a voice in expressing their experiences through interviews. Chandler (1991), Hart (1976), Scandron (1988), and Simon (1987) are a few of the prominent scholars that contributed to shedding light on widowhood from a cross-disciplinary humanistic perspective, particularly exploring how widows and widowers expressed themselves in interview contexts and what their social and economic backgrounds

looked like during those time frames. One of the greatest takeaways from this era was Lopata's 1996 comprehensive work on myths surrounding widowhood because she was able to discover that widows were looking at so much grief literature that they felt as though their only experience they were allowed was to grieve and take care of grandchildren. Chambers work in 2005 (published in 2018) interviewed widows, as well, finding that many widows were actually relieved by the death of a spouse and felt less remorse than she anticipated. Because the historical and medical research was so deeply grounded in feelings of loneliness and sadness, Chambers and Lopata both anticipated finding widows to be unhappy and mourning. Instead, in many cases, they often found their interview subjects to be living independent and often very happy lives.

While the interview research is an important contribution to scientific research and I could have done interviews, that work has already been done by scholars like Chambers and Lopata. Instead I analyze mass media accounts of widows in memoirs and films and seek to find how these media accounts influence the formula story of widowhood.

Before I explain what a formula story is and what the formula story of a widow looks like, I must first address that I am a communication scholar. In reviewing existing literature in the discipline of communication, my search results primarily generated scholarship focusing on patterns within family systems that may shift as widowhood *approaches* (Carmon, et.al., 2010; Harwood, Rittenour, & Lin, 2013) and not after a wife takes on the label of "widow." This literature looks at the patterns of talk that take place prior to the loss of a husband within the context of the soon-to-be widow and her family. This family communication research discusses the importance of maintaining communication (Pecchioni, Wright, & Nussbaum, 2006), research on pre-loss conversations (Goldsmith, Miller, & Caughlin, 2007), and attachment styles (Golish,

2000) pre and post-loss. These works are all significant contributions to coping with a loss of a spouse because they explain how communication patterns are certain to change and how attachment styles that may have previously existed prior to the loss will shift after the death of a family member, but they provide little insight about how a widow (especially an older widow) specifically talks about her experiences, thoughts, and feelings surrounding her new identity. Certainly the family communication perspective is an important contribution to communication scholarship, as are the communicative models of talk explored by these scholars in the context of widowhood, but what has yet to be explored regarding older widows' in communication studies are the stories they tell, the mediated stories being told about them, and how these stories influence identity structures surrounding widowhood. This is the work of a narrative identity communication scholar.

There is no current communication research, or research from most disciplines, that focuses on narrative theory and sensemaking for widowed women. A simple Google Scholar search shows the shocking, but true, nature of how undervalued widows are as a population "worthy" of study. The first result that will come up is Lopata's work that occurred in 1979 and much of the research on widows focuses on widowhood in other countries such as Guatemala (Green, 1999), India (Dreze, 1990), and widows in African societies (Potash, 1986). In addition, other work that appears is primarily focused on health after bereavement (Parkes & Brown, 1972; Maddison & Viola, 1968) and in self- help literature (Vachon, Lyall, & Rogers, 1980). Remarkably outdated, these contributions have little use in representing contemporary widowhood. As a large and growing percentage of the population, widows are surprisingly underrepresented and, as Chambers (2018) and Lopata (1996) have shown, narrative structures surrounding their experiences are often misleading or misrepresentative of their lived

experiences. With little to no scholarly data that significantly contributes to communication research surrounding widow identities, there is a tremendous gap in the identity work and where these women are learning how to construct their identity as a widow. As communication scholars, we can and should be exploring the patterns of interaction and communicative practices of older widows, especially because of the problematic canonical structures that currently exist surrounding older widowed women as not worthy of much or even outright unnecessary individuals. Data does exist in census collections but is actually more often collected by life insurance companies because these companies use the alarming statistics surrounding widowhood to sell life insurance policies to older adults. The statistical data is certainly important but what is missing from current work on the older widow population is the intersection of their narrative identities and the social structures that surround and reinforce this group as a weak and unnecessary part of contemporary Western populations. Certainly we see life insurance companies perpetuating ideas of older individuals as weak by scaring them into purchasing end-of-life products and medical companies reinforcing statistical data in pamphlets provided by pharmaceutical companies or in medical clinic offices, but this data tells little of human *experience* and how the death of a spouse shapes identity structures and daily behaviors post-loss. By interrogating the narrative structures surrounding widows' identity stories, communication scholars can provide insight into whether or not the changing roles of women in society have impacted the formula story that constructs the widow identity in contemporary American culture. Through thematic analysis of widely consumed media texts as a research method, I argue that we can observe and understand the widow scripts that are still pervasive in our culture.

So what is a formula story and what does the formula story of an older widow look like? As Loseke (2007) notes, "understanding how narrative identity works and the work narrative identities do require examining reflexive relationships among stories of cultural, institutional, organizational, and personal identity" (p. 663). So essentially, all stories told about a person's identity have cultural implications that need to be examined in order to be understood. Loseke argues that categorical identities (such as identities associated with families, gender, etc.) come from constructions of the past, so they are historically situated, but themes being told surrounding these identities are challenged and negotiated as they are socially reconstructed. That means that a person's identity may have certain grounding that has been so historically situated that it is challenging to change their identity framework. The term "formula story" implies that each character has a narrative that adheres to typical actor characteristics, typical behaviors within typical plots leading to expectable moral evaluations (Loseke p. 664). As a result, a formula story provides a framework upon which individuals are expected to act and are evaluated as a result of how well they act in accordance with their social identity. One of the questions posed by Loseke that I explore in this dissertation research is: "What work do these stories do?" That is, what is implied by the ways that a character behaves in their stories and what are the repercussions or benefits of a formula story on a character's identity?

The widow, for example, is an identity that has a formula story. She is expected to follow a particular narrative structure. In doing so, she behaves according to a larger idea about what behaviors are appropriate and acts in response to the formula story. The idea that a formula story has such a major influence on human behavior can be problematic if the characters find difficulty adhering to that story. For example, if one of the behaviors that a widow is supposed to partake in is constant grief after the loss of her spouse but she instead finds herself relieved or happy

because he is gone, there are moral judgments placed on the widow for deviating from the formula story. I argue that formula stories are influenced by and influence mass mediated texts, such as memoirs and films. These artifacts provide examples of the formula behaviors a person of a particular identity should enact and reinforces the existing formula story. Loseke does note that, "Socially circulating formula stories are continually created, modified, challenged, and discarded" (2007, p. 664), which means that formula stories can be both fluid as well as rigid. This is important for this dissertation work because the films and memoirs studied in this project not only provide the formula story for a widow, but also show how the formula story is created, modified, and challenged by the writers and actors in the artifacts studied in this work. The eight artifacts explored in this dissertation project show the common, mainstream formula story that is produced and circulated in contemporary Western culture, however, because formula stories are not necessarily representative of all populations, these mass-consumed artifacts produce a narrative that many widows cannot live up to, which is why it is especially important to understand what formula story about widows is being told. Loseke comments that, "Formula stories evaluated as believable and important therefore tend to have particular authors, plot lines, and story forms" (2007, p. 665). So the best stories follow a particular narrative structure that is well-received by audiences. Social norms surrounding widowhood are expressed through canonical structures that are socially constructed and provide "equipment for living" (Burke, 1973). Because the work analyzed in this dissertation includes contemporary, well-received films and memoirs, these works are directly influencing the formula story of older widows. This is a comfort, in that, having a well-liked formula story provides equipment for widows to help in sense-making of their identity post-loss, but also incredibly problematic, in that, many individuals cannot live the formula story they read about or watch in a movie. Books and movies

tend to have a narrative structure that reinforces a happy ending and has a good moral—audiences like this narrative structure because it is familiar and leaves the consumer with a sense of fulfillment or hope. My aim is to understand the existing formula story of an older widow and whether or not contemporary memoirs written by widows and contemporary films depicting widows conform to or challenge existing social norms as included in the formula story of widowhood.

Because of the lack of existing research on the widow experience, widow narratives, and widow identities, many scholars (Carr, 2004; Dribe, Lundh, & Nystedt, 2007; Chambers, 2018, for example) tend to rely on Lopata's work on widows, as she was the last to write a comprehensive examination of "current" widowhood (1996). The goal of her research was to share her ethnographic interview work to explore how widows are culturally situated across America. In doing so, she interviewed individuals in both large cities and small towns to obtain information about their experiences. She also provided a glimpse of cross-cultural and racially and ethnically diverse widow experiences that were/are taking place in America, including examples of Black experiences of widowhood and widowhood for Asians living in America. The breadth and depth of her work provided groundbreaking insight into widows' experiences across America and in other countries and her legacy carried beyond her death in 2003 to cross-disciplinary studies on widows. While the means to carry on her research were readily available, few scholars chose to work in studies surrounding widows, much less older widows. The glimpse of hope for older widows to be taken seriously as a population worthy of study has been fundamentally absent in academia for upwards of twenty years.

In order to understand why this population *is* worthy of study, the demographics of older widows need to be addressed. The Administration for Community Living's (ACL) annual report

revealed that the population of older adults (ages 65+) is growing at a rapid rate. From 2006-2016 there was a 33% increase in the older adult population living in America. In addition, the older American population is expected to double by 2060 to approximately 98 million individuals (2007, p.1). With increased numbers in the older population there is also a greater risk for widowhood. Older American widows comprise 44% of the older female population and women are more likely to outlive their husbands than vice versa (US Census Bureau, 2017). Women are less likely to remarry or even start a new romantic life after the age of 45 and men are more likely to remarry and often remarry women much younger than themselves (Lopata, 1996). This is a result of both gender distribution (there are more women available to date than men) and because men of older age have a general feeling of incompetence when it comes to living without a wife (Lopata, 1996). The National Centre for Old Age Insurance (CNAV) revealed that between ages 62 and 75, only 1% of the older widow population formed a new "union" with a romantic partner.

The number of older women exceeds older men and women are anticipated to live approximately three years longer than older men. In 2017, one out of every three older American women (ages 65+) are widows, whereas only 11% of older men were widows—making the odds of being an older woman widow three times more likely than being an older male widower. Most older Americans are expected to live to be approximately 85 years of age, which is a significant increase in life longevity, and this number will continue to increase (ACL, 2017). In addition, women have a longer life expectancy than men, which leads many widowed women to have longer periods of widowhood. These demographics are a problem because a lot of women will be widows—many of them for a very long time as life expectancy increases, and many of them never remarrying or even looking for a new romantic partner after the death of a husband.

As the data analyzed in this work will show, women who are widowed act more erratic, partake (and are often encouraged to partake) in behaviors that put them in embarrassing and dangerous situations, try to learn to navigate their social role of widow by adopting traditionally male tasks and failing, and accept social interaction limited to family members and close friends. Chambers (2018), for example, wrote that because of what she had read in the literature, she was shocked to meet real widows who were actually out in social spaces doing fun things. She also wrote about widows who found relief (especially if their husband had been ill for an extended period of time) when their husband's death occurred. These stories are not discussed often in the literature, nor are they often reflected in mainstream, mass-consumed artifacts that saturate contemporary books and films available for reading or viewing pleasure. Because of feminism, longer life spans, and changing gender roles, perhaps the formula story no longer represents widows' experiences. My analysis isn't necessarily representative of all widows and I do not attempt to generalize my findings, but what this work does show is how formula stories and widow experiences intersect and influence one another through popular cultural texts (memoirs and films).

## CHAPTER TWO:

## RESEARCH METHOD AND OVERVIEWS OF MEMOIRS & FILMS

### Research Method

This chapter examines the methodological approach to the data examined in this project and provides an overview of the texts and films being studied in this work. I explain how the research is being conducted and also why narrative and thematic analysis, methods of qualitative analysis (Reissman 1993, Reissman, 2008), are essential to this research project.

In order to justify why qualitative work is imperative to this research I will first provide the background of how the project came about. I began working with my advisor for a writing project regarding widow memoirs for a summer independent study. My research interests are in romantic relationships, hers in health and loss, so we wanted to see where we could intersect our ideas to create a publishable paper. We brainstormed for less than an hour before coming up with the idea to read about lived experiences of women who were in love but lost their husbands. We decided that we would read a few memoirs of widowed women and independently write down the most prominent sections of the texts that stood out to us. After completing each memoir we would meet for lunch and compare our notes and, surprisingly, we could not have been more on the same "page" (literally!). It was overwhelmingly odd how we found the exact same page numbers for reference for our conversations. We ended up choosing the same passages from the books, which led us to think we were truly on to something. Our preliminary data collection[1] was

[1] See Appendix I for the primary and secondary data analysis

to gather as many of the common themes we found and condense them into several overarching themes that could make for a workable paper.

Once we found the themes I started working with a corkboard to visually organize the overlapping themes we encountered while reading. The corkboard was a visual way of displaying the data that was gathered from the start of the project through the end of reading the three memoirs we focused on. After time, that data turned into a short paper that explained the use of qualitative methodology as an approach to studying widowhood. Because our conversations were collaborative, discussion about the memoirs helped us make sense of our social constructions of widows—that is, how these women are projecting themselves and how we perceive them as "outsiders" because we're getting a look into their world through their stories. After a summer of reading widowed women's memoirs we agreed that the scope of this project is bigger than a paper—that this underrepresented population of older women deserve a voice. This was a turning point in the research process, as I made the decision to make this project my dissertation focus. This approach allowed inquiry to focus on the deep emotions aligned with older widowed women.

After making the decision to move forward with this project as my dissertation, it was suggested that I extend the scope of the project to look at other cultural artifacts that might provide insight into the older widow experience. My committee and I discussed selecting several films that either featured or contained a character who is an older widowed woman. I selected the films by asking for recommendations from friends, my husband, and my dissertation committee. It, candidly, was a difficult task to find many contemporary films that featured widows as a prominent (and not a secondary) character. I note here that the demographic selection is unintentional, aside from sex and age—These are mainstream sources that feature white women,

and, therefore, my conclusions certainly do not reflect a broad experience of older widows cross-culturally. (More about this is written in the limitations section of the dissertation.) I settled on and viewed each of the five films, screening them for a thorough content analysis to find themes reflecting the widowed characters' experiences and personas, much like I had done during the initial reading and rereading of the memoirs. After independently watching each film I put together a list of the overlapping themes that reoccurred throughout the movies and prepared to do a comparative analysis of the films and movies. The purpose was to see whether or not the themes present in the texts were also present in the movies and, if so, what these representations say about older widowed women and how they are communicated about and with. Overlapping themes did indeed appear in the memoirs and again in the films. This project will show, through qualitative analysis techniques, the importance of these narratives about and from older widowed women and how they speak to and challenge the larger cultural narratives about widows age 65+. In the analysis, I address the following research questions:

1.) How does mass media portray older widows in contemporary films?

2.) How do older widows write about widowhood in memoirs?

3.) What perceptions, beliefs, or attitudes have emerged as a result of how older widows are depicted on films and in memoirs and do these perceptions of older widows reflect or contradict a larger cultural narrative about widowhood?

Narrative analysis, thematic analysis, and comparative analysis are all essential approaches that are used in analyzing texts and stories. Narrative analysis takes the story as a whole and looks at issues such as character development, plot, and the "moral of the story." According to Smith, "Narrative inquiry might, therefore, be best considered an umbrella term for a mosaic of research efforts, with diverse theoretical musings, methods, empirical groundings,

and/or significance all revolving around an interest in narrative (2007, p. 392)." Thematic analysis is useful when one is interested in looking across multiple stories to uncover similar plot devices or lessons learned. While useful as a research method, it provides more of a showing of what the artifacts tell an audience than providing an argument for the, "Why does this matter?" or "So what?" questions that may be asked of a researcher. Thematic analysis provides a way of organizing repeating phenomena that occur across multiple texts, and organizing the data into themes. Instead of only using thematic analysis and presenting the themes present in the research, this work takes the themes present in the memoirs and films and compares them to help make sense of why the themes are repeated and overlapping and how they do/do not represent the experiences in the popular canonical story of widow experiences. By organizing the themes first through thematic analysis, comparative analysis provides the opportunity to look across the themes to structure an argument regarding the phenomena being studied, in this case, the narratives surrounding widow experiences. This methodology is important when taking more than one set of data (in this case, more than one book or film) and comparing the artifact with another or many artifacts because it provides an opportunity for a researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the artifacts work together or are unrelated to a more broad concept about a particular phenomena. The thematic analysis is conducted prior to the comparative analysis, as the thematic analysis provides the data that is compared in the comparative analysis portion of the work.

Thematic and comparative analysis methods are used to analyze the three memoirs of widowhood and the five films that contain or feature a widowed character. The three memoirs include: Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), Anne Roiphe's *Epilogue* (2008), and Joyce Carol Oates' *A Widow's Story: A Memoir* (2011). The films include: *How to Deal*

(2003), *Elizabethtown* (2005), *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007), *The Face of Love* (2013), and *Book* Club (2018). Each memoir and film contains a multitude of stories, and to choose only one or two stories or themes from each would not do justice to the richness of these texts.

This data analysis approach yielded four themes: (1) Demographics—age, education, race, financial status, and physical features; (2) Interpersonal Relationships; (3) Erratic Behavior—drinking, drug use, dating, age-appropriate(?) behavior; and (4) Widow Duties/Responsibilities—love, caregiving, household chores, etc. These themes will be thoroughly discussed in Chapters Three and Four.

## Overview of Widow Memoirs

Joan Didion (2005), Anne Roiphe (2008), and Joyce Carol Oates (2011) have written contemporary memoirs regarding their experiences with loss in later life. They write about the day-to-day implications that the widow label bears on their social, emotional, and romantic lives post-loss. I will begin by providing an overview of each novel in chronological order.

### Joan Didion – *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005)

Joan[2] writes about the death of her husband, John Gregory Dunne. John passed while their adult daughter, Quintana, was in the hospital in an induced coma because of pneumonia and septic shock. He had a massive coronary five days after Quintana was put into the coma while he and Joan were at home having dinner. She says simply, "We sat down. My attention was on mixing the salad. John was talking, then he wasn't" (p. 10). She talks about the vivid recollection of trying to save him and calling paramedics, about immediacies of the incident, such as the

[2] I have made a stylistic decision to write the authors on a first name basis as they have shared their incredibly personal stories with us. Joan, Anne, and Joyce are respected authors who have welcomed us into their lives by writing their losses and love.

blood on the floor that her housecleaner, José, had to take scrub out of the carpet while he sobbed, and about how unfamiliar and immediate the hospital work and her death duties were during the loss.

Both John and Joan were writers and worked from home so they spent most days together. Because of the amount of time they spent together at home their routine was relatively set until the day that John dies. Work hours and dinnertime are set and the schedules the two have are relatively easy to accommodate because they were in such consistent close proximity. Upon abruptly losing John, Joan writes about trying to make a new life for herself post-loss by calling it her "year of magical thinking" as she focused on trying to recall the details of what occurred during the time that Quintana went into the hospital up until about a year after her loss of John. Her account includes attempts to recall things that happened immediately post-loss, such as telling friends and family about John's death (and often not remember that she had even called them). She writes about her friendships, her gardening, her widow duties, and trying to find normalcy in the waves of grief she experiences. While Quintana does emerge from the coma with weakness, she is able to actively participate in the funeral arrangements—including reading a poem for her father. Because Quintana is an adult woman, grown and married, most of the writing focuses on Joan's journey through loss and very little is written about her daughter except for the actual event of Quintana coming out of her coma and Joan having to tell her what happened to John.

Much of Joan's writing discusses the "cool customer" idea—that is, the notion that post-loss some spouses, friends, and family members "deal" with the loss better than others. She talks about how the doctor and social worker interact with her when she asks if John is dead and that the social worker nods to the doctor to give the go-ahead to give the news that he is because Joan

is a “cool customer.” She takes pride throughout the book in her ability to begin to manage life without John by completing her widow duties—funeral arrangements, bookkeeping, getting rid of his clothing, and caring after even the smallest details at the hospital, such as packing up his personal belongings and taking them home to put away. She, of course, does write about the deep emotional complexities of her loss, such as waking up thinking she and John had gotten in a fight and he was sleeping on the couch only to realize again that he has passed, but speaks frequently of writing as method of healing. She interweaves quotes from his notebooks and poems that she finds that resonate to help her keep her writing flowing as a part of her “year of magical thinking.”

As a part of her work to cope, Joan provides a copious amount of research from traditional Chinese medicine to contemporary theory on stages of grief and loss. She interestingly comments that one of the only resources that did not make her mad about the grief process, aside from finding comfort in eating a lot of congee, was a book on funeral etiquette written by an etiquette writer (Post, 1922). Part of her emphasis in the book surrounds the notion of self-pity. She writes about going through the grief research and finding the “appropriate” way to grieve and notes back to Post’s etiquette book about how self-pity is an inappropriate behavioral response to grief. As the “cool customer,” Joan consistently works to be cognizant of her feelings of self-pity as she attempts to cope with her grief. She frequently mentions wondering if she is performing the “average widow” and writes about her ability to attempt to maintain control of her life—specifically referring to her emotions.

In essence, Joan’s book is not only about her year post-loss but also about paying tribute to John through stories and memories. She has a seemingly specific goal to try to write her way out of her pain, focusing on the breadth and richness of the relationship she shared with her

husband while he was healthy. She writes near the end of the memoir, "I realize as I write this that I do not want to finish this account… I know why we try to keep the dead alive: we try to keep them alive in order to keep them with us" (pp. 224-225). Part of her tribute to her husband's death is the memoir, and although it ends with ongoing waves of grief after one year has passed, Joan embraces the idea that in order to keep living, we must embrace death as a part of life.

**Anne Roiphe – *Epilogue* (2008)**

Anne provides a very simple "thesis" of sorts right at the start of her book: "This is a book about happiness regained—or not" (p. 1). She writes that, "Grief is in two parts. The first is loss. The second is the remaking of life. This book is about the second" (p. 4). Anne's work focuses on getting back into the dating world post-loss. Her two daughters write her a personal ad in the *New York Review of Books*, which lead her to a series of awkward dates and a lot of writing about being self-conscious. Anne writes about her subjects using only their first initial, so her late husband is referred to throughout the book as H.[3] While Anne's book is stated to be a remaking of life post-loss, she immediately and consistently reverts to talking about life with H. and her attempts to cope. She also, much like Joan, writes abundantly about other writers, frequently quoting them or paraphrasing their ideas about grief. This memoir, too, is very much a journey in trying to regain a sense of hope.

Anne's husband unexpectedly passes away after collapsing from a heart attack in the hallway of their apartment building in New York City. She does not go into much detail about the actual cause of death, nor does she discuss any health issues preceding the loss. Instead, she focuses on her widow duties early in her novel, the first being her responsibility to her children

[3] Anne doesn't give names to any of her characters – she speaks only of them with a letter as representation of their identity. She does not clarify this stylistic choice.

and how they initially cared for her after the loss (which she felt guilty about), but also the daily exhaustion from taking on a new identity as a widow, specifically focusing on the inability to sleep. She writes about her relationship with H. and their children and how she is in a constant post-loss position of anxiety, worrying about things like taking the subway alone, and having to try to figure out an appropriate time to have dinner because H. made all of her meals. One of the interesting thoughts Anne reverts to while writing is how Feminism[4] plays a role in her loss of H. She talks about how she wants a man to call her a taxi or fix the fence for her but that she can utilize the loss as an opportunity to take on Feminist pride by taking tasks on by herself that she normally would not have done if it weren't for H.'s death. She also juxtaposes this with how she will cope with attempts in finding a new mate, questioning whether or not her attempts for independence will align with or contrast traditional male/female gender roles.

One of the things that Anne writes about that is unique from the other memoirs is her return to her sex life. She doesn't give intimate detail, but instead, describes how she feels as though she's cheating on her husband by sleeping with another man. She also discusses how awkward it is to hold the hand of another man—how the feeling of her hand in another man's hand isn't the same… the wrinkles and fingers are different and don't match H.'s. Small details like that are often discussed when she talks about trying to find a new partner. She writes about how dating, more often than not, actually makes her feel more lonely. In addition to her loneliness, she writes about the dates she found successful and how not getting a call back after the date makes her wonder about her self-image and beauty at the age of 70, as well as the capacity to try to love and trust again.

In her dating and coping efforts, one of the things Anne prominently writes about is her widow responsibilities and the memories of H. as she tries to navigate the dating scene, but she

[4] Capitalization of Feminism is intentional

also reflects on some of the mishaps of H. She notes that he would often go to sleep despite her being angry, that he didn't prepare properly for his own death, thus leading her to feel unprotected, and her anger at him for his unwillingness to have more children. The most important of all, however, is: "But the worst thing he ever did was to die" (p. 67). Anne shows a variety of characteristics of H., both positive and negative. She writes about how she ends up having to cope with a lawsuit that he should have been accountable for and that she knows she has better things to do during the disputes and she is angry because H. should have been responsible for taking care of the legal matters before his death. She talks about the lawsuit as a chronic irritation—both a reminder of him but also what he should have done to leave her in peace if he was leaving the world. Much like the other memoirs, Anne's writing in sections like these are often on thoughts of suicide and a candid projection of her feelings that suicide is okay. She writes, "I am reassured that I do not have to live beyond my desire to live" (p. 82).

While Anne doesn't find the love she was set to be looking for by her daughters, she does give a beautiful tribute to her life with her husband, portraying her emotions and feelings throughout the dating process. She writes her way through her journey with honesty, not afraid to tell the reader about the complexities of widowhood and life after losing a husband. She battles the idea on the page of finding a new companion, sometimes wanting to find someone, sometimes wanting to keep the memory of H. to herself without moving forward. Ultimately she ends the novel by noting that she has no good or bad news about dating, but essentially, that she "will not let grief become [her] constant companion" (p. 214).

**Joyce Carol Oates – *A Widow's Story: A Memoir* (2011)**

Joyce's husband, Ray, passes away from contracting an infection in the hospital after being admitted for pneumonia. Joyce writes about how there were, in hindsight, clear warning

signals that something was wrong with Ray—for example, the day of his hospitalization, he got up much earlier than usual and changed his usual breakfast routine, struggling to force down food. As an editor for remarkable journals, such as the *Ontario Review*, Ray argued that there is no necessity to see a doctor and that he had deadlines to attend to but eventually gave in to letting Joyce take him to the hospital. Initially, his pneumonia was believed to be the cause of his rapid health decline but it was later found that E. Coli (often thought to be a digestive issue) was the cause of the bacterial infection in Ray's lung. Joyce talks about the downward spiral of Ray's health while he was in the hospital and also about her frustration of having little to no control over the decision-making process in his demise. She watched him slowly decline both physically and mentally in the hospital. One evening she headed home to try to get some rest when she was woken in the middle of the night by a phone call letting her know that Ray was in critical condition and that she needed to head to the hospital right away. Upon arriving, she found that he passed only minutes before she was able to make it to his room and that he had died among strangers instead of his clinical care team that had been responsible for looking after him while he was being treated. She said that, "the enormity of this fact is too much to comprehend, I feel that I will spend the remainder of my life trying to grasp it" (p. 59), which is one of the first snippets of guilt that the reader encounters Joyce feeling post-loss.

The early sections of her memoir focus primarily on Ray's health journey while in the hospital, ultimately concluding with his death from the E. Coli bacterial infection. The majority of the rest of the book focuses on Joyce's widow duties. As soon as Ray passed, one of the first things she was asked to do is to clear his hospital room of personal belongings: "It is my task—my first task as a *widow*—to clear the hospital room of my husband's things" (p. 63). Taking his things home from the hospital and signing the death certificate are some of the responsibilities

that Joyce took on immediately after the loss; however, she continued to discuss larger projects throughout the text. For example: trying to figure out how to tend for the garden that Ray was diligent about caring for, cleaning out his closet and removing the clothing from their home, responding to condolence cards and sending emails, trying to figure out how to sleep and eat without him, etc.). In addition to the physical objects that Joyce has a responsibility for, she also writes about the emotional labor involved in the grief process. She discusses deep feelings of anger, sadness, guilt, feeling foolish or out of place, and feeling powerless. Much like the other memoirs, Joyce writes a lot about writing as a method of coping. Her book is the longest of all three and delves the most into deep and complex emotions surrounding her loss. She is candid about contemplating suicide and she is very self-reflexive in her writing about the ways in which her actions and feelings are perceived by others and how she feels as though they influence others in a way that she feels incredible guilt and anger about. While her writing is poetic and incredibly self-reflexive, much of her work is emotional writing that pours anger and frustration out on the pages of her novel. Even in moments where she should be proud of herself for an accomplishment, she writes things like:

> "My friends are lifting glasses to me. My friends are smiling happily at me. My friends are visibly happy for me. And I am grateful, so seeming-so; I am smiling, and lifting my glass—of sparkling water—shifting my face into a reasonable approximation of cheeriness, anticipation. So long have my friends pitied me, this opportunity to say *Congratulations!* instead of—for instance—*Condolences!* is not to be overlooked" (p. 253).

So even during these moments of posed happiness, Joyce expresses how much of a façade she is putting on to appease her friends and the amount of emotional labor behind the acting she is doing.

It is interesting to read through Joyce's memoir because her work doesn't necessarily end happily, but rather, ends on almost a sour note: "*If I have lost the meaning of my life, and the love of my life, I might still find small treasured things amid the spilled and pilfered trash*" (p. 415). There is little to no hopefulness in her tone and the only accounts of energized livelihood that she expresses are by writing that she still is passionate about writing, as it helps her cope with her journey through widowhood[5]. The typical expectation for the end of such a sad novel would, seemingly, be the formula story of finding a happy-ever-after mentality, but Joyce writes little of this into her account.

**Summary of Memoirs**

While the texts provide a polished and published insight into widow experiences, narrative analysis provides the opportunity to take rich accounts of human experiences and understand how these experiences are not just written, but shown and embodied. I have utilized thematic analysis of widows' narratives - written by the widows themselves in their memoirs - and conduct a similar thematic analysis of the movies I have selected - written by others -- to see how they compare and contrast with our cultural "formula" story (Loseke, 2001; Loseke, 2012) of what widowhood is or should be like. It's important to note that widows are often perceived as not very interesting, having outlived their usefulness as romantic partner, mother or grandmother, usually at or near retirement age, so not productive in any social sense, and what

[5] One of the interesting things about Joyce's experience of loss is that as she was finishing her memoir she began seeing someone new. There is no mention in the work of this individual and Joyce received a lot of kickback from her readers after publication because she was writing about Ray while she was dating someone else—More of this is discussed in Chapter 4.

we would prefer them to do is fade away, take care of grandchildren if they can, not expect much, and certainly not command the world's attention. Given my analysis of the memoirs, these women at least expect to rejoin society and expect us to be interested in and learn from their experiences because widowhood is a very common experience for women.

## Widows on Film

This section of the dissertation will include a brief description of five films featuring widows: *How to Deal* (2003), *Elizabethtown* (2005), *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007), *The Face of Love* (2013), and *Book Club* (2018).

I will provide a brief overview of each film and the widow role that is portrayed. Because of the nature of this project—that being the exploration of widow identity and formula stories—I chose to analyze five contemporary films that either star a widow or have a widow as a character in the film. Admittedly, it is very difficult to find films that feature widows, but the films included do have older widows as prominent characters in the storyline; however, the demographics of these women characterize them all as well-educated, fiscally stable, white women, and there is little to no cultural, racial, or sexual diversity in these characters. (More is written about this in the limitations section of the dissertation).

### ***How to Deal*** **(2003)**

This film, based on two novels written by Sarah Dessen, focuses on a teenager who is coming of age and experiencing romantic relationships for the first time. My focus, however, is the role that her grandmother plays in the film. The leading actress, Halley Martin (played by Mandy Moore), makes a comment early in the movie that her "crazy grandmother" moved in with her family. Halley's widowed grandmother, Grandma Halley (played by Nina Foch), is

portrayed as an unstable woman who cannot take care of herself physically and emotionally. She moves in with Halley just as Halley is beginning another year at her high school and watching her mother go through a painful divorce. Her father left her mother for a younger woman—a woman Halley doesn't care for—and while processing this, her best friend becomes pregnant and her sister gets engaged. Halley is surrounded with very interesting interpersonal interactions during this coming-of-age romantic film. Her older sister is bogged down and very anxious about the details of planning her wedding and her best friend, Scarlett, is trying to find a way to tell her mother that she's pregnant and still in high school. As if all of these interpersonal relationships are not enough to monitor for Halley, a new student, Macon, arrives at her high school.

The plot primarily follows Halley's relationship with Macon as the central focus. She often expresses that she's frustrated with her life and by the people surrounding her—especially other girls her age who are hopeful romantics. Halley doesn't believe much in the prospect of finding an ideal and compatible romantic partner because of the estranged relationships that she's surrounded by, but Macon ends up finding ways to surprise Halley, make her laugh, and show her that he cares about her. A little bit of an outlier to the school as the "new kid" with a bad-boy attitude, Macon is surprisingly charming and sweeps Halley into a young love that affirms that romance is possible. There are moments in the movie where Macon has his downfalls, for example, when he and Halley get into a car accident as a result of his negligence and how he ignores her at school after a bad fight they have, but, ultimately, he redeems himself at the end of the movie by rushing with her to the hospital when it's time for Scarlett to happily deliver her new baby into the world.

The majority of the scenes with Grandma Halley involve her smoking pot for pain relief and being scolded by her daughter. There are frequent scenes where Grandma Halley breaks

social norms by doing things like mistaking doorbells for windchimes and comparing the chicken on her plate at a formal dinner to a parakeet she had as a child. Grandma Halley is an eclectic character that pops in and out of scenes either for comedic relief or to offer Halley advice on love, dating, and loss. Her snippets of advice are often outweighed by her follow-up thoughts after delivering the advice to Halley, as she will say something of importance such as "first loves are never really over," pause, and then deliver a line like, "Oh boy do I have the munchies!" (in reference to having smoked marijuana). Regardless of her insight or the use of elicit drugs throughout the movie, Grandma Halley's character is that of the classic widow: an older, white-haired woman often wearing black clothing. She demonstrates characteristics that make her appear weak, for example, living with her daughter and granddaughters and not being able to care for herself on her own, but also demonstrates characteristics that show her as a vital asset to these women as she often gives advice or insight at the appropriate times to the girls/women in her family.

***Elizabethtown* (2005)**

This film is packed with Hollywood stars, including Orlando Bloom, Kirsten Dunst, and Alec Baldwin, but I look specifically at the widowed character, Hollie Baylor, played by Susan Sarandon. *Elizabethtown* focuses on Drew Baylor's journey after losing his job, having his girlfriend break up with him, and losing his father all in the same day. He contemplates suicide but his mother and sister insist on sending him to his father's hometown (Elizabethtown, Kentucky) to bring his father's favorite suit. His father, Mitch, wanted to be wearing the suit at the wake and it was the wishes of the family that he be cremated in the suit. On the flight to Louisville, Drew meets his bubbly airline attendant, Claire, who moves his seat from coach to first class. She provides him directions to Elizabethtown and leaves him her number and a map

so that he can contact her in case he gets lost. After meeting with his family, Drew checks into his hotel room and is overwhelmed with boredom so he begins calling around to check in on his ex, his mother and sister, and finally resorts to calling Claire. He and Claire stay up all night on the phone talking and then finally make the decision to drive to meet each other. They spend time together in Kentucky and their romance is quick to take off. When it's time for Drew to leave Elizabethtown, Claire provides him with a map that has a soundtrack for his journey back home—one in which he brings his father's ashes with him for the roadtrip. He makes the drive back and stops through all of her suggested routes, restaurants, and places to see with his father's urn—spreading cremated ashes throughout the trip. When he reaches his end destination Claire is waiting for him. While the focus of this film is on Drew's journey, primarily with his father and falling in love with Claire, the audience is also given the story of what's happening to Drew's mom—the widowed Hollie Baylor.

Upon the death of her husband, Hollie begins taking cooking classes, dancing lessons, trying to learn to fix her car, and erratically changing from one activity to another in order to cope with her loss, which was a sudden loss. Her daughter is panicked in trying to control her mother's behavior, while Drew becomes the man of the family, responsible for keeping family affairs in order. There are moments in Hollie's behavior where she is angry and flippant, and others where she occasionally plays the role of the "cool customer," especially at her former husband's funeral that takes place in his small hometown where the entire town dislikes her for "stealing him away to California." When she travels to Elizabethtown for her husband's memorial service and it's her time to take the stage in front of the entire town, Hollie talks about everything she tried to do to cope with the loss of her husband. She includes a candid story about hugging her neighbor, who she ends up calling Boner Bob because he became aroused upon

hugging her the first time he saw her after Mitch's death. She discloses a lot of embarrassing detail about her failed attempts to deal with the loss, but ultimately regains the trust of the community by essentially saying that no one understood the loss of Mitch except for the people who were there at the funeral service in the town he grew up in. Several times prior to her trip to Elizabethtown, she is shown in scenes where Drew is on the phone with his sister. His sister is incredibly stressed about her mother's well-being and is taking care of monitoring Hollie's behavior and reporting it back to Drew as he travels. There is wisdom and a sense of resolution for Hollie's character by the time she travels to Elizabethtown because she makes peace with the community that disliked her and she is able to doing some of the things that she couldn't do immediately post-loss, such as laugh and dance. She is somewhat of a main character but has little to no dialogue until the memorial service—often she is the comedic relief in her attempts to regain control of her life after losing Mitch.

***The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007)**

This movie is about five women and one young man who meet together once per month to discuss famous novels that Jane Austin wrote. Each of the book club members picks one of Austen's six books at the start of the film and is assigned to lead the conversation and host the monthly get-together. Throughout the film there are a lot of relationship changes (romantically speaking), but the widow in this film is one of the book club member's mothers. Prudie (played by Emily Blunt) tries to help and support her mother, Mama Sky, (played by Lynn Redgrave). Prudie struggles with the relationship with her husband throughout the movie and is already on edge before her mother comes in town for an indefinite visit. Prudie is having a challenging time connecting with her husband and one of her high school students begins to take a sexual interest in her. At first, Prudie attempts to keep her guard up, not only with her student and her husband,

but also with the book club. She is frustrated with her interpersonal interactions with these individuals, often thinking that they don't value her opinion and sometimes making comments about how she's a French teacher who has never been to France, which she feels discredits her as instructor. The attention of the student, Trey, that Prudie recognizes and begins to reciprocate, is a result of Trey's passionate attention toward her and his validation that she is sexy, intelligent, and very much a woman worth being attracted to. Eventually Prudie does succumb to Trey's persistence and they engage in a brief, yet mildly romantic affair, only kissing in Prudie's car before she stops the interaction from going any further. She makes amends with her husband at the end of the film by letting him know that she is in a position where she needs him and wants to work things out.

The other women in the film, Jocelyn, Bernadette, Sylvia, and Allegra, and the one male book club member, Grigg, have their own journeys they are on throughout the film. Grigg is a well-established, yet humble individual, looking to make new friends in a new city; Allegra is a college student exploring her first encounters as an openly homosexual woman; Jocelyn is unopen to pursuing romantic relationships because of the history with Allegra's father so she pushes Grigg to try to get together with Sylvia but ends up finding herself charmed by him; Sylvia is Allegra's mother and struggling with her husband of twenty plus years wanting to leave her for a younger woman; and Bernadette is the founder of the club and a fiery independent woman with a lot of insight that she provides to her friends as they read through each book. Each character has characteristics that well-represent the message of the Jane Austen novel that they choose as the film unfolds and the audience is able to see how Austen's works resonate with the character's experiences and growth throughout the movie.

Although Prudie's mother, Mama Sky, is not a part of the book club, her irresponsible actions instigate Prudie into making decisions that incur consequences. For example, Prudie's widowed, hippie mother sets the oven on fire while Prudie is gone at work because she was smoking pot and did not remember that she was cooking, which causes Prudie to get incredibly emotional and make her mom terminate her visit. There are repeated events that show Mama Sky avoiding the house rules while visiting, including driving despite not being able to buckle her own seatbelt and smoking in the house. She is erratic and an unnecessary nuisance, most often in scenes that are causing distress to Prudie. Because of her mother's lax behavior and irresponsibility, Prudie finds out very soon after kicking her mother out of the house that Mama Sky has passed, leaving her with a tremendous amount of guilt about having told her to leave. Mama Sky does try to connect with Prudie prior to her death by showing her a picture of Prudie's father but Prudie doesn't want to even believe it was her father because the version of her mother that is still alive through most of the film is painful for her—she is insistent on becoming nothing like her mom, tired of taking care of her mother's mishaps, and cannot connect to the negligent behaviors and actions that she witnesses—Prudie is emotionally exhausted by her mom and, because she has no connection to her father's memory, cannot understand why Mama Sky is so different than her. She is tired of being a babysitter for her mother and cleaning up after her mother's constant marijuana-fueled mistakes. It is clear that Mama Sky doesn't perceive herself as an imposition, but rather a free spirit living in the presence of her daughter. She is relatively happy and easy-going. She also tries to connect to Prudie and to help Prudie process the loss of her father but Prudie is resistant to attempting to understand her mom. As a cameo appearance in this film, Mama Sky does not have much of a featured role

except to exacerbate the ongoing problems in Prudie's life by putting her under more stress. She is often unacknowledged, inconvenient, unimportant, or just projected as crazy.

Each character in the plot essentially leaves the film with a sense of gratefulness and intelligence about how loving relationships work. Despite Prudie's loss of her mother she is able to ensure that her marriage stays afloat, Allegra is able to move on from a difficult breakup, Jocelyn ends up with Grigg, Sylvia gets back together with her husband, and Bernadette stays satisfied with her life as-is without a partner. The Jane Austen books seemingly helped them heal themselves and take care of each other.

### ***The Face of Love*** **(2013)**

This film is the only contemporary film I was able to find that truly starred a widow[6], as opposed to having the character as a complimentary or secondary character. The film features Annette Benning, who plays the role of Nikki Lostrom, a recently widowed woman who happens to meet a man that looks like her deceased spouse, Garrett. Garrett passes from a heart attack, collapsing on the beach while with Nikki taking a walk. After the death of her husband, she attempts to recreate her relationship with a new partner in order to live out more of her life but the man she meets, Tom, is a look-alike of her past husband. While the physical attributes of Tom are similar to her past husband, many of his personality characteristics are dissimilar, though he does seem to like many of the same things that Nikki does, including going to a local art museum and enjoying cooking, swimming, and painting. Nikki sees him outside of an art museum she used to frequent with Garrett and follows him to his building on campus where he teaches art classes. She asks him for private, in-home lessons and the two begin to grow close.

[6] A very contemporary film was released recently about widows that was not included in this project because it was released too late for consideration but that film is one possible indication that the formula stories for widows may be changing for younger generations given that the film is an action/adventure film

Throughout the film, Nikki attempts to remake Ed Harris' character, Tom, live as though he is the husband she had that never died. She recreates some of the memories she had with her deceased spouse by living vicariously through another man. For example, she returns to the same places she and Garret would often date, only this time with Tom. She essentially tries to recreate the life she had and cast another look-alike man as a replacement. This film is an interesting contribution to this project because it stars a widow, but also because Nikki chooses to introduce her new romantic partner to her adult child, Summer, who becomes very put off by Nikki's selection in returning to the dating scene. There is also her neighbor, played by Robin Williams, who is also suffering from the loss of a spouse in later life. Williams' character, Roger, has a romantic interest in Nikki and they often share their post-loss experiences over dinners together, but Roger's infatuation with Nikki doesn't pan out for him when she meets Tom.

When Summer meets Tom for the first time she sees him through the window, but only partially. She is excited that her mother has company and Nikki agrees to let the two meet but wants Summer to accept Tom, despite the fact that he looks exactly like her dead father. Naturally, Summer is incredibly frustrated and emotional when she sees Tom for the first time and she gets really upset with Nikki. Tom sees Summer's response and says that he's just going to leave for the day so that he can try to give Summer and Nikki some space and while he's walking away Nikki yells, "Garrett, please!" and Tom turns around to her and says, "It's Tom," with a startled and disgusted look on his face. While Nikki saw Tom as an opportunity for a second chance, the psychological impact behind her actions is too much for both Summer and Tom. Prior to Tom coming to her home for the first time she started hiding many of Garrett's things and pictures of Garrett so that Tom wouldn't see that he looks like her deceased husband. She averts a lot of questions about Garrett and almost pretends as though he never existed

because she does have such an overwhelming infatuation with the resemblance between the physical attributes of Garrett and Tom. The relationship essentially dissolves until Nikki receives an invitation to attend a memorial of Tom's art, as he had passed from a heart condition after they were no longer seeing each other. He titled it "The Face of Love" and when she attends the exhibit she notices that the paintings were all based on their time spent together, thus giving her a nostalgic and beautiful memory of both her time spent with Tom, but also, the time she had with her husband. Ultimately, this movie concludes with Nikki attempting to work through the grief process without both Tom and Garrett, but instead with the help of Summer and Roger.

***Book Club* (2018)**

This movie focuses on four older lifelong female friends who gather together as a tradition each month and select a book to read and discuss. The film stars Diane Keaton (Diane), Jane Fonda, (Vivian), Candice Bergen (Carol), and Mary Steenburgen (Sharon). The film shows these four women in close friendship and how they navigate their romantic relationships in older age. The narrator, Diane, begins the film by giving the audience a glimpse into each woman's relationship. She is the narrator and one of the four main characters of the film but the only widow. She has two adult daughters and one grandchild. The women in the film begin reading the "Fifty Shades of Grey" series, written by EL James. Throughout the movie Diane warms up to dating a new man despite having lost her husband just a year ago, which she receives many negative or condescending comments about when she returns to the dating scene. There is a lot of discussion throughout the film about what is appropriate and what society says about age and sex.

Within the first ten minutes of the film Diane (the widowed character) boards a plane to go to Arizona, where her daughters insist that she move to because their father is gone and

Diane's house is "falling apart." Her daughters don't trust Diane to be able to take care of herself and the house on her own and tell her to try Arizona out for a weekend so she makes the trip. Upon boarding, she has to climb over a man who appears to be sleeping in the middle seat so that she can get to her designated seat with a window view. She trips over him (her first of many signs of ditziness) and takes sedatives to make it through the flight[7]. When the man next to her comments about taking the pills she bickers with him about being a nervous flier, making him laugh and giving him the opportunity to start a conversation with her. She begins reading *Fifty Shades of Grey* on the flight and when she's departing the plane, the man who had been sitting next to her remarks that it must have been an interesting read and asks for the title. She doesn't disclose the actual book, but instead tells him that she was reading *Moby Dick*, to which he replies, "I didn't realize that Christian Grey had a nickname." Clearly reading sexual content in a public space embarrasses Diane.

When Diane gets to Arizona to see her daughters they go to the mall to do some shopping and the girls have a candid conversation at (not to) Diane about women her age and the dangers of living alone, saying that she might slip and fall and that she can't keep flying out to Arizona if something bad happens. The girls even go so far as to have had done research on older women, which they present to Diane during the walk through the mall, and then leave her on the downstairs level among a group of senior citizens to sit down and wait for them while they get coffee so she doesn't have to take the escalator to the second floor. While sitting waiting on her daughters to return from their coffee run, Sharon calls and asks how the trip is going (and also to ask Diane if she, as an adult woman, has ever been spanked while having sexual relations with

[7] Note that each of the four older women, not just Diane, demonstrates erratic behavior or violate social norms at some point during the film. Vivian chases a former flame into a fountain to recover a penny she'd thrown in, Sharon is caught by her assistant looking at dating websites that have pornographic pop-ups, and Carol drugs her husband with Viagra because he hasn't taken an interest in having sexual relations with her. These are all reflections of behaviors exhibited by older women, and thus, categorize these women into a particular framework of identity that is not necessarily positive, but instead, pokes fun at older women in general.

someone), to which Diane responds that she feels as though she's on an episode of *The Walking Dead*.

When Diane flies back from Arizona to her home in California, the gentleman from the flight that she had fallen over, Mitchell, steps out of the cockpit to get Diane's information and asks her out on a date. He's a pilot for the airline and recognized her upon her boarding the plane. When Diane tells her girlfriends about the date, Sharon is annoyed, Carol is happy for Diane, and Vivian is excited. Vivian says that Diane's husband, Harry, dying was the best thing that ever happened to Diane because now Diane can date and have sex again. All four women cheers to making sure that their sex lives don't fade as they grow older and they begin to begin or rekindle their sex and dating lives.

As the movie progresses, Diane finally begins to open up to her new love interest, Mitchell, about the death of her husband letting him know that, while she was stuck in a period of mourning for some time, she began to realize that her relationship with Harry prior to his death was just going through the motions of daily life with him and that the way that people perceived them as a couple had more of an impact on keeping them together than she realized. She says that she loved him but started to notice toward the end of his life that his passing was almost a relief because his illness had been taking a taxing toll on her and there was no spark or romantic passion that surprised her anymore. She feels tremendous guilt in sharing this "sad story" with Mitchell but it doesn't stop her from pursing him further, nor is he put off by her talking about Mitchell's death and her post-loss experiences with grief.

After reading the first book together the group continues the trilogy and they meet to discuss the second book. By this time, the initial romances and the pursuit of sexual interest have worn off and the women are frustrated with their relationships. They attribute defeat to their old

ages. They call themselves uninteresting and pathetic with nothing to remarkable to say. After copious amounts of wine and ice cream, the women agree to continue to the trilogy despite their feelings of loneliness and desperation caused by reading the second book and acting on their impulses to sexually reengage with men in their lives. Slightly, thereafter, into reading the third book, the focus of all four women shifts from sex to love when engaging in their personal interactions with men. By the end of the movie, Diane is able to stand up to her daughters regarding her age and let them know that she doesn't want to move in with them, but instead, wants to continue to try to be happy and take risks. The movie concludes with all four women finding themselves in a happy and successful place in their romantic journeys.

**Summary of Films**

These five films give insight into how older widowed women are portrayed in media. Audience members are able to see the life disruption of losing a husband, but also the challenges that are projected post-loss, including things like trying to date again, experiencing the necessity to rely on drugs or enact erratic behavior, the reliance on friendships with other women, etc. In addition, interesting comparisons can be made in the stories told from memoirs written by older widows. The next section of the dissertation project takes a thorough look at the films and the memoirs to pinpoint common themes that are expressed across all eight artifacts[8].

[8] A family tree for all eight artifacts is located in Appendix II for reference

## CHAPTER THREE:

## THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF WIDOWS' MEMOIRS AND FILMS

It is important that individual stories of widowhood are explored because, as Frank (1995) notes, "Thinking with stories means that narrative ethics cannot offer people clear guidelines for making decisions. Instead, what is offered is permission to all for the story to lead in certain directions" (p. 160). Thinking with a story provides an insider perspective for the reader, which, in turn, better helps in understanding the process of grief and why/how widows enact their role as 'widow.' By conducting a textual analysis of the three stories written by Oates, Didion, and Roiphe, a framework for themes occurring in written narratives of widowhood will constitute significant findings from the project. As Lamott (2011) suggests, "There was some famous writer, I think it may have been Tolstoy, who said you must be wounded into writing but that you shouldn't write until the wound has healed. But I just want to keep typing up these notes from the middle of the hurt…" (p. 60). While the preliminary data I have explored has exposed a theme of writing to heal, just as Lamott expresses, I am interested in the ways in which women heal post-loss, not only through writing, but also through reflecting on mediated portrayals of widows and whether or not the writing projects align with the image of widows on film, and how both of these sources of contemporary stories can challenge the view of what widows are like and how they should behave.

I have conducted narrative analysis and identified key themes related to widow narratives and identity performances in these three memoirs as well as the five films, including themes such

as responsibility for widow duties. These themes help to make sense of how the memoirs and films examined in this research connect to a larger cultural narrative about widows' experiences of identity post-loss. While the themes cannot account, in entirety, for all of the material related to widowhood, the examples from these stories can provide a unique view of the experience of widowhood. Not only do these stories potentially create a relationship between the reader(s), viewer(s) and the writer(s), they provide insight into how relationships (in this case, romantic relationships) play an important role in our social worlds and how larger cultural narratives help in understanding how these narratives are embedded and embodied in and through cultural norms. In this section I will give an overview of the themes of each cultural artifact that will offer a glimpse into how widows are communicated about and how they communicate about loss in contemporary widow memoirs and films. I separate the memoirs from the films for a comprehensive and exhaustive span of themes that are present in these artifacts and discuss their overall intersections as a body of artifacts surrounding widow experiences in Chapter Four.

## Widows' Memoirs

In order to organize the overarching themes among the films and memoirs, I have selected four categories for which all themes fit into: 1.) Demographics & Physical Portrayals of Widows, 2.) Interpersonal Relationships 3.) Drinking, Drugs, & Erratic Behaviors, and 4.) Widow Duties.

### Demographics & Physical Portrayals of Widows

In each of the three memoirs, the writer is an older, white woman (age 65+) who has been married for at least forty years. All three women are well-established writers and work from home and have written and published extensively. Their memoirs are all written as first-person narrative accounts of their post-loss experiences and none of the three memoirs are written

during the actual dying process of their husband, but only after he has passed. Two of the three writers are mothers; Anne Roiphe has two daughters and a grandchild, Joan Didion has one daughter. All three women's late husbands were writers and avid readers and did much, if not all, of their work from home, as well. All three men passed rather abruptly (within a month after their diagnosis or after the incident that caused their hospitalization). All three women and all three men were financially well-off and well-educated, some teaching at prestigious universities[9]. There is no indication in any of the three memoirs that the widow or her husband had been previously married to another individual and all primarily identified as heterosexual. From the information provided in the memoirs, all three men were close in age to their widowed spouse and were also of Caucasian descent. As far as cognitive status goes, all were projected as being of sound mind prior to the death. All three couples lived in the United States and all three men lost their lives while living in the U.S. Post-loss, all three women write about being unkept. They mention using sleeping pills or drinking alcohol to try to get sleep. They also discuss their emotional stability very frequently, expressing feelings of self-pity, helplessness, loneliness, internal conflict, restlessness, remorse, and feelings of guilt. Most of the writing on emotional and behavioral health is done in the context of writing about the widows' duties to themselves, their husbands, and their relationships post-loss.

These characteristics are important to the memoirs because of the statistical research surrounding the likelihood of a woman outliving her husband, but also because of the accessibility to resources, such as better hospital care, that individuals who are not as fiscally sound may not have access to. In addition, as prominent authors these women already have the

[9] Lopata (1996) notes that "many older widows have not gone through the identity and arena-opening experience of extensive, formal education" (p. 44), however, the demographic information collected by Lopata was done so in the form of qualitative interviews with widows sharing their lived experience. Thus, the mass produced and mass consumed books and films paint a picture of widows as formally educated so much so as that the writers are well-published and most of the film characters are highly educated and succeed at their character role because of their ability to provide much needed insight and advice to family members.

experience of working in the writing field so they have connections to publishers and editors that may not be accessible to other writers. There is also the creative freedom to be able to write the memoirs because of the financial situation in which the widow finds herself post-loss, as there is no immediacy to return to an hourly or salaried job as there may be with other widows. More of this will be discussed in the limitations and directions for future research sections of Chapter Four.

**Interpersonal Relationships**

Didion and Roiphe are the two memoirists that have children. Roiphe has one grandchild, but she doesn't make much mention of her grandchild in her memoir. Instead her focus is primarily on the successes and failures of dating life post-loss, as well as the memory of her husband. Didion's work is similar, in that she doesn't write much about her daughter, Quintana, except to explain to the reader that Quintana was in an induced coma prior to John's death and that she had to let Quintana know John had passed while she was in the coma. All three daughters are independent, healthy, adult women (aside from Quintana's brief struggle with septic shock[10]) so they don't require as much constant care as would an infant. Oates is the oldest of the three widows and has little family remaining so her writing is almost independently focused on Ray and her widow duties, though she does discuss not having had children and relying on friends for social and emotional support. All three women interweave their experiences in friendships and collegial relationships throughout their stories, often through sharing emails they had sent or explaining what it was like to be the only single woman among their friends or the "new widow" in their social communities.

[10] Note, please, that Quintana was hospitalized for this twice in a one-year span but she was married so most of the communication regarding her health occurred outside of the memoir and was between her and her husband.

In terms of romantic relationships, Roiphe is the only memoirist who directly writes about seeking another partner. Didion and Oates keep most, if any, feelings of necessity to find someone new to themselves. Roiphe writes about a personal ad that her daughters placed in a journal for her to find her a new romantic partner. She discusses not having read the ad but that it said that she is an attractive writer who loves books and the ocean. She shares her first experience kissing another man post-loss, hosting a couples' dinner party with friends and being the only single person present, and avoiding discussing her husband around others because of the adjustment and burden she feels as a widowed woman. Her ultimate claim during her work turns toward her independence, which she reifies repeatedly throughout the text, but that she is okay with being alone because of her faith in her ability to be alone but not lonely. Oates and Didion do express some optimism throughout the course of their memoirs, often in telling small successes that have happened to them, such as Didion regaining her ability to dream again or Oates' ability to see Ray's garden as 'theirs' instead of 'his'; however, in the context of social exchanges, all three women struggle throughout their books to find consistency in their interpersonal interactions.

Oates shares a lot of the email exchanges that she had with friends, colleagues, and even the legal team working with Ray's personal affairs. In Chapter 34 of her book she has a series of snippets from her personal email account that she had sent off to friends. She questions, "As these e-mail excerpts suggest, the memoir is a memoir of loss and grief but also perhaps more significantly a memoir of friendship (p. 157). While doing the thematic analysis of this chapter I had written in the margins, "*But is it?!"* I noticed that Oates hadn't written any sort of "friend dialogue" in the book or any of the conversations with friends when writing this section and wondered why. I also noticed that she only included her own writing and never responses to the

emails she had sent so there is no showing of reciprocation or dialogue back to/with her. There is actually very little commentary about her personal relationships, with the exception of hers with Ray, in the memoir. Even when she does disclose events or gatherings she attends with friends her commentary is often about putting on a façade in front of the individuals that she is surrounded by. At one festival she goes to she ends up avoiding lively conversation and she "drifts away" from the reception with another lonely-hearted friend, "having signed as many of our books as we are likely to sign, in fact more copies than we might have predicted…for here is a true-life drama beside which the stratagems of fiction are mere shadows" (p. 231). She is living in almost a parallel universe as she navigates these social functions, not seeing the individuals in attendance as truly caring or understanding her, but instead fascinated by the world of fiction that she provided them earlier in her writing career. She expresses exhaustion and feeling ashamed by this. She feels shame because she provided a fantasy world for her readers that they communicate has influenced their lives but because of the peril she is in with grief she feels as though she has given them a false sense of hope about the harsh reality of the world and that she has done the readers a disservice by not addressing the idea that stories, like the current narrative she's living post-loss, don't always have happy endings.

Didion writes a lot of the same kinds of interactions that she has with others post-loss. She grips to Emily Post's book on etiquette, especially around the time of the funeral, because there is a sort of "code" that Post gives to the "proper" way to behave in the presence of others. For example, the widow should sit in the appropriate spot at the memorial service with the proper people—close friends and family members. The widow should drink warm tea with warm milk by an open fire and, if offered food, have very little, if any. She writes that she likes the "matter-of- fact wisdom" behind Post's logic and that it's better than any of the grief/loss

scientific models (i.e. the Kübler-Ross model) or the pamphlets designed for the bereaved. These formulaic social rules give her a guide for how to negotiate her social identity and subsequent interactions post-loss.

In addition to feeling out of place among friends, there is also a part of the widow experience where the widow may begin to recognize some of the private life of her late husband that she didn't know about. Roiphe talks about this disconnect when she discusses opening the condolence cards that she receives after H. passes. She writes about the "letters from former patients whose names I did not know, whose stories I will never know. One after another they spoke of how much H. had meant to them, how he changed their lives, made it possible for them to marry, to have children, to make good on days that had gone bad" (p. 15). Part of the grieving process for these women is also getting to know a part of their husband that they hadn't been exposed to before. Roiphe writes more about this later in her memoir when she finds out that H. had a lawsuit that she ended up having to deal with on her own and that she lost money as a result. Her connections to the legal staff and her resentment toward H. for passing grow rapidly during this section of her work. While many of these interactions are justified as a part of the duty of a widow to "handle" post-loss, I mention them here in the context of interpersonal interaction to bring in the complexity of identity and self-performance the widow engages in when around others. While there is depth in conversation in some instances, more often than not the widow memoirs speak to interactions with friends, dates, or other individuals they encounter as a draining chore that does nothing but remind them that they are ultimately alone with their thoughts and happiest when writing by themselves. All three women speak passionately about writing as a healing process because they can write unforgivingly what and when they'd like to. The intrinsic call to turn to reflexive writing is not understated in these memoirs. If anything, the

reliance on family and friends is more of an irritation, placeholder, or a cause for feelings of guilt than a stress reliever for these women. Whether or not this is a generalizable feeling for all widows is still unknown, but certainly will be discussed in the film analysis section, as well.

### Drinking, Drugs, & Erratic Behaviors

Some of the work that the memoirists do to convey their experience is attempting memory recollection post-loss. As the widows write their stories they seek to regain control over their life before they lost their husband and part of the problem that all three authors seem to struggle through is recalling details surrounding the event of the death. As readers, we also see that the day-to-day normalcies are disrupted by the death so the authors often struggle with simple tasks, for example, even little things, like Roiphe's attempt to remember how to open the door to her apartment—an act she didn't typically have to do on her own because he husband was always the one to unlock the door. Throughout this section, I will look specifically at the theme of drinking, drugs, and erratic behaviors (sometimes the erratic behaviors are caused by drinking and/or drugs) to explain how participating in behavioral changes affects the author's sense of self-identity and reifies the cultural stereotypes surrounding older widows.

It has been implied several times already throughout this work that the older widow is deemed unnecessary, unimportant, and not necessarily good for much use in daily society except, perhaps, to take care of grandchildren. Because the memoirs were written by women who were married sometime between the 1950's and 1970's, the dominant cultural roles were that men were likely to be more heteronormative and often in charge while women were often perceived as nondominant and dependent on their husband for their safety and well-being (both their own and that of their family). The generational gap between the authors and a younger widow may influence what is being written about (for example, gender roles) or the style to which the

writing is done (perhaps less emotional writing and more focus on moving forward). These are directions for future research but I mention them in this section because it is imperative to understand the sample of cultural artifacts being explored when looking at older widows' memoirs in the context of whether or not they are deemed "worthy" citizens, or citizens of importance.

Often, some of the coping skills that are read about throughout these memoirs reflect the ways in which the women try to handle their grief by taking medication or turning to alcohol. When Oates confronts her husband's doctor about Ray's death and hints toward a wrongful death suit against him, the doctor fumbles around with words of explanation regarding her loss and then writes her a prescription for Ambien (a sleeping pill). When she leaves the office she heads to the grocery store to get some things for the house and finds herself so upset that she begins dropping bags of groceries all over the parking lot. As she watches a container of cottage cheese fall to the ground her frustration and loneliness are overbearing and she expresses hatred and anger about the doctor's contribution to her husband's death. She also gets so worked up that she begins contemplating suicide. She writes, "Am I murmuring to myself? In the food store? Am I—laughing? Pressing my hand against my chest, as if in pain?" (p. 168). Her emotions are so overwhelming that she has no capacity to control her own bodily movements in this piece of the work. She wants to be angry with customers who aren't helping her clean up spilled groceries and angry with the doctor because of Ray's death, but instead writes, "It is really myself whom I hate; and condemn" (p. 169). She discusses taking the Ambien for sleep in combination with Lorezapam (an antidepressant/anti-anxiety medication) but still waking up with terrible nightmares and a cloudy perception of what's going on around her. Likewise, Roiphe is sent home with a prescription for Ambien post-loss and has similar side effects. She, too, wakes in

the middle of the night and is “up like a zombie” all day long when trying to stop taking sleeping pills. In addition to sleep aids, Roiphe is also given Paxil to help calm her racing thoughts. She admits to taking her medication in combination with wine at dinnertime but, eventually, stops the prescription medications around halfway through her the book, saying that she feels as though the medications are making her lose her edge and ability to think clearly enough to be witty.

Didion’s obsession with medication doesn’t actually come as a result of her using medications for herself, instead she is more interested in the ways medicine is used in hospital facilities and treatment centers. Given that her daughter and her husband were both in the hospital at the same time, she had to learn a lot about what the treatment procedures were and the effectiveness/safety of medications. A lot of her coping strategy involved looks into medical research surrounding medicine and behavioral health. In her attempts to find “normalcy” in her daily life post-loss, she begins to do a lot of research on psychology and illness in order to make sense of the events and even of sanity itself. Her constant quest toward truth-seeking in the medical field guides her toward literature on appropriate behavior in grieving. This is where she seems to situate best in the process of coping with the loss of her husband because there are clearly defined “rules” as to what behaviors are deemed appropriate or inappropriate in public situations so that she doesn’t stand out or seem like she’s not, as she prefers to call herself, a “cool customer.” Much of her text is a conflict between her role as a newly widowed woman experiencing self-pity and helplessness versus her “feminist pride,” in which she describes her duties to take power over her experiences and “walk her own path” (p. 17). She consistently battles with her projection of self in social situations and wants to ensure that she doesn’t make anyone feel uncomfortable around her and that she’s performing “widow” appropriately. When the fields of medicine and psychiatry don’t give her the answers she reverts to work on behavior

written by manners writers. Her exhaustive span of the medical literature helps her in sense-making but it's ultimately the work that gives her a clear outline of *how* to behave in public, rather than what to take in private, that she deems most effective for identity maintenance and establishing a feeling of control.

Oates writes about turning toward exercise in order to find solace and to control her thoughts. She discloses that running was often something that helped her get to sleep prior to Ray's death because she would exhaust herself with physical exertion. Post-loss, however, her attempts to regain control by running do not seem to have such a positive effect. She can't sleep so she's already tired and her mind is constantly flooded with thoughts of Ray so exercise is no longer a comforting or a mindful practice. Instead she feels as though she's running away from something and unable to motivate herself to try for progress with her exercise because she can't stop thinking about Ray. When Roiphe stops taking her prescription medicines, she attempts to turn to exercise, as well. She writes that the gym is too monotonous for her and that all of the machines are too robotic. She also comments that she avoids the mirrors at the gym—perhaps because she is afraid of judging herself for her own appearance in a public setting.

There are similarities and differences between all three works but one of the most prominent similarities is the theme of identity control. With all three women expressing at one time or another their troubles with maintaining normalcy, they collectively focus on how others perceive them as performing "normal." While medications can be taken and alcohol be consumed in private settings, in public spaces these women are in constant negation of their self-presentation. They assign labels to their performance of widow (i.e.: normal, "cool customer, and even just "widow") to contextualize their behavioral patterns and negotiate how others perceive them. Most erratic behaviors, such as Oates dropping groceries all over the parking lot and

bursting into laughter, go without apology and are considered to be a part of the breakdown of their former label as "married woman" or "nonwidow." Even Roiphe's unfulfilled attempts at looking for a new potential partner may seem to her to be progressive and emotionally draining, however, they are a part of her quest for control over her life post-loss. No matter how awkward her dates are or if she gets a phone call back from a suitor, she posits her interactions in a self-reflexive way so that she doesn't feel guilty or hurt by being alone or lonely. In sum, mention of alcohol and prescription use (sometimes abuse) is commonplace in these three memoirs, as is erratic or non-normative behavior that repeatedly occurs post-loss and is worth further exploration in the canonical narrative of the older widow experience, which will be further discussed in the analysis section of the work.

**Widow Duties**

Perhaps the most common and robust theme of all three memoirs is the widow duties that the bereaved memoirists write about. Widow duties are the responsibilities and obligations that the widow takes on after the death of her husband. They can be small things, such as running the dishwasher without help, or can be situated as massive daily disruptions, such as negation of identity performance in social situations. I have discussed several of the duties earlier in this chapter but will include some of the duties that have not yet been discussed and will also examine how these widow duties frame what it means to be an older widowed woman.

All three writers note the immediacy of their widow responsibilities upon the end of their husbands' lives as occurring from the moment he is pronounced dead. It is her obligation, despite shock, terror, or any other emotion, to remove his things from the hospital room in which he passed and begin the paperwork process to get a new individual into his room at the hospital. While the memoirists don't necessarily complain about taking on this sudden identity

categorization in the moment of the loss, there are clear indications throughout each text that the widow duties they inherit are frustrating and disruptive to their sense of normalcy. Post-loss, things like flowers and condolence cards can seem like meaningful and important ways for others to express their grief and to share the loss with the widow, however, the widows in these stories are often tortured by the constant displays of gift-giving and the obligation they feel to respond to others' grief. Oates talks frequently about the responsibility she feels to uphold contact with her and Ray's friendship circle. She comments after receiving more baskets of beautiful flowers and fruits post-loss that, "There does seem to be an element of mockery in all of this—sympathy. Almost, one might mistake the siege for celebration" (p.107). Having to receive "grieving gifts" entails a responsibility to recognize the sender and to acknowledge the deliverer of the "gift" despite the desire to be alone, shut the door, and not deal with the labor of the "trash" being received by the widow. In Oates text, she comments that she sorts through a stuffed mailbox and is overwhelmed by the repeated attempts from friends and family to gift-give during a time of bereavement. Likewise, Roiphe's daughters, though they had good intentions posting an ad on her behalf for a new partner, put her in a position where she undergoes awkward and embarrassing dates—duties that were foisted on her for being a widow that hadn't yet moved on from her loss. She writes about the other widow friends she knows and the worries she has that she won't be able to join them in their "successful" widowhood. There are also emails to reply to, family members to tell the news to, children and grandchildren to care for, funeral arrangements to be made (that includes thinking through the costs of the funeral, so worry about death expenses), and the emotional labor of having to return to an empty home (often alone) to resume even the simplest of daily behaviors, such as eating something or

sleeping at night. As Oates notes, "Widowhood is the punishment for having been a wife" (p. 102).

These tasks that the widow has to take on are time-consuming and emotionally exhausting. "All that one believes of the 'rational'—'reasonable'—scientific-minded' life is jettisoned, when one becomes a widow… There does not seem to be much purpose to my life now except these meaningless but necessary tasks (like speaking with a funeral director, buying a cemetery plot, looking for the Last Will & Testament)" (Oates, p. 102, p. 84). While the daily tasks get checked off of the widows' to-do lists in an almost zombie-like fashion at the beginning of each of the memoirs, the layers of emotional complexity surrounding widow duties becomes more complicated as the stories unfold. The women write about how one of their responsibilities in loss is rethinking about their lives and identities. Didion writes about trying to make sense of "weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I ever had about death, about illness… about marriage and children and memory… about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself" (p. 7). Not only are the daily tasks that the widow takes on changing post-loss, so is the perception of the world of the widowed woman.

There is a social norm for individuals to expect to have shared responsibility for taking care of their widowed mother post loss, out of respect for her and for the elderly, in general. This formula for post-loss behavior, however, can be a daunting responsibility for the widow as she goes from caregiver to being the one that other people are giving care to. Didion and Roiphe discuss the role of having children and how they feel a sense of guilt because their children have to help in caring for them after they lose their husbands. This renegotiation of identity roles is a complicated one, but is typically temporary, and the widows express relief when their families feel as though it's been an appropriate amount of time for them to have helped out with post-loss

responsibilities. They don't want to burden their families so they often express passing with their new widow label as being in control or able-bodied enough to handle themselves so that their children aren't put under stress. Oates, who doesn't have children, touches on her age (70 years old) when discussing children in her memoir. She knew that she didn't want children but, being the oldest of all three widows, has several moments of remorse for not carrying on Ray's life through childbearing. She also has little to no family left so much of her reliance on others is through close friendships.

In addition to coping with social responsibilities in the context of family members, specifically children, there is an obligation to either accept loneliness or attempt to find a new partner. With such long marriages, the women express that they aren't used to being single and their recollections of dating life prior to and with their husbands are outstanding by forty plus years. When Roiphe begins the dating process again she finds herself constantly negotiating feelings of abandonment and betrayal to loyalty toward her husband. She writes about the emotional responsibility of awkward first dates and the intimacy of new relationships. While spending time with new men, there is a constant nagging feeling for her of discomfort, as kissing, holding hands, and other forms of intimacy often breech her comfort zone and she finds herself missing the way that H. would hold her hand or how his skin felt compared to men she is spending time with. There is also the obligation to move forward after being rejected by a potential suitor, which feels for Roiphe more like a small jab amidst such a large loss, but still makes her question her beauty and age.

One of the duties, as a writer, that each woman expresses is the obligation to tell the story from an ethical and analytical perspective, which means thinking through some of the ways in which her husband wasn't perfect. It is easy to romanticize relationships post-loss but the writers

talk about the characteristics of their husbands, both good and bad. The reader learns of Didion's husband's lawsuit that she has to manage, about how Oates' husband was somewhat of a workaholic, often tending more to his own projects than taking a vested interest in hers, and Roiphe's husband's ability to shut down during an argument and have her go to bed on her own instead of staying up to fight for their relationship. Despite the perceived responsibility to tell a full and true story, however, the women all maintain a deep commitment first and foremost to their marriages, typically telling only the good things about their husbands and feeling apologetic for disclosing anything that would dishonor or deface his character.

Another duty that is made mention of is having to take on responsibilities for things that the widow doesn't want to do that her husband enjoyed. For example, Ray, Oates' husband, kept a beautiful backyard garden that Oates was very hands-off about. She watched the garden as the seasons changed and realized how little she knew about it. She eventually recognized that she had to take care of the garden as if it were "theirs" not "his." This same sense of obligation to a spouses' things is brought up frequently in all three memoirs. The women discuss having to get rid of their husband's clothing, their old newspapers, or anything else that is left around the house that isn't necessary to daily functioning. There are also tasks like bill paying or meal preparation that the widows express not being used to taking care of. For example, Didion's husband did most of the food-shopping and most of the cooking so her elegant evening dinners with him were replaced by a new diet of processed and easy-to-make or ready-made meals. Even some of the smaller things, like finding a piece of necessary paperwork, became daunting. Some of the documentation for Ray's Death Certificate was misplaced so Oates had trouble getting the documentation to the appropriate place and felt incredible frustration in how long it was taking

her to find the paperwork when she just wanted to take care of the certificate and try to move forward.

All of these objects and tasks require attention, which is commonly frustrating for the women in these stories because they are energy-drained and sleepless. As a result, one of the other unanticipated responsibilities the widow takes on as a part of her duties is self-care and coping with negative emotions on an almost-daily/hourly basis. The widows express feelings of self-pity, helplessness, loneliness, internal conflict, desire (specifically for their own independence), powerlessness, restlessness, agitation, anger, remorse, and most often, guilt. There is a constant nagging feeling of guilt present in all three memoirs, whether it comes from dating again, guilt from not performing "well enough" in social interactions, or guilt that arises from feelings of self-pity and suicidal thoughts. In all of the messiness of trying to remake their lives, the emotional labor is a daunting and unanticipated task that has to be consistently negotiated. In the midst of their losses, all three women write about a sense of numbness, exhaustion, or memory loss. Didion comments that she had, "no memory of telling anyone the details, but…must have done so, because everyone seemed to know them" (p. 5). Oates writes, "I am feeling very light-headed. The phone ringing and waking me from that frothy-thin sleep is confused with a ringing in my ears…" (p. 69). Roiphe even writes about the simplest of daily behaviors that have been disrupted: "Now I don't know when it's time to eat. I don't know what to eat. The day has no appointed end. It drifts off into the night" (p.15). Each author writes about the emotional complexity of their experience post-loss, even when trying to move on with their social life and take care of day-to-day activities. These significant disruptions show how the writers are expressing not only loneliness, but also the inability to remember or feel situated into a new way of living.

One of the interesting things about these three books is that all of the women talk about the "appropriate" length of the grieving process. They discuss how long they believe they're allowed to grieve. One of the critiques that occurred for Oates' memoir was that she did not take enough time to grieve. When her book was published she was criticized for being "happily engaged" to another man eleven months post-loss (*The New York Times*, 2011). Maslin wrote: "A book long and rambling enough to contemplate an answering-machine recording could have found time to mention a whole new spouse." This kind of critique sheds light on the way in which older widowed women are expected to perform their widow duties—one of which is the length of time and what age they are before they are culturally acceptable sexual/romantic beings post-loss. Roiphe struggles with this throughout her memoir as well. She talks about being embarrassed about her daughters putting out an ad for her to begin dating again and how awkward dating in later life proves to be. This affects their private and public acceptance and performance of self.

Another commonality is that all three writers talk about writing as a method of coping and trying to help work through their grief. The authors don't write about their memoirs as a duty, but rather, a relief. Oates, for instance, writes, "Words seem futile. In the face of such catastrophe… Yet, working on short things—reviews, essays, stories—is a solace of a kind" (p. 136). Didion comments that, because of loneliness, writing provides the ability to take self-pity post-loss (p. 195). She also mentions that while she continues to plea for his presence, "I am a writer. Imagining what someone would say or do comes to me as naturally as breathing" (p. 196). So, in essence, writing provides her the ability to imagine what John would have said if he were still present. Oates admits that she has a contract obligation for the book but that writing is "the most effective way of eluding the basilisk" (p. 217). All of these snippets from the books

reveal that writing is a way of not only dumping thoughts they feel guilty repeatedly sharing with close friends and family but that, in writing, there is the ability to remember their husband and/or choose to avoid thinking about the loss. Once a paragraph is done or a publication finished, a writer with a spouse can leave the page(s) and reconnect with the spouse. These women all lost that capacity to leave their home office and be able to see their husband. They all wrote about the eerie, painful return to life off of the screen.

There is a lot of vocabulary about emotion in these books: envy, guilt, self-pity, shock, depression, anger, sadness—yet there are few emotions that demonstrate any sense of happiness unless the writers describe nostalgic moments, for instance, when Oates recalls her husband, Ray, bringing home a cat for her after they had just lost one. Even in the context of positivity and attempting to look forward, however, Oates finishes the book by writing, "If I have lost the meaning of my life, and the love of my life, I might still find small treasured things amid the spilled and pilfered trash" (p. 415). Roiphe ends her memoir by trying to fight her grief by writing, "I refuse its offer to accompany me…" (p. 214). Didion, much like Roiphe, does make an attempt to write against the grief: "…if we are to live our life ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead" (p. 226). Each book has a heavy-hearted and almost dark attempt at optimism toward their future without their deceased husband. The things they are emotionally trying to make sense of are what Oates refers to as "widow duties." Having to put on a happy face is a widow duty that the authors often discuss feeling obligated to and if they can't perform what they perceive as proper face-maintenance, they are overwhelmed with guilt and self-pity.

Widow duties are one of the most prominent themes that occur across all three memoirs. Whether the death of the spouse was abrupt or prolonged, many mentions of daily activities are

consistently written in these books. Roiphe writes, "I wonder if everyone leaves a trail behind when they go into the grave, a trail of resentment, financial knots, undone, unresolved matters, lunatic ex-spouses, unreconciled children" (p. 20). Oates talks about tending to her husband's garden, Didion talks about returning to John's office and having to figure out what to do with his undone writing projects, Roiphe talks about having to attend traditional Sunday dinners without the presence of H. In addition to having to grieve the loss of their husband, each woman has her own set of responsibilities to take care of that will keep her financially and emotionally supported, as each writer is, demographically, a well-read writer. In Oates' prologue she writes, "Of the widow's countless death-duties there is really just one that matters: on the first anniversary of her husband's death the widow should think *I kept myself alive*" (p. 416).

I believe the strongest theme across all three of the books is focused on the attempt to have control over widow duties. The widows want to control how they're being perceived, how they've taken on duties that they now have to control, how their relationships with others often come along with an inability to control their obligations to friends and vice versa, and, just by writing, trying to control their coping method(s). Widow duties and the attempts to regain a sense of control are prominent themes in each book. Roiphe writes, "I had not imagined all the legal forms that follow the death of a spouse. Death certificates—tax papers, conversations with lawyers and accountants…This is my error. I tend to wait for rescue by a shining knight. Not this time" (p. 36). Asking and obtaining help post-loss are frequent themes these women write about in their memoirs and it shares a rich contribution to the socially constructed ways in which they perceive and perform grief.

As each memoir draws to a conclusion there is an anticipated formula for the narrative expected by the reader. As mass consumers of canonical narratives, or narratives that follow a

formula story, we anticipate that the authors will provide us with a sense of hope or a seemingly happy ending. This is pretty closely followed by the writers, Oates being the author that strays furthest from providing too much of a concise happy ending to her narrative, but the overall message of each of the three books provides a moral undertone that the widow "can make it" and has honored her husband's legacy in writing the work. Not only are the widows adhering to cultural patterns by writing these formula stories, they are also living adhering to cultural patterns posited by other stories of widows. They follow the rules and responsibilities that are thrown at them immediately post-loss and try to maintain face in public situations despite their emotional labor. They also self-reflect on their thoughts and actions to try to position themselves so that they're following social rules without being a burden to others. By doing this, these women are reifying a larger cultural narrative that older widowed women should and can find ways to remake their lives post-loss without burdening society with their widow duties or their sadness. Moving forward into the analysis of the films, the themes above will be examined in mediated contexts to provide a glimpse into the cultural narrative of widowed women on film.

**Widows on Film**

This section analyzes the five films that have undergone thematic analysis regarding older widowed women's lived experiences. The films examined here are: *How to Deal* (2003), *Elizabethtown* (2005), *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007), *The Face of Love* (2013) *and Book Club* (2018). Each of the films will be analyzed using the four common themes that were also used to conduct the analysis of the memoirs: 1.) Demographics & Physical Portrayals of Widows, 2.) Interpersonal Relationships 3.) Drinking, Drugs, and Erratic Behaviors, and 4.)

Widow Duties. I will reiterate again that these themes are overlapping in nature, yet for the sake of the scope of the project I have refined the data into four succinct categories.

**Demographics & Physical Portrayals of Widows**

The demographics of the women in the films are a little more readily available to the viewer than to a reader because we see them on the screen as opposed to reading about how they write themselves. The women in the films are all 60+ years of age, white, generally thin or fit, grayish or graying hair, wealthy (or have accessibility to relying on family members that have money), and relatively well-educated. All of the women in the films have children and some have grandchildren so many of the displays of behavior that are seen from the widow's perspective comes from a matronly standpoint (or the widow expresses a desire to be closer to her daughter(s)/grandchildren if the family dynamics are estranged). About half of the widows tend to wear darker clothing, often black clothing to indicate mourning. All five widows represented in this data are either spiritual or adhere to a generally moral set of beliefs and are also typically in very close relationships with their friends (with the exception of Prudie's mother from *The Jane Austen Book Club*, who is portrayed as a free-spirited loner). All of the women live to see the end of the movie except for Prudie's mother and some begin dating again during the film. Less detail is explained about the length of most of the characters' relationships with their husbands, however, when detail is disclosed the relationships were longer in length, marriage-wise, and the endings to the marriage were primarily abrupt endings (often caused by a heart attack, much like in the widow memoirs). All five women are vibrant, attractive, and have a vested interest in living out their remaining days with as much optimism as possible.

In terms of employment, most of the women are unemployed, retired, or their status of employment is not disclosed. For recreation, many of the women attempt regular exercise, many

have reading groups with their friends to socialize, and they all work to spend time with their families. All of the women identify as heterosexual in the films, however, some do not express any interest to remarry or to attempt to date anyone again post-loss. Geographically, all women live in the United States, as did their husbands, and what can be gathered from viewing the films is that they typically live in nicer areas with accessibility to resources they may need for day-to-day activities, such as grocery shopping and even getting reliable healthcare. In four of the five movies, the widow lives independently of her family and owns her own home, displaying characteristics of being able-bodied. The average screen time for the widowed woman is far less than half of the film, the exceptions being *The Face of Love* and *Book Club*, where the widow has a stronger appearance in the film. The rest of the widows are secondary characters, some making less than five to seven minutes of the entire film and often having little dialogue.

It should be noted here that the films were selected based on their accessibility and availability. These films are all more contemporary artifacts that are examined and finding characters who were older widows that were highlighted were scarce in data gathering for a sample of older women in film that lost a spouse. Even more difficult in the process was finding women who were clearly identified as primary characters. Even in the work on *Book Club*, where widowed Diane is the narrator of the story, she shares the screen with three other women whose stories have as much value and provide as much to the plot as her own. This will be further discussed in the limitations and directions for future research section made available in Chapter Five.

One of the interesting things about the demographics of the women in these contemporary popular culture films is the way in which the widow is projected through her image. As older, white women with focus on family there is still a tendency to cast these women

into positions where they're well-off and well-educated but still display erratic behavior, addiction, and struggles with independence and interpersonal relationships. They are also cast to be inconvenient, unheard, and a nuisance. More of this analysis will take place in the next section but is worth mentioning in this section in order to help with character development as the film plots unfold.

**Interpersonal Relationships**

As noted above, all of the women are mothers, some are grandmothers. There are no examples from these films that show any connection to the widows' parents or other existing family members outside of the relationships with their children and grandchildren. Some women, like Diane and Hollie, have close relationships with their daughters. Hollie is able to have her daughter live with her post-loss as she mourns the death of Mitch—mostly because her daughter is incredibly concerned with Hollie's erratic behaviors. Hollie is hell-bent on finding independence post-loss, suddenly taking on projects and activities that she has never tried before in order to feel accomplished and in control. She takes tap dancing classes, attempts to learn to fix a car, learns to cook by enrolling in cooking classes, and generally hops from one new activity to the next seeking a niche for comfort. Her son, Drew, is unconcerned with the changes in behavior for two reasons: 1.) he isn't around to witness her behavior firsthand, as he has the post-loss obligation of getting his father's funeral suit to his father's hometown, and 2.) most of the story is focused on the romantic relationship between him and Claire and their ability to find love amidst chaos, therefore, he is preoccupied with his own agenda. Diane is very emotionally close to her daughters, however, it seems as though the girls do more worrying about her than necessary, almost to an obsessive level. Both girls live in Arizona and are constantly reminding Diane of the dangers of her old age, worrying incessantly about Diane's ability to survive on her

own after their father's death. They burden her with literature about the dangers of her age (frankly, she's one of the younger widows and one of the most independent, so their interest in her well-being is more self-absorbed in their personal interests than in Diane's wishes) and insist on having their mother move to Arizona so that they can keep an eye on her, which would potentially separate Diane from her friends and her home. Their unnecessary and overbearing focus on her age is frustrating to Diane but she allows them to express their concerns because she knows they're going through a lot in dealing with the death and they think they have her best interests at heart.

Where we see some characters that are overly supported by worried children, others are pushed away by their daughters. In *The Jane Austen Book Club*, Prudie's mother is a nuisance for already high-strung Prudie upon her arrival to stay with Prudie and her husband. Her out-of-control behavior pushes Prudie to ask her mother to leave her house and to leave her alone. One of the goals of the visit for Prudie's mother was trying to talk about Prudie's father with her. She brings a photo of Prudie's dad along for the trip and when she tries talking about him and his memory, Prudie breaks down saying that she doesn't want to know anything about him. The estrangement within the family is very volatile and any attempts to try to reconcile or rekindle a good relationship between Prudie and her mother is abandoned by Prudie and subsequently results in the death of Prudie's mom. In *How to Deal*, Hallie's mother, Lydia, is so preoccupied with the ongoing divorce between her and her husband that she pays little to no interest in Hallie's teen angst. They, too, have an estranged relationship, however, their estrangement is conditional and temporary. As Hallie grows throughout the film she is able to better understand her mother's position and her mother also has time to process the divorce and learn to be there for Hallie. In the meantime, however, Hallie's grandmother is the one who intermittently steps in

to take care of Hallie's growing pains by offering small doses of sound advice (however, these small snippets of advice are often followed up by comments about being high, so many of the scenes are present for the sake of the storyline and for comic relief from the teenage drama Hallie is going through). Regardless of the drug use, however, Grandma Hallie is an important character in reifying cultural narratives of widowed women as typically being there to care for children and grandchildren. Grandma Hallie only makes on-screen appearances when the scene becomes too out of control or irrational to continue without comedic relief and some kind of caregiving advice, otherwise Grandma Hallie is portrayed as a relatively unimportant character. Hallie's mother perceives Grandma Hallie as being an annoyance, much like Prudie perceives her mother as an annoyance, particularly when it comes to drug use in the home. Both Prudie and Lydia act as though they wish their mother would not be around them and are annoyed that they have to provide a space in their home for their mothers. In addition, despite Prudie's mother passing away and all of the help that Grandma Hallie provided during chaotic times in the Martin family house, there is no attention paid to either woman at the end of the films. Grandma Hallie's storyline ends when Hallie seems to be coming of age well enough on her own that she doesn't need her grandmother to be present in any of the scenes and Prudie's mother is basically forgotten about because of the mess Prudie gets herself into by having the affair with one of her students. The focus of the film shifts back to the main characters leaving Grandma Hallie and Mama Sky as characters that the film carry on without mentioning, again reifying the larger cultural narrative of their older widow status as unimportant unless they're caregiving.

In *The Face of Love*, Nikki works hard to protect her adult daughter from being exposed to her post-loss flame with the doppelganger of her husband, Garrett, named Tom. Being that Tom looks exactly like Garrett did would surprise and perhaps mortify Summer, so Nikki keeps

the relationship very private. She hesitates to allow Summer to meet Tom and when Summer unexpectedly drops by during one of Tom's visits to Nikki's house, Nikki ends up in a heated argument with Summer and tries to explain the situation. It becomes very uncomfortable and also very obvious that the façade of a real relationship that Nikki had painted in her head about the similarities between Tom and Garrett were truly nothing more than skin deep for her, where Tom had developed true feelings of love and affection. Despite her attempts to explain the situation, however, the film ends with Nikki and Summer working through the awkward situation and Nikki choses her daughter over the relationship with Tom. Hiding a romantic relationship from adult children also takes place in *Book Club*, as Diane hides Mitchell from her daughters until they worry so much about her when she's not answering her phone that they call the police and track her down to Mitchell's house where they find her lounging in a pool float at night with him drinking and being affectionate. They are shocked and disapproving upon finding their mother with another man, both because they were worried about her but also because they didn't know she had been seeing anyone new.

While Summer is seemingly okay with Nikki beginning to date again and excited to meet Nikki's new romantic partner, it's clear that the choice Nikki made in selecting Tom is shocking and a disgusting display of behaviors for Summer. Not only is partner selection problematic, Diane's dating being hidden from her daughters makes her sexual interactions repulsive to her girls when they find out about Mitchell. Not only had Diane expressed to Mitchell earlier in the film that she was nervous to date again because she had realized her husband wasn't "the one" for her anymore after he passed, but she thought the idea of dating at her age was silly because she didn't think of herself as a sexual being anymore. The disapproval of her daughters upon meeting Mitchell only confirms her thoughts about the canonical older widow by making their

meeting with Mitchell very asexual and awkward, but also by making it funny to the audience in having Diane kick Mitchell off of the pool raft they had been floating on when her daughters arrive, leaving her scrambling to find a way out of the pool on her own—a feat that takes an extended period of time to accomplish. Because both Nikki and Diane's relationships with men after the loss of their spouse are not accepted by their daughters, both women choose not to date to appease their children. Diane does later go back to Mitchell to pursue a romantic relationship, but only after her daughters tell her that it's okay with them, and Nikki chooses not to date at all again. These widowed characters, featured as lead characters in their respective films, draw attention to themselves seemingly only by being older widowed women that do something so outstandingly shocking or embarrassing that's worthy of being disgusted by or making fun of. Without Diane's and Nikki's forbidden love these characters have little of interest to contribute to society and their stories are mundane.

The widows in these films are coping with issues of disclosure—whether or not to tell the truth and what the relational consequences of the truth may be, and what makes them noteworthy in these films are their interpersonal disclosures. For Prudie's mother, telling the truth about her husband upset Prudie and got her kicked out of the house, for Hallie's grandmother, telling the truth was an opportunity to connect with Hallie and to give advice and keep the conversation light about Hallie's problems, and for Diane, not telling the truth ended up briefly breaking up her relationship with the first man she wanted to be with post-loss, which made her incredibly unhappy, however, when she did confront her daughters after the pool incident about trying to live her own life and told them they didn't need to be so worried about her age, they did wish her good luck and turned out to be incredibly supportive of their mother's quest to try new things and regain a sense of happiness and purpose. Similarly, Hollie's memorial service speech is the

driving force that allows her worried daughter to be able to see that some of her erratic behaviors post-loss were coping attempts that culminated in a truly heartfelt celebration of Mitch's life and a rekindling of her relationships with Mitch's family and various members of his hometown community, which was an important part of the healing process for Hollie. The only familial relationship that ends with no sense of closure, and actually goes almost entirely unaddressed, is the passing of Prudie's mother. At the time of her mother's death, Prudie is so surrounded by the emotional complexities of her relationship with her husband and the sexual relationship with her current student that the funeral is almost swept under the rug as a passing moment. There is no true sense that the death was fundamentally earth-shattering for Prudie—if anything, the only potential good that came from the death was a gentle push toward sensibility, where Prudie finally gave up the illegal relationship with her student to try to reconnect with her husband before she threw away her marriage. It's not even an obvious connection in the plotline that Prudie made these decisions as a result of her mother's death, but it could certainly be implied that it had the potential to be a factor in moving her back into healthier relationships with those around her.

While family plays a significant role in these relationships between characters and their post-loss journeys in the films, some of the most important relationships that factor into finding a purpose, finding a sense of self, or working through grief are the relationships that the widows have with their friends. As Fry & Gavrin (1987) suggest, "The culture of widows is by and large a peer culture bonded by homophyly in gender, widowhood, and common experiences built around long-term participation in community life" (p. 43). The two films on book clubs have a supporting cast comprised of mostly female characters who are having relationship troubles of their own. These women who are in the widow's social network are supportive to the loss of her

spouse and to the other cast member's relationship issues in a multitude of ways. Bernadette from *The Jane Austen Book Club* is a great example of how she helps keep Prudie grounded as Prudie copes with some of her interpersonal interactions by providing her with advice about life and friendship and serving almost as a surrogate mother. Prudie's biological mother is the least independent of the widows in the film and relies only on others around her for access to illicit drugs, so she shows the least likeability of the widows because her interpersonal connections are self-serving and don't provide much more than example for what *not* to do post-loss. In *Book Club*, Diane's friends are key in helping her, not only in beginning to re-explore her romantic life and sexuality, but in being there in her moments of need. Her three best friends in the book club with her drink wine and all of them share their adventures and experiences with their relationships when they get together as a collective, but they're also there for each other in dyadic interactions—getting together to shop or have a cup of coffee. These women are all healthy, strong, and stable friends that have had lasting relationships together for an extended period of time so they demonstrate the power and importance of friendship post-loss. Hollie's disclosure of relationships outside of her family are limited to an awkward exchange between her and her neighbor and some small comments about making herself look foolish in front of others by trying new activities, but she makes light out of the circumstances and shows appreciation for the individuals who saw her working through the loss in her own way. Nikki keeps mostly to herself in terms of relationships outside of the family, except for her relationship with Roger, who is a widowed man, but his intentions are to try to be with her, whereas she is only looking for companionship for dinners and to talk about their grief experiences together. She enjoys the time she spends with Roger and it helps her with sense-making of the loss but their relationship isn't one that moves beyond friendship and eventually does more harm to Roger than good when

he finds out that she's been seeing Tom. In *How to Deal*, Grandma Hallie is more of a friend to Hallie and Hallie's sister than a (grand)parental figure, as she intentionally irritates her daughter (Hallie's mom, Lydia) to get a rise out of her in order to entertain her grandchildren. She steps in to offer friendly advice that comes without judgment and is, despite some of her more erratic marijuana-induced comments, a calming presence in the drama of the movie, which is appreciated by her grandchildren. While each of the women in the films is on a quest of some kind to find a sense of closure post-loss or to remake their life in some way, their independence is often minimal and the reliance on friends and family to cope far outshines any clear moment of post-loss realization that the widow can do things on her own. This provides a challenge to the widow as she navigates the independence/dependence dialectic in her interpersonal relationships, where one side of her feels as though she should be able to get through life without needing any help from others and the other part of her believing that it is imperative to seek out trusting and strong connections with friends and family members for support. The widows that fail, like Prudie's mother, are the ones that show that they cannot make it on their own or that their choices, like Nikki's choice to date Tom, will destroy her relationships with her family members.

Outside of family and friendships, there are minimal interpersonal interactions that are shown in the films, especially those that have widows as secondary characters. Diane from *Book Club*, considered a primary character, is the most social of all five widows but she has also been grieving the loss for over a year and is one of the younger "older widows" in the films so she still frequently travels and maintains her independence. Most of the displays of interpersonal communication that occur outside of friendship and family interaction are taking place in the context of scenes that occur at a grocery store, a dinner gathering, a social event, or somewhere that characters in passing can be addressed but don't draw much from the plot of the movie,

which is ultimately to see the protagonist(s) succeed and carry on with whatever issue(s) they bring to the beginning of the film. There is little to no discussion of feelings or emotion surrounding the loss of the husband with other individuals, and if the discussion does take place, it's typically only to assess the length of time that has passed since the death or to situate the character as a widow so the audience has a character history, which helps in forgiving some of the unusual behaviors that would be out of context had the character not been older and a widow. This is addressed further is the next section.

**Drinking, Drugs, & Erratic Behaviors**

I have mentioned in previous sections that the older widows explored in these films engage in illicit drug use and participate in activities that often show them drinking alcohol (such as social outings and book club gatherings). These films, in particular, however, show the misuse and abuse of drugs and alcohol in an interesting set of ways, particularly because older widows are given a free pass to engage unapologetically in these behaviors because of their losses. In some circumstances, Grandma Hallie's, for instance, illicit drugs are a pacification system for her, so much so that her illicit drug use is almost encouraged by the family members because it provides them the feedback from Grandma Hallie that they need in their moments of drama and keeps her out of their hair when she's unwanted or needs to go unnoticed around the house. While misuse of illicit drugs is typically shocking for women in old age, the widow's participation in behaviors of drug abuse are well-received because they either offer comedic relief to the film or they provide a lesson to the audience on "what not to do" in widowhood. Prudie initially tolerates the misuse of her mother's illicit drugs until Mama Sky goes "too far" and nearly burns the house down while Prudie is away. Prudie takes issue with the drug problem only when it affects her personal livelihood; her concern for her mother doesn't seem to be a

genuine concern, but rather, a vested self-interest in making sure that nothing bad happens to her. She rolls her eyes at the drug abuse but never does anything to stop the misuse—instead she leaves her mother at home to recreationally use as much as and as frequently as she'd like to. Grandma Hallie does mix recreational drugs with alcohol but doesn't seem to present any kind of medical issues that would truly cause excessive damage, however, Prudie's mother is in a constant haze, so much so that she insists on doing things like driving when she can't even buckle her own seatbelt and starting a meal in Prudie's kitchen and forgetting that she had done so because she was so out of it. While Grandma Hallie's use of marijuana as pacification for her loss is deemed acceptable by the family, Prudie's mother's use of marijuana is tolerable as pacification only until it begins to annoy others (specifically Prudie) and become out-of-control. In either case, the use of drugs, whether for comedic relief or for exacerbation of existing relational problems, causes the widow to be characterized as an individual who must rely on some kind of coping mechanism to help them get through daily life post-loss. Despite the drugs potentially being out-of-character behavior for an older woman, marijuana is a acceptable form of temporary pacification for the widow until it is problem-causing to family members, thus perpetuating the problematic idea that widowhood is a "disease" that can be treated (Lieberman, 1994) and, if left untreated without the appropriate medication, the widow will begin to demonstrate erratic or out-of-control behavior because of her psychological illness. The women in *Book Club* are all mild to moderate drinkers. The majority of the scenes they share as a collective group are in the presence of several bottles of wine or a few mixed drinks each, and even independently, Diane isn't shy about taking prescription medication in public settings to calm her nerves when she has to board an airplane to travel to see her daughters in Arizona. Likewise, regarding drinking, *The Jane Austen Book Club* members are all drinkers so when they

have their monthly get-togethers or attend social outings it's commonplace behavior to have all of the main characters, including the widow, participating in consumption of alcoholic beverages. While many of the scenes that have a presence of drinking and drugs are not excessive amounts of drinking or misuse, some extreme examples, such as Prudie's mother's misuse are, but there are other important things to be considered when addressing this as a theme. The conversations that happen between the book clubs changed upon the first few glasses of wine being poured—for example, the *Book Club* members all agree to reading the provocative Christian Grey novel after having a couple of drinks and openly discussing their sex lives, which is written to be a comedic and mildly uncomfortable scene to get the movie rolling, yet it does have implications regarding what behaviors are age-appropriate for the women in these scenes. One of the reasons why it feels awkward to watch the scene about four older woman discussing sex and reading borderline pornographic literature for a traditionally serious book club discussion is because the women in the scene are written to make the scene awkward. When the book is suggested you can nearly see Diane turn "beet red" and two of the four women are opposed to reading the book as a serious literary commitment because they don't think it's age-appropriate. By having Vivian, a fiercely independent and highly successful woman, introduce the book and persuade the others to embrace the message that they're not too old to go out without getting to feel sexy, the other readers in the club are more receptive and open-minded to the suggestion.

Participating in illicit drug-use and mild to moderate drinking often leads the widow to do things she wouldn't do if she was in a sober state of mind (i.e.: agree to read a sexually provocative novel with her adult friends or get so high that she nearly burns down her daughter's house). These exaggerations of drug use/abuse in widow stories are important to the plot because

they provoke other behaviors that perhaps would not have taken place—for example, Diane gaining the courage to embrace the idea that she is a sexual being as a result of reading *Fifty Shades of Grey* or Grandma Hallie getting so stoned that she speaks candidly and openly to Hallie about love, relationships, and her drug use in a way that a sober-minded individual would not often do as candidly as she does. The consumption of drugs and alcohol lead to erratic actions that cause the widow to be identified in a way that makes her seem as though she is doing inappropriate or shocking things that "normal" people wouldn't do. This further perpetuates the notion of the widow narrative as being one that entails performing behaviors that violate social norms, thus making the widow seem out of the ordinary, crazy, or generally unable to control herself.

In the films there are more age-related behaviors that could be classified as erratic than what's been presented in the memoirs. While the memoirs acknowledge age in moving on and dating other men, the films directly focus on culturally inappropriate behaviors that the widows are conducting after their loss, sometimes making the behaviors extreme (i.e.: Prudie's mother's death being one example). In a sense, the flirtation with inappropriate behaviors can be perceived as a cautionary tale to viewers about what is acceptable self-presentation in later life, especially post-loss. While most characters from the films do seem to have the canonical happy ending (aside from Prudie's mother), the negation of the older widow identity is situated as a constant work in progress and will only lead to a better future if the widow finds someone new and has close friends and family to support her as she navigates the loss.

**Widow Duties**

While the memoirs had an abundance of widow duties to be explored, far less examples can be found in the films except for the duty of regaining control and seeking independence.

There are several reasons for why this is possible. Perhaps, because the when authors selected what parts of the story to write about their focus was on widow duties because they were able to express more about day-to-day activities that they were doing post-loss, whereas characters in the films were there to serve a larger canonical narrative or being a supporting cast member instead of having the spotlight on them. There is also the possibility that, because many of the widows in the films relied more heavily on their children for fiscal and emotional support, the necessity for sharing details about tasks they may have taken on after the death of a husband wasn't worth deterring too much away from the plot for or the husband had passed long enough ago that the recency of the event wasn't as pressing of an issue for the characters. It is still possible, however, to see the ways that widow duties play out differently for the film characters than the memoirists by looking at their relationships with family and friends. It is noteworthy that the absence of day-to-day widow duties is absent in the films because they are perceived as unimportant, irrelevant, or don't serve as pressing to the widow's story. Surely these women participate in having to take care of daily duties (i.e.: eating, cooking, cleaning, going to the grocery store, taking care of paperwork, etc.) but the lack of normal or mundane activity is an important aspect of what contributes to the widow's identity of being a relevant presence in a narrative.

One of the duties that should be considered as incredibly prominent is the duty to take care of children and allow for children to take care of the widow. Despite Prudie not wanting Mama Sky to stay with her at her home, she obligingly accepts and tolerates the caregiving she has to do for her mother while she's staying with her. Likewise, Diane doesn't want to be coddled by her two adult daughters but she allows them to do the research about old age and nag at her about falling risks because she knows it's their way of expressing concern and trying to

show her that they love and support her. Summer is another example of how important the duty to children is in these films, as Nikki ends her relationship with Tom when she finds out how upset Summer is about the physical attributes Tom has that look like her father's. Summer serves as both a caregiver and a character that has to be cared for in *The Face of Love* because she regularly checks up on her mother to make sure that Nikki is doing alright and then has to help take care of Nikki when she finds about the strange psychological blunder that Nikki has gotten herself into by dating Tom. In *Elizabethtown* Drew takes care of getting his father's suit to his hometown, which is a task that Hollie doesn't want to have to participate in because the community members of the town dislike her. In addition, Hollie's daughter is her temporary caregiver as she participates in rediscovering herself through her attempts at trying new activities. Grandma Hallie takes on the traditional role of becoming closer to her grandchildren post-loss and becoming a partial caregiver, which Lydia, Grandma Hallie's daughter, is very happy about because it allows her the freedom to be absorbed in other activities aside from parenting, for example, taking care of herself as she goes through a divorce. While the children in the films do often take care of the widow immediately post-loss, much like the traditional canonical narrative of a widow, she has a few months of allotted time to grieve before the children move on to their own obligations and responsibilities, often leaving the older widow to take care of herself. In addition, the widows on film reify the stereotypical older widow by becoming closer to grandchildren as a method of pacifying the absence of their husband.

While small tasks, like day-to-day chores, are not often mentioned in the films they are sometimes shown being conducted while the widowed character is with a friend or family member or on the phone with someone close to them. Diane can be seen at the grocery store, shopping at the mall, helping prepare food, cleaning the house on her own without the help of

her husband, etc. Similarly, Nikki cooks (sometimes even for others, like Roger), goes independently to an art museum, shops and cleans, and generally maintains normal upkeep of the home (except for hiding pictures of her late husband from sight so that Tom won't see the photographs). These tasks are important to continuing life but, because of the length of the movie and the necessity to continue the plot to a greater cultural or canonical narrative, the details about what the widow has to take on aren't necessarily the focus of the films. The most prominent duty that the widow is required by all five films is some form of self-actualization, even if it means that she is killed trying to obtain a better life post-loss.

The widow is often portrayed to have a responsibility to use her loss as a learning moment or an opportunity to retake control over her life. Her new duty after the loss is to focus on putting her life back together and trying to regain independence so that she isn't reliant on others to help her for "too much" time after the loss. Diane's friends push her to move beyond her grief and to begin dating again in order to regain control over her sex life and, later in the film, her love life and independence. Grandma Hallie utilizes her situation to help raise Hallie but also to take responsibility for imparting her knowledge about life and loving relationships when things get chaotic. Hollie takes the grief and situates it into activities outside of her comfort zone so that she can learn things about herself that she didn't know. She expresses wanting to be able to learn what it's like to live without Mitch and she ends up on an empowering journey of self-discovery that allows her to embrace the time she had with her husband but to rekindle relationships that had gone awry because of her being with him. Mama Sky pays the ultimate penalty by trying to use her loss as a learning moment when she tries to share the grief with her daughter and discuss the death. This backfires because of the estrangement of their relationship and she is cast into a new role where she is entirely alone and ends up passing away. This

narrative is a cautionary tale that essentially tells the audience not to wait too long to try to take advantage of the time you have post-loss to ensure that you spend it with people you care about or you will lose control over your life. Finally, Nikki is able to not only accept that she is still grieving by the end of the film, but she is able to start to let go of her husband's death in a more healthy manner and move forward in ways that are not as psychologically disruptive to her and others. Each of these women find a way to try to regain control of their lives and attempt to calm the chaos in the lives of others as a part of their respective widow duties.

While this section connects the individual films and memoirs to explore common themes, the following chapter will interweave the data in order to give a comprehensive look at the ways in which widowhood is perceived in mass media and explore how media reflects written stories of widows. There are clear overlaps in some instances, but also significant discrepancies in how widows are writing as opposed to how they are portrayed in movies. Each of these contributes to the identity label of "widow" and how communication plays a significant role in her label.

**Summary**

All three books and five movies provide interesting intersections about older widowed women and their experiences with post-loss life. Captured in this section have been the four main themes present in the films—1.) Demographics & Physical Portrayals of Widows, 2.) Interpersonal Relationships 3.) Drinking, Drugs, & Erratic Behaviors, and 4.) Widow Duties—that the widows' stories connect with, represent, and reify throughout the artifacts. Each of the four themes has been discussed in the context of memoirs and films and has provided a glimpse into larger cultural narratives about the relevance, presence, and necessity of older women experiencing post-loss bereavement. The next chapter of the dissertation will discuss how the

themes overlap as a whole, conclusions about the older widow experience, limitations of the research, and directions for future research.

# CHAPTER FOUR: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF WIDOWS' MEMOIRS AND FILMS, AND LIMITATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

This section of the dissertation provides a comparative analysis of the themes identified in three memoirs and five films featuring widows ages 65+. The memoirs included are: "Epilogue" by Anne Roiphe (2008), Joyce Carol Oates' "A Widow's Story: A Memoir" (2011), and Joan Didion's "The Year of Magical Thinking" (2007). The films included are: *How to Deal* (2003), and *Elizabethtown* (2005), *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007), *The Face of Love* (2013), and *Book Club* (2018). The themes identified in the thematic analysis are: Demographic Characteristics; Family, Friends, and Interpersonal Relationships; Drinking, Drugs, and Erratic Behavior; and Widow Duties. After a comprehensive look at the overlapping themes, I discuss conclusions that have been drawn from the analysis, limitations of the research project, and directions for future research on older widows.

## Comparative Analysis

In the comparative analysis section I use subheadings in order to help develop an understanding of how the themes presented in this dissertation overlap. Each section provides a reader with connections to how facets of the four larger themes work together to help reinforce a formula story for older widows. Each subsection will provide relevant examples to explain the findings and overlaps of the thematic analysis. The subcategories—Control, Widow Duties, Older Widow Criticism, Failed Coping, Widow Relationships, Drinking and Drugs, and Age &

Sexuality-- provide organization to the comparisons and similarities that are found across all eight artifacts.

### Control

By looking at where the themes overlap in the memoirs and the films, there arises a projection of how the older widow experience is narrated in contemporary cultural artifacts, and thus, perpetuates or reifies common canonical narratives surrounding post-loss experiences. One of the themes that proved incredibly prominent across all of the works looked at in this project was the notion of control and ability to remake one's life post-loss. Being in control of feelings, control of day-to-day activities, and generally controlling well-being were addressed across the board. One of the issues with battling the urge to be in control is that it often causes the writer or the character in the film more stress, especially if it arises as a result of interpersonal interaction. Relying on others is not a stress reliever for the memoirists, nor is much interpersonal interaction; if anything it makes them more uncomfortable and leaves them with the burden of feeling as though they need to reciprocate communication in interpersonal interactions when they'd rather be left to their own thoughts or coping techniques.

Culturally situated in the idea that older women, not just widows, are not necessary to society, uninteresting, unimportant, and aren't making substantial contributions because of their age (and perhaps, gender) is present in all of the eight artifacts. While regaining a sense of being in control is important to the memoirists and widowed film characters, societal expectations of these women are low: They are not expected to regain control of anything that is important to anyone else. No one nags the older women in the films or memoirs to remarry (or marry at all)—for example, Bernadette from *The Jane Austen Book Club*. She is an older woman who is fiercely independent and she is the voice of reason for all of the relationships that unfold in front of her.

The only necessity for her character in the film is to get the book club together and keep them together as the younger characters become unglued and she only does so in subtle ways, such as dropping a quick line amidst a chaotic moment. In one scene where Prudie is breaking down about joining the book club because the other members find her to be pretentious and uppity in nature, Bernadette laughs and challenges Prudie to think differently about the club:

> "Bernadette : All Jane Austen, all the time. It's the perfect antidote.
>
> Prudie Drummond : To what?
>
> Bernadette : To life."

Bernadette has no pressure from other characters to try to use the book club as anything but something to do to relax and spend time with friends. The characters in the film with Bernadette are happy that she is a sounding board for their problems and that she has time for them because she isn't pursuing any kind of romantic relationship. Bernadette, while not a widow, still does represent the portrayal of older woman as not being of romantic interest and her advice is sometimes unsolicited or so vague that it doesn't serve much use for the characters she's speaking with or they don't listen to her warnings anyway.

In order to transition from wife to widow, there is a responsibility for the widow to ensure that she follows the social rules surrounding the formula story that influence her behaviors. Part of a widow's responsibility is controlling her identity and many widows are not expected to remarry. If a widow chooses to seek a new romantic partner, she must do so with caution because if she decides to move on "too quickly" she loses her control over maintaining the social expectations surrounding her grieving. Having similar personality traits as Bernadette, Mama Sky from *The Jane Austen Book Club* is an older widow who also has no necessity to try to find another potential spouse. Her free-spirited mentality mimics that of Bernadette's, the only

difference being that her free-spirited advice backfires and she isn't taken seriously at all by anyone she comes into contact with, including her own daughter. Her character has given up on the trajectory for her life story being encompassed by a potential romantic role as a wife or partner and is more concerned with coping with grief through drug use and attempts to reconnect with her daughter. Instead of being loved and understood, she is repeatedly shut down, yelled at, and just generally projected as an unwanted or undesirable nuisance. Her lack of ability to control her life circumstances proves her character to be so undervalued that when she dies there is very little said about her death and the film moves forward toward a happy ending as though her removal from the story was a relief, rather than an event to feel burdened by. Hollie's character is another example of the out-of-control "nuisance widow" in *Elizabethtown*, as Drew's sister has to live with Hollie while Hollie begins taking on new projects and tasks to try to assert a sense of self-worth post-loss. Drew's sister is annoyed by the changes and inconvenienced by having to stay with her mother, so much so that she repeatedly calls Drew to report how crazy her mother is making her. Being a nuisance and not being expected to date again as an older woman or an older widow, especially if the character's purpose is to move the plot of the story forward, shows how cultural portrayals of these women make them out to be unnecessary, annoying, or romantically undesirable.

Sarbin's (2001) observations support the analysis I've conducted. Widows are expected to "grip" a presupposed label and they have been portrayed to embrace widow stereotypes, such as being a nuisance who is emotionally and socially isolated. Sarbin says that, "Instead of controlling the discourse of, say, a grieving widow as a passive victim being gripped by a specific emotion, it is more continuous with close observation to note that she has agentially gripped a narrative plot" (p. 21). Instead of allowing for the widow to disclose her fear, isolation,

lack of control, anger, sadness, etc., she is clinging desperately to a formula story for comfort, even if that formula story doesn't meet the desires she has to move forward or regain control of her life or independence. So by comparing and contrasting films that portray widows and memoirs written by widows, it becomes clearer that widows feel pressure to behave in ways that are situated within the formula story of appropriate widowhood. This analysis provides information, as well, about how problems can arise when widows deter from a traditional cultural narrative.

Both memoirs and films are powerful vehicles for conveying what widowhood is like, how grieving is supposed to take place, and how widows are to behave and feel about their new social status. As Loseke notes, "While interviews are the most typical way to gather narratives of personal identities, formula stories are located in public realms, in places such as court transcripts, texts of public policy hearings, social advocacy documents, organizational manuals, transcripts of speeches, and *mass media* and web contents of all types" (emphasis mine) (2012, p.255). These mass mediated texts are representative of how embodied formula stories are and how easily digestible they can be when presented in popular culture. Obviously none of the widows in the films or memoirs actually like being widowed, but they are expected to learn or grow somehow from their experiences and to impart some kind of knowledge to their audience or find some kind of way to be happy after the loss that does not impose on others. All of the widows in this project are proactive in making attempts to regain confidence and control and find strength after losing their husbands, whether it be through writing his memory, finding balance in day-to-day activities, trying to reconcile estranged relationships, or attempting to meet someone new to spend their remaining years with. What ends up happening in the process of being proactive post-loss, however, is a consistent feeling of guilt for moving on too quickly from the

loss and feeling concerns about the image that she is projecting in public settings. A widow wants to know that she is performing her new identity label well. In one article, "Am I doing it right?" (DK van den Hoonaard, 2005) was a question often asked by interview participants. The widows in interview settings were questioning not only if they were answering the questions from the interviewer appropriately, but also questioning the larger ideas they had about how they were supposed to behave as a widow. Asking "Am I doing it right?" implies that there is a right and wrong way to do widowhood, and enforces gendered constructs that women have to check that they're speaking properly, not disclosing too much or too little, and that they're providing what they deem the "correct" character story for their widow identity. The interview process and this comparative analysis serve to demonstrate that widows do indeed reflect a larger culturally embedded narrative about what forms of behavior are acceptable and that there is a desire for widows to control their behaviors and emotions as a result of the confining formula story available for them.

Hollie is a good example of this because she throws herself into a stream of new activities to try to work her way quickly through the death of her husband, only to end up with a series of failed experiences gone wrong. She doesn't want to embrace the idea that she has a new label, but if she's going to have to do it she makes a point to do it with as much persistence as possible, even at the annoyance of her children. This reifies the canonical narrative that human beings can "get through anything" and should work to survive circumstances beyond their control. The writers talk a lot about this because they feel as though they have to hide their emotions, which, for the writers, end up on the page instead of in conversation. They express the challenges they face with taking on a new identity post-loss and how challenging it is to have to hide raw emotion from others because they don't want to burden anyone with their feelings. As a result,

they have an intrinsic struggle to perform feeling/being "okay" with the loss. They end up performing able-bodied and being okay when in public settings but go home after social outings and write out what they were actually feeling during the interactions, which more often than not, were deep concerns about whether they were performing "widow" well and had succeeded in not being a burden to anyone else.

As the widows navigate self-disclosure (that is, how much to tell, when to tell information, and who to tell it to), they find that some instances of self-disclosure have more positive reception than others or they choose not to disclose information because they don't want to be disruptive to others' well-being. Roiphe and Didion don't want to burden their children or friends by disclosing their feelings of suicide and chose, instead, to write about their experiences with these emotions because they felt as though they could be more candid on the page than in social situations. There are repercussions to holding back, though—one of which for the authors is that if friends and family read their work and were part of these experiences the women write about, there could be some sense of feeling of betrayal from a friend or colleague who reads about the interaction not knowing what was truly going on in the widow's mind at the time of their social encounter. I say this because if I were in private conversation with my mother and she wasn't honest with me during a significant loss and were to have feelings of self-harm that I found out about only after reading something she had written, I would feel very torn and hurt that she didn't trust me to disclose that information. Candidly, however, to play devil's advocate, if there is repeated disclosure of the same problem ongoing over and over without action steps and a plan to try to "get better" or make some kind of change for an extended period of time and I were to have to keep hearing the same complaints, I can understand how complicated it could be for a widow to not want to share her experience repeatedly because she would begin to think of

herself as an annoyance. Diane (*Book Club*) is a good example of this kind of behavior—she is okay with beginning to take steps to move forward and is uncomfortable letting her daughters know when she isn't okay because they're already incredibly worried about her health and well-being. Friends and family tend to make the assumption that the widow has to be sad about the death, but Diane makes it clear in the movie that she has self-agency and really only makes the move to Arizona to appease her daughter's concerns, rather than pursuing her own happiness independently of her daughters' persistence to have her closer to their homes. Disclosing to them that she actually wants new adventures with another man and that she's tired of living as though she has to be drowning in sorrow all of the time because of her loss is a turning point for Diane's character to show that she is an able-bodied woman seeking independence. Without this disclosure, her character couldn't have moved forward in trying to find her "happy ending" or remaking of her life.

**Widow Duties**

An important contribution of all of these works is an examination of widow duties and looking at just how much responsibility a widow in older age is expected to take on after the death of a spouse. From very small obligations to incredibly oppressive emotional battles, such as suicidal tendencies and almost unexplainably complicated grief, the tasks left to widows are overwhelming and often avoided in conversation prior to loss, which leaves the widow in a messy situation having to handle overwhelming grief and personal affairs.

This becomes even more complex when the widow is ready to begin to try to move beyond the grief and find a new companion. The larger formula story about widow etiquette would encourage the widow not to move too quickly into a new relationship post-loss. Some of the characters in the films and memoirs were criticized for moving on "too quickly" by family

members, friends, and even the general public, which I will discuss in the next section on *Older Widow Criticism*. The older widow comes under extreme scrutiny for her anticipated time for which she is expected to grieve and if she doesn't follow the cultural format for this pattern she is harshly criticized for not caring enough about her husband to "properly mourn the loss."

Unforeseen undertaking of household duties leads to a consistent display of erratic behaviors. We see Hollie failing at fixing the family car, women who were living with their spouse having to move in with family because they can no longer take care of themselves (Sky & Prudie's mother), Diane having to rely on friends to help her get dressed. All of the changes these women face show that they are not independent, they are weak, and that the only help would be close female friends or children. Characterizing these women as weak, unimportant, and unable to take care of themselves is an overarching theme through all five films.

**Older Widow Criticism**

Some research on reviews of the films and memoirs might be helpful in driving this point because many of the reviewers of these films and books call the artifacts uninteresting or criticize the writers or characters for their drawn out writing or poor performances. For example, Oates received backlash from reviewers and readers because she began dating while she was writing her memoir and then got remarried just after the book was published. Her audience was infuriated that she didn't take enough time to grieve. In a review by *The New York Times*, Maslin (2011) wrote: "A book long and rambling enough to contemplate an answering-machine recording could have found time to mention a whole new spouse" and further goes on to say that she attacks another memoirist (Didion) for writing a similar and better-selling memoir: "Ms. Oates, who had two pet cats with Mr. Smith, shows her own sharp claws when alluding to Ms. Didion's book as an exercise in narcissism and vanity." The reviewer then goes on to say that it

was, instead, Oates who was self-absorbed in her writing of the memoir, leaving little room for the loss of Ray, but instead focusing on " thoughts of suicide, her collecting of pills, her curious fascination with the Eliot Spitzer scandal, her quite funny loathing of fruit baskets sent as sympathy gifts, and her teaching and touring schedule."

Oates isn't the only widow who is criticized for post-loss behavior. Hollie, played by Susan Serandon in *Elizabethtown*, is criticized multiple times for the scene in which she shows the most presence in the movie: Mitch's memorial service. One anonymous reviewer wrote: "Hollie's tap dance. Okay, I normally love DANCE in movies, but I just wish this number was a little better. I know Hollie had just learned to tap dance on a whim in her grief, but the choreography was more soft shoe than tap. After her standup routine (which I didn't like although I do understand its purpose of diffusing grief), I just wasn't moved or impressed by the dance, and I wanted either more emotion or better execution" (*Rotten Tomatoes*). Another anonymous review writes about Keaton's character in *Book Club*: Diane Keaton is clinging to her la dee da Annie Hall flibbertigibbet routine. I found it grating. If you've made it to 72 and you don't know how to handle life's little challenges, like making small talk with stranger on an airplane, then why should I care about you? A young woman's confusion can be endearing. An old woman's confusion suggests that she should wear one of those 'Help, I've fallen and I can't get up' alarm systems" (Goska, 2018). Between the reviews of perceived time a widow is responsible for grieving and the attacks on the widow characters not performing a just-learned dance routine and being too old to complain about life challenges, the criticism against older widows is overwhelming and often quite sinister. These critiques of the characters, authors, and content of the memoirs and films deepens the analysis about the issue of the canonical widow

story as problematic and an identity that is not worthy of embracing, but rather, worthy of criticism.

**Failed Coping**

Hollie (*Elizabethtown*) begins activities that are also construed as social violations. She takes tap-dancing classes with young children and attempts her mechanic skills but fails when she is "eaten by a car," as the car hood slams down on her and she can't get out of the situation without help. Some of the widowed women do try to take on new adventures (i.e.: Diane riding in a small plane for the first time), but most of their attempts at moving on/coping end in disastrous or embarrassing situations.

Another example of failed coping occurs in *The Face of Love* is Nikki's obsession with trying to rekindle her life with a look-alike of her deceased husband. While she knows, at first, that the man she begins seeing is not actually her husband, she becomes obsessed with trying to make him into the man she married. Garrett (her new boyfriend) is unaware of the similarity to her spouse, Tom, but eventually finds out and refuses to see her anymore. The love she tried to rekindle falls apart because she tries to recreate it with a look-alike. This social violation deeply depicts the ways that widowed women are expected to behave post-loss. The attempts at finding a new man to be romantically involved with go sour and, again, show the erratic behavior of widowed women.

Because Mama Sky's death is discussed in the section below on *Drinking and Drugs*, I won't go into detail here about her failures to cope but it is important to know that her character is the ultimate widow failure in terms of her ability to cope because she relies so heavily on medicating herself that most of the scenes of her in the film *The Jane Austen Book Club* are scenes that show her as crazy and so loopy from drug misuse that she's simply "not there." As a

result, she dies and even her death is swept under the rug in the larger context of the plot of the film.

**Widow Relationships**

In addition to erratic/failing attempts to "regain" her life post-loss, we also see the influence these behaviors have on a widow's children. Drew (*Elizabethtown*) begins the film by attempting suicide, his sister doesn't know how to handle Hollie's behavior, and the "adult responsibilities"—such as taking care of funeral arrangements—are put on the children. This reflects Nikki's behavior in *The Face of Love* in connection with her daughter, Summer, who surprisingly finds out that Nikki has decided to date a look-alike of her father. Not only is she shocked and confused, she is explicitly angry with her mother because of the erratic post-lost choice her mother makes to date the doppelganger father. These scenes reflect on the parent-child relationships that occur post-lost and the widow impact/neglect of her children. That's not to say that moving on shouldn't be a possibility for older widowed women but that there is a significant projection of the way that widows with children are being portrayed in film. The lack of agency of the white-haired, lonely, older widow is shown through the lack of a social circle beyond their relationship(s) with their children in these films. There is also a discourse post-loss that widows' children view seeing their widowed mothers as a chore. For example, siblings like those in Elizabethtown, ask one another, "Did you make it over to see Mom for the holiday?" or "Did you get a chance to call Mom to check in?" These interactions are more frequent between children post-loss. The notion of "finding time" or "making time" to spend with a widow is often a forced activity and is usually consistent with holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries of the death, whereas, because men are more likely to be reluctant to leave the home or be the "holiday-maker" (the person in charge of making sure everyone in the family gets together for the

holidays) causes the children to be more present in the life of the widower than the widow (Delbès & Gaymu, 2002). In addition, regular family interactions are better maintained for widowers and widows than for married couples in older age, as the children see more of an obligation to spend time with their surviving parent, however, widowhood often erodes or breaks relationships built around the parental couple, as children may have a relationship that exists with one parent only because the parent is married to his/her mother/father. The death of a spouse may mean dissolution of a relationship with a family member (i.e.: a child who is not blood-related or a child that doesn't have a strong relationship with the surviving parent). For example, the only in-law relationship that is mentioned in all eight artifacts is the relationship between Didion and her son-in-law and it's only mentioned because he is the one who wants to tell his wife Quintana about the passing of her father when she wakes up from her coma. Didion makes no other mention of in-law relationships. These relationships are seemingly unimportant or not necessary to the plot of the memoirs or films. Oates notes this change in discourse post-loss in commenting that her friends are often taking turns checking in on her via email or by phone and that relief comes when she wins a book award and she has the opportunity to celebrate with friends rather than feel like a "task" that they have to mark off of their to-do lists. She also makes it apparent that she knows that her friends are checking in with each other to make sure someone is checking in with her—almost like a phone tree of asking, "Have you talked to Joyce lately?" to make sure that she's still okay post-loss.

**Drinking & Drugs**

When it comes to the health of the women in the movies, most appear to be generally healthy and independent at the beginning of the films. It doesn't take long for many of the widows to reveal that they partake in illicit drug use or drink excessively. Prudie's mother, who

is revealed to be an addict, actually dies after she is kicked out of Prudie's house in *The Jane Austin Book Club*. The movie portrays the death as a result of Prudie neglecting her mother, Sky, by telling her to leave. Sky's first appearing in the film is a scene where she's trying to light a joint at the airport when Prudie comes to pick her up to let her stay at her home. The cause of death is unknown to a viewer but portrayed as though it was from misuse of drugs after leaving Prudie's house. Likewise, in the introduction of Hailey's grandmother, Grandma Hailey Williams, Hailey describes her as "her crazy grandmother." Scenes show Grandma Hailey shakily saying things like, "I had a little headache, but I'm feeling much better now," as rings of smoke cloud Grandma Hailey, implying her smoking marijuana. In one scene, Hailey even removes the smoke detector from the ceiling, helping hide the fact that Grandma Hailey was smoking marijuana. Widowed women partaking in drug use display emotional instability when left by themselves and there are frequent scenes where someone else (a daughter or granddaughter) has to take care of them or clean up after their mess. Notably, the only widow who dies in these films isn't actually even projected on film for a funeral scene and the cause of her death is never fully revealed, which shows her insignificance and how easy it is to forget her character in a larger narrative.

In addition to erratic behaviors surrounding drug abuse, Diane's fear of traveling causes her to rely on anti-anxiety medication. She takes pills prior to departing to visit with her daughters and when they begin to take effect she is ditzy and scattered. All four of the ladies, including Diane, in *Book Club* are shown repeatedly day-drinking, as well. The lax approach to consumption of medication and alcohol is entertaining for the purpose of the plot, but there are instances where her use of drugs and alcohol reiterate her character as being annoying or a burden. While Diane appears to be mostly competent, healthy, and ready to move on, her

children repeatedly nag her about their perceptions of her health. They tell her that it's sad that she eats alone and that they have "room for her in the basement." When she visits her daughters in Arizona they try repeatedly to convince her to move there and won't let her use the escalator at the mall because they're worried about her falling. She compares her life to a "scene from the '*Walking Dead"*". One of the connections to the misuse of marijuana and health is "age-appropriate" *behavior* for older women. The health of the widows is either influenced by self-inflicted misuse of drugs and alcohol or decided by their children as to what age-appropriate health looks like. The insistent notion for Diane's daughters to have her put in the basement also speak to how degraded and displaced the widow can be. They won't let her get on an escalator in public but they push for her to take stairs to one of their basements.

**Age & Sexuality**

*Book Club* is unique, in that, all four women are older age but only one, Diane, is a widow. The series they start reading is "Fifty Shades of Grey" and they meet monthly for their book club. Much like Roiphe's writing about dating, this film is interesting because the main character, Diane, begins to rediscover her sexuality post-loss. The characters in the movie make mention of age more often than any of the other movies reviewed in this dissertation project. In addition, Diane's daughters are constantly talking about her age and worried about her being too frail to manage life on her own. Age is one of the most significant themes in this widow portrayal.

When the ladies from *Book Club* get together at the beginning of the movie to begin a new book, "Fifty Shades of Grey," Diane is particularly embarrassed by that novel being the monthly read. When she begins reading the book she laughs out loud about the book saying things like, "Oh, come on," and even hiding the book from men that she's around and claiming

she's reading "Moby Dick." This embarrassment is portrayed as not only coming from unexpected physical responses and urges to the actual material in the book but also because she thinks she's "too old" to be reading sexual material. Less than half an hour into the film one of the book club friends says, "I don't care what society says about women our age, sex cannot be taken off the table" and that another friend says to Diane (despite it being over a year post-loss), "Your husband just died," while the next line comes from a third friend saying, "Harry dying was the best thing that ever happened to her," because she can have sex again. These conflicting statements from friends make it awkward for Diane to want to read with her book club and send confusing messages about the time-appropriate frame for starting to date or have sexual feelings after losing a spouse. Because her friends are speaking for her and she is constrained by what she "should" be doing, she has no voice. Even when she does accept a date her friends come over to criticize her clothes. Her "age appropriate" reading sexual content, acceptance of her loss, physical appearance, and attempts to move on are all highly remarked on throughout the movie.

Many of the widows in the movies embrace self-love and try to make sense of their loss by trying new adventures, trying to date again, and trying coping through the use of drugs and alcohol. Throughout the thorough review of these films, not one woman remarries or seems to be entirely independent. The women who are the most successful at accomplishing any sort of hope for the viewer are women with children (except for Prudie's mother—although their relationship was relatively estranged) and the women who have regular get-togethers with their girlfriends. Reiterating the thesis of this project—Older, widowed women are perceived as an unimportant population and incredibly understudied—is represented in the analysis of these films. This perpetuation of canonical narratives surrounding widows is problematic and, as Delbès & Gaymu note, "In the future, because of the succession of new generations, an improvement in

women's experience of widowhood may be expected" (p. 910). Not only is the goal of this project to explore the themes surrounding widowhood and review them in the context of larger cultural narratives, it is to challenge the existing narrative to reflect older widow experiences in order to expand on the formula story. While we may not expect mainstream films to challenge canonical views of older widowed women we could, perhaps, expect our memoirists to do so because they have the financial resources, time, and education, however, in the data provided by this dissertation research, the memoirists have not necessarily challenged formula stories of the widow experience because they write mostly about grief and all of their stories imply a happy ending, or at least some sort of hope for the reader that the author will be okay despite her loss. At best, Roiphe's attempts to date again show her trying to move forward with her romantic life, but at the end of the text the reader is left where they began: with a single, older, widowed woman.

**Reinforcing the Formula Story**

What's interesting about all of the experiences of the widows, both through memoirs and films, is that I anticipated finding more insights that didn't necessarily perpetuate formula stories than I actually read about or watched. I was hoping that the stories would provide a framework for a more constructive or positive formula story but instead found that the majority of the works had widows adhering to particular behaviors as cautionary tales for what *not* to do post-loss or that their stories just reiterated what the reader or viewer expected from narrative work—a happy ending or at least an ending with a positive tone as the novel concluded or the credits started rolling. While there were some instances of character development and Feminist thought, these stories did seem to reify common cultural narratives of widows as unimportant, not worth much time or attention, members of society with little to offer aside from helping take care of children

and grandchildren, or to provide comic relief. While the stories themselves adhere to common cultural narrative structures, one of the important things I did find, especially in more recent work such as *The Face of Love*, *Book Club*, *Epilogue*, and *A Widow's Story*, was the author or main character's goals of the healing process (whether it be writing, dating again, or establishing independence) to be effective, unapologetic, and of therapeutic value. Sharing stories and memories of the death helped the authors and characters in creating a new meaning for themselves about life post-loss and gave them access to new facets of their lives that hadn't previously existed prior to the death, such as experiences with a new romance or revisiting their sex life, but also honored the time they did have with their husbands. By exploring these stories as both individual stories and a collective overview of widow experiences, this project has identified both positive, negative, and reifying cultural narrative structures that continue to be told regarding the older widow experience. Recognizing the complexities of the grief process by reading and viewing these films have unearthed four larger cultural themes that describe how older widows' experiences are written about by themselves and others. This analysis demonstrates that the widows in the memoirs and films use formula stories about widowhood as resources for storying their lives post-loss and making sense of their new identity.

**Comparative Analysis Summary**

In essence, one of the fundamental questions that should be asked is: how important are formula stories to the coping process of the older widow? Through the artifacts in this dissertation it is clear the answer is: very important. These widowed women are repeatedly making themselves out to be nonsexual beings with limitations to how they're allowed to perform their identity in public settings and they're burdened with constant and nagging guilt for

stepping away from their presupposed narrative structures they got thrown into as soon as they were given the label of being an "older widow." The sense of importance that widows in later life experience is drastically impoverished by their loss and their new identity. As Oates notes, "Widowhood is the punishment for having been a wife" (p. 102), almost as if a wife should anticipate being punished for getting married because her odds are not in her favor—statistically she will not die before her husband does. Implicit, then, is the idea that marriage is a set-up for failure and sadness.

While these eight artifacts help in making sense of how widows are perceived and how they navigate their experiences, there is much work to be done on older widows and their experiences post-loss. Providing four themes has granted access to a more in-depth understanding of how widows situate their experiences and what themes are common in contemporary cultural narratives surrounding the death of a husband in later life. Applying these themes to other projects may be useful in doing thematic analysis of contemporary older widows and may be translated into other projects surrounding lives of the bereaved.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Many of the limitations in this work come from the demographics of the data. Given that all of the widows in this research are adhering to formula stories of grief and that they're all white, affluent, heterosexual women, there are no characters that are discussed that come from impoverishment, racially diverse, or geographically diverse backgrounds or populations. All of the stories are of women living in the United States, so there's little to no cross-cultural context, and the representations of these experiences are all from mass produced and mainstream media outlets. It's also important to note that the characters in both the memoirs and films are widows

that have had long marriages (approximately 40+ years) and that many of the widows are coming from the "Baby Boomer" generation, which helps give some personal and cultural context to their stories. It would be interesting to read about and see lived experiences of older widows in contexts that are not as highly consumed in popular culture venues to establish a more comprehensive view of how widow experiences are portrayed, however, this project does do justice to the work of how formula stories are set up to make the viewer or reader think and feel about older widows in mainstream contemporary culture. Perhaps one direction for future work could include repeating some of Lopata's (1996) work on contemporary widowhood using interview strategies to survey widow populations today. This could provide narratives of lived experiences of real women as opposed to mediated portrayals of women, especially as there are changes to demographic patterns and life expectancy that we need to be mindful of. There is certainly value in studying the projection of older widows in mediated scripts, however, the stories from widows are who living in American society *now*, including our younger widows, may provide a different script associated with the formula story of widow if reevaluated.

Another limitation of this work is narrowing down the themes into four large categories to study eight total artifacts. This is important for the scope of the project and were selected because of the repetitiveness of the content in each theme, but it would be interesting to see how one or two major themes work with a smaller group of texts in order to delve deeper into the larger cultural narratives of bereavement for older widows. Perhaps focusing only on current first-person accounts would be a potential opportunity to dig deeper into the thematic analysis of one theme or looking only at film portrayals of widows from all walks of life may provide interesting context into how younger populations cope with post-loss experiences after a husband's death can provide interesting insights into how older widows' experiences may/may

not filter down into younger generations. Also, doing another scan of existing widow memoirs might significantly contribute new data if new texts have appeared in the last few years.

In addition, the experiences of men have not been included in this work, so looking at the differences between how older widowers experience loss would be an interesting contribution. One interesting thing about the statistics surrounding men and their experiences as widowers is that they are more likely to remarry after losing a spouse in order to have another woman fulfill household duties that their former spouse would tend to do, and because there are more available females for men to date in older age because women live longer and outweigh the male population. Studying the gender differences would be interesting in further understanding the male perspective of older widowers, because they, too, are displaced because of their age. I'll add here that same-sex couples are nearly completely overlooked in all widow research, as are relationships between any LGBTQ+ communities, and there is much work to be done in these contexts, as well. Another potential for future research would be to look at women who aren't as well-off, financially speaking, as the widows in these stories. The widow duties could be incredibly difficult for someone who is financially burdened and doesn't have the time or clout to write a best-seller (or have the connections to do so) post-loss can provide another perspective into older widow experiences.

Looking at these three books and five films gives a comprehensive span about what's available in mass consumed cultural stories of loss, but the target audience tends to be women who are looking for love stories or stories that will provide therapeutic value to their reading or viewing experience. Most of the memoirs and films have something about the importance of reading and writing as one of the appeals to their consumers. I don't foresee, for example, my husband wanting to pick up the original copy of *The Jane Austen Book Club* to read at home on a

Saturday night. This also speaks to the idea that widows and their experiences are not interesting to the world at large. Some of these films and books are for guilty pleasure or the target audience has to have knowledge about the context of the film prior to watching or reading in order to keep interest. For me, I enjoyed viewing *The Jane Austen Book Club* because I love Jane Austen's works and thought it was interesting to see the literary devices play into the character development as each author read through their assigned book. There is also the issue of relevancy and accessibility—that is, who is interested in reading these memoirs or viewing these films based off of their age, race, gender, etc., and who has the economic or social accessibility to these memoirs or films.

While this dissertation has covered themes surrounding narratives of widowhood, there are directions for future research that can and should be examined in the future. For example, scholars (myself included) should/could be: looking at how older widows lived experiences have changed in a less patriarchal society; looking at how widows are perceived or perceive themselves across diverse populations, financial backgrounds, and educational backgrounds; giving agency to widows by showing the identity patterns that are challenge current formula stories; providing an identity framework that supports independent widows in older age and challenges existing cultural narratives for this population; looking at how this data can be used to help inform bereavement groups, implement new information into retirement communities or widow communities, and educate older populations and those studying end-of-life in general about the lack of presence in existing scholarship surrounding end-of-life work for this large population of older women who become widows. In addition, it is essential that the narratives be collected again, now that most of the data collection in narrative scholarship is well over a decade old. Interviews will be a helpful tool in reassessing the stories that widowed women are

currently sharing in order to interpret any changes that may be occurring in contemporary widowhood. Also, it would be interesting to gather information about what books or films widows have read or read to get a more comprehensive picture of what artifacts influence widow identities/perceptions. Clearly, there is a lot of work to be done to represent older widows, not only from a communication perspective, but also in aging studies, sociology, anthropology, psychology, women's and gender studies, and other humanities disciplines interested in work surrounding absent or displaced populations, such as widows. Moving forward with research projects surrounding older widows, these limitations and directions for future insights into post-loss experiences can help in understanding how grief, loss, and identity are understudied yet common experiences that continue to have a need to be re-evaluated in the scope of larger formula stories, however, this project has certainly given some precedence to the problems and benefits of canonical narratives and formulaic stories in the context of studying older widows. In sum, a variety of opportunities for future cross-disciplinary research can contribute to a better understanding of a large population of underrepresented American women: older widows.

I noted some of the limitations to this research project and believe that further inquiry into varying demographics may prove interesting in understanding whether or not the lived experiences of all older women widows adhere (or attempt to adhere to) a larger formula story regarding widowhood. Reviewing past data on widows and what they wrote about in memoirs (if there are any or many) may help situate any writers who have challenged canonical stories of widowhood and helped in shaping how Oates, Didion, and Roiphe wrote about their losses. At best, I speculate that most older widows would follow the formula story that they should continue to remake their life post-loss and not challenge the mentality that every story must have a happy ending. I also speculate, given the data collected in this project, that the formula story

has the potential to change or be challenged, but it is an unlikely endeavor for many older widows. I would hope, however, that even as older women, widows can express that they have the freedom to grieve for as long and however they choose to and that their population is a very common group of individuals, so the stigma currently surrounding their identity may be less threatening than they anticipated, however, I do not foresee many women challenging formula stories in this way. I say this because, just as Didion was seeking a plan she could follow post-loss so that she had the social cues written out for her and didn't have to find her way on her own, many widows are likely to want the same formulaic and comfortable patterns in their own losses that canonical narratives provide. Going against the grain would mean taking on new challenges that are unfamiliar to the widow narrative and could further provoke feelings of guilt, anxiety, hopelessness, and loneliness for the widow.

I do not think the formula story has changed much even though women's lives have changed. Despite progress for women to be activists as a result of the Feminist Movement, there still isn't anything like equality between men and women present in these artifacts. Given that the formula story hasn't changed much, this has a direct influence on women and how they perceive themselves in general, especially when reflecting on current social and political movements like the #MeToo movement or when thinking about the formula story for a widow in the context of the wage gap between men and women's incomes. The idea that women need some instruction for widowhood (like referring to Emily Post's manners book or getting help on the steps to sign a death certificate) also reinforces the current formula story of widowhood where the widow is perceived as weak or incapable of doing things on her own[11]. Despite the progress in contemporary American culture to open doors to new voices, it is still difficult for women in general, and especially challenging for women of color and LGBTQ+ communities, to

[11] This idea about needing instruction for widowhood could, and likely is, relevant to widowers, however, that research has not yet been done

participate in these conversations and influence the status quo. While these social movements and issues are certainly influencing contemporary American culture, much of our older widow population is from the Baby Boomer generation and there is a tendency to stay comfortable with existing narratives rather than trying to challenge them to create new narratives that could potentially further stigmatize their identities. As younger generations start to become part of the older widow population I do believe there is a possibility for a shift in the formula story—I think that there are already signs that something is happening because the two most recent movies that are studied in this dissertation—*The Face of Love* and *Book Club*—both feature a widow as a primary character, whereas some of the older films do not. A longitudinal look at how these memoirs and films have changed over a larger time frame may give more information about the trends in the formula story as it's socially reconstructed.

As the Baby Boomer generation increases in age and younger generations become the new "older widow" population, it will be important to examine how the larger cultural narratives from previous generations influence the stories of widowhood that begin to emerge, especially because of the changes in gender roles over the last sixty to seventy years. Men are less often the breadwinner and sole income provider for the family, women are less likely to be stay-at-home mothers, and changes in the workplace (equal pay for women and increased time in the workforce) may challenge the current stereotype of the co-dependent older widow as the norm. While the themes that I have identified in this research add depth to the formula story, they have also shown that widowed women on film and in memoir-writing do adhere to post-loss scripts of a larger canonical nature, and that the story is embedded so much into these women's lives that they act and write about how they "must" grieve for a certain time, in a certain way, without doing much to prevent social isolation except caring for grandchildren, protect themselves from

doing anything “too” embarrassing, fun, or erratic, and take care of anything that their husband left behind (leaving them with “duties” post-loss).

The insights from this research have practical implications if shared to empower older widows. One of the greatest influences that affects work on bereavement and studies on widowhood is the “denial of death” because death is a taboo subject (Becker, 2007). Frankly, human beings do not want to talk about dying so they deny the idea that they will die or that their loved ones will die. As a result, people are often unprepared for loss and there is little motivation to have conversations surrounding loss. Research like this can be shared to inform health practitioners, social workers, estate planners, gerontologists, and even friends and family members who communicate with an older widow. Perhaps even a communication/interdisciplinary certification program for those working directly with this population could be formed in order to help widows with the identity work that comes along with the death of a spouse. Future research will be able to reflect on these discoveries and utilize the themes to explore ongoing canonical structures and hopefully reveal widows who choose to challenge these identity narratives to improve women’s experiences of widowhood.

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## APPENDIX I:

## PRIMARY THEMATIC ANALYSIS

**Initial Themes Identified**[12]

Age of authors

Length of relationship

Self-doubt

Gendered roles

Self-pity

Dating again

Children

Children as a support system

Use of medication in "healing"

Time for grief allowed

-When friends stop calling

Loneliness

Things other people do for widows after the death (i.e.: condolence notes)

Feminist pride (Roiphe p. 17)

Identity/ "Title" change

Acknowledging changes to their story as they write it or think about it again

[12] *** Stars indicate that these themes are strongly prominent and repeated in all three texts

Reconstruction/Changing the Narrative

Time of day/certain location influencing emotions

Acknowledgement of grief being different for different people

Tasks, management, duties

Writing (and writing method- sometimes scattered or layered instead of chronological or flowing)

Selfishness

Guilt

Dating again (strangeness of dating again)

Things they "can't do" on their own

Being/feeling uninteresting, unimportant

Boring

Physical implications of the death on the widow

Being around other people

Scattered identity

Bravery

Items they discard

Concept of "normal life"

Desire to "get away"

"What if" thinking (ruminating)

Trying to find someone to follow for help (Dr. Phil, Emily Post, Kübler-Ross, Freud)

Absurd behavior

Irrational behavior

Anger

Resent

Alone

Burial expenses

Self-consciousness

Therapy

“Living dutifully” (Roiphe p. 83)

Sleep; fear of sleep; lack of sleep; afraid of sleeping too much

Eating habits (or lack thereof)

Living happily, happiness

Reminding herself to stay optimistic**

Other couples

Social outings

Avoidance (and being avoided)

Changes in senses of belonging

Conversation etiquette changes (“I am not sure it is fair to me to shift the subject when everyone else is enjoying the conversation” (R. p. 89))

Being a burden

Tears, sadness

Spirituality (*very infrequently mentioned)

Writing about death as being contagious

Obligations to the dead

Suffering

Distrust

Isolation

Friendship

Online dating

Age (**lots on age!)

Desire for companionship

Ethics

Fear

Respect

Feeling better/Trying to feel better

Calling themselves bipolar, schizophrenic, crazy; "Losing my mind"

Loss of interest

"Grief in waves" (***all three authors say this)

Sex, sexuality, desire (mostly lack of and in the context of age)

How to act, when to act, acting, not to act, shouldn't act…

Suicide

Trying new things

The requirement of being old in order to be comfortable being alone (It's expected that you should be okay to be alone when you're old) –R p. 212

Time

Exhaustion

Trying to remember things

Chaos

Denial

"Cool customer" concept (Didion p. 15) "good widow" (Oates p. 147)

Social expectation/performance

Face maintenance (***)

Time/space confusion

Attempts at closure

Morning as "illness" (Didion p. 34)—(Similar to existing research on widowhood as a treatable disorder)

"Overcoming" grief

Medical jargon (cold, stark)

Rituals

"Coping business" (Didion-pp.45-47+)

Post-death relationships

Hiding grief

Normalcy

Dealing with doctors, learning medical rhetoric

Loss of voice

Work of grief (***)

Being a "survivor"

Dreams

Hopelessness

Silver linings

Control (***)

Lucky/unlucky

Closure

Silence

Disorientation

Writing your way out

Describing the death

Legal implications

Control/work (***)

Time/narrative (punctuated) – not wanting to write or finish writing (***)

Change emphasized in response to death (***)

Feeling like the death was going to happen (***)

Blame

Widow responsibilities (***)

Death bringing up other past losses

“Widowhood is the punishment for being a wife” (Oates p. 102)

Products for death (flowers, cards, etc.)

Forgiveness

Ending traditions

Drug use

Transition from wife to widow (***)

Talking to oneself

Importance of friendship

**Secondary Thematic Analysis**

1) Demographics
    - Age
    - Education
    - White women
    - Finances
    - Physical portrayals (clothing, hair)
    - Health (ability)
2) Motherhood/Family
3) Behaviors
    - Drinking
    - Drug use
    - Age-appropriate behaviors
    - Erratic behaviors
4) Widow duties
    - Love
    - Sexuality
    - Dating
    - Taking care of clothing
    - Death certificates
    - Tending to his garden
    - Bill paying
    - Correspondence with family and friends

- Receiving gifts (condolence cards/flowers)
- Taking care of herself
- Eating habits
- Mowing the lawn, fixing the car, other male-oriented tasks
- Finding herself again/coping with the loss

## APPENDIX II:

## FAMILY TREES

Characters in **bold** font indicates the widow in the memoir/film. The actor/actress playing each character is in parenthesis. Please note these character lists include only the characters relevant to this dissertation.

### Memoirs

***Epilogue* by Anne Roiphe**

**Anne Roiphe** is married to H.

Anne's daughters: E., K., & R. (E. is a daughter from a previous marriage)

Anne's stepdaughters (H.'s daughters from another marriage): M. & J.

***A Widow's Story* by Joyce Carol Oates**

**Joyce Carol Oates** is married to Raymond Smith.

***The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion**

**Joan Didion** is married to John Gregory Dunne

Joan's daughter: Quintana Roo Dunne (married to Gerry Michael)

**Films**

***How to Deal***

**Grandma Halley—**Halley's grandmother (Nina Foch)[13]

Len Martin—Halley's father (Peter Gallagher)

Lydia Martin—Halley's mother (Allison Janney)

Halley Martin—Main character (Mandy Moore)

Ashley Martin—Halley's sister (Mary Catherine Garrison)

***Elizabethtown***

**Hollie Baylor**—Drew & Heather's mother (Susan Serandon)

Mitch Baylor—Hollie's husband (Tim Devitt)

Drew Baylor (Orlando Bloom)

Heather Baylor (Judy Greer)

***The Jane Austen Book Club***

**Mama Sky**—Prudie's mother (Lynn Redgrave)

Mama Sky's husband is unknown

Prudie—Book club member (Emily Blunt)

Dean—Prudie's husband (Marc Blucas)

Trey—Prudie's student that she has an affair with (Kevin Zegers)

Other book club members:

- Jocelyn (Maria Bello)

[13] The actor/actress playing each character is in parenthesis

- Bernadette (Kathy Baker)
- Sylvia (Amy Brenneman)
- Allegra (Maggie Grace)
- Daniel/Grigg (Jimmy Smitts)

***The Face of Love***

**Nikki Lostrom**—main character (Annette Benning)

Garret Mathis—Nikki's husband (Ed Harris)

Tom Young—Nikki dates him; Garret's look-alike (Ed Harris)

Summer—Nikki's daughter (Jess Weixler)

Roger Stillman—Nikki's widower friend (Robin Williams)

***Book Club***

**Diane**—narrator and book club member (Diane Keaton)

Harry—Diane's husband (uncast; never shown)

Diane's daughters: Jill (Alicia Silverstone) & Adrianne (Katie Aselton)

Diane's grandchild (not named or cast)

Mitchell—Diane dates him throughout the film (Andy Garcia)

Other book club members:

- Vivian (Jane Fonda)
- Sharon (Candice Bergen)
- Carol (Mary Steenburgen)

# APPENDIX III:

# FORMS FOR COPYRIGHT PERMISSION

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Name: Jennifer Bender Date: 3/4/19

Class or Project: Dissertation

Title of Copyrighted Work: "Elizabethtown" (2005 film)

PURPOSE AND CHARACTER OF THE USE

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AMOUNT AND SUBSTANTIALITY OF MATERIAL USED IN RELATION TO WHOLE

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| ☑ Small amount (using only the amount necessary to accomplish the purpose)<br>☐ Amount is important to favored socially beneficial objective (i.e. educational objectives)<br>☐ Lower quality from original (ex. Lower resolution or bitrate photos, video, and audio) | ☐ Large portion or whole work<br>☐ Portion used is qualitatively substantial (i.e. it is the 'heart of the work')<br>☐ Similar or exact quality of original work |

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EFFECT ON THE MARKET FOR ORIGINAL

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| ☑ No significant effect on the market or potential market for the original<br>☐ No similar product marketed by the copyright holder<br>☑ You own a lawfully acquired copy of the material<br>☐ The copyright holder is unidentifiable<br>☐ Lack of licensing mechanism for the material | ☐ Replaces sale of copyrighted work<br>☐ Significantly impairs market or potential market for the work<br>☐ Numerous copies or repeated, long-term use<br>☐ Made accessible on Web or to public<br>☐ Affordable and reasonably available permissions or licensing |

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CONCLUSION

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Name: Jennifer Bender Date: 3/4/19

Class or Project: Dissertation

Title of Copyrighted Work: "The Jane Austen Book Club" (2007 film)

PURPOSE AND CHARACTER OF THE USE

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Class or Project: Dissertation

Title of Copyrighted Work: "The Fact of Love" (2013 Film)

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Class or Project: Dissertation

Title of Copyrighted Work: "Book Club" (2018 Film)

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