

Exploring Family Dynamics in Mitch Albom's *For One More Day* Through the Lens of Bowen's Family Systems Theory

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ABSTRACT

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This study represents the culmination of a final-year project in literary criticism, integrating selected literary text with a theoretical framework, with roots tracing back to the 1940s and 1950s. The paper delves into exploring family dynamics and human behaviours in Mitch Albom's *For One More Day* (2006). Through the lens of Bowen's family systems theory (BFST), we utilize three concepts and aim to illuminate the intricate interplay of relationships within the family unit, encompassing the roles of the father, mother, and the protagonist himself. We proceed to investigate the transmission of emotional issues from the parents to the child, which culminates in Chick's adoption of emotional cutoff as a coping mechanism. This study contributes to the understanding that people's thoughts, emotions, and actions are shaped by the complex relationships rooted in their family of origin. The unresolved emotional issues within the family unit can jeopardise other new relationships. BFST sheds light on this dynamic relationship, making us understand that it is not just about identifying the cause of the problems but more about resolving the problems and finding solace through a proper closure to the unresolved trauma within the familial context.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature in Mitch Albom's literary works, utilising three concepts from eight interconnected concepts developed in Bowen's family systems theory. The paper's primary contribution is examining the intricate family connection and the importance of seeking closure for unresolved trauma within the family framework.

1. Introduction

Following the publication of Albom's (n.d.) widely acclaimed works, *Tuesdays with Morrie* in 1997 and *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* in 2003, his novel *For One More Day* was released in 2006. Apart from that, he has also written *Have a Little Faith* (2009),

The Time Keeper (2012), *The First Phone Call from Heaven* (2013), *The Magic Strings of Frankie Presto* (2015), *The Next Person You Meet in Heaven* (2018), *Finding Chika* (2019) and *The Stranger in the Lifeboat* (2021). Albom's (2006) *For One More Day* explores the complexities of family relationships, the effects of a broken family on a child, and the profound impact of unresolved emotional issues on the individuals and people living with them. In this paper, we attempt to uncover the family dynamics that shape the main character, Charles "Chick" Benetto's journey of self-discovery and redemption. Drawing from Bowen's family systems theory (BFST), we aim to shed light on the intricate dynamics of a family unit consisting of the father, the mother, and the protagonist himself. From there onwards, we examine the emotional issues that have been transmitted from the parents to the child which eventually cause him to resort to emotional cutoff. This analysis offers insights into the complexities of human relationships where it begins from home. According to Ogan et al. (2004), family-of-origin systems affect the emotional well-being of children and the findings in their study have shown that conflicts within one's family of origin negatively impact the ability of the children to maintain their romantic relationships due to increased emotional dysregulation. Bowen's Family System Theory emphasises the importance of addressing family issues and this has been supported by Józefczyk's (2023) study in which she confirms by highlighting this helps to improve social functioning among younger generations.

The themes and issues explored in this story resonate with this concept of shifting dynamics within a family unit. BFST understands the importance of a family unit in shaping the broader systems that influence human emotions, thoughts, and behaviours. While the social context in which this theory originated may differ from the backdrop of the selected novel, Bowen (1978) and Albom (2006) share similar attitudes towards problematic American families and their social functions. This study aligns with Alzoubi's (2016) perspective which suggests that BFST serves as a valuable tool for analysing modern American literature.

1.1. Research Objectives

We aim to achieve three objectives:

- i. To explore the manifestations of emotional dynamics between Charles and his parents through an analysis of their interactions and relationships.
- ii. To investigate the influence of parental anxieties on Charles' development and behaviour.
- iii. To examine Charles' coping mechanisms and strategies in managing his unresolved emotional issues within the familial context.

2. Literature Review

This section is divided into two parts. Firstly, we compile our readings on Albom's (n.d.) literary works, navigating into a wealth of critical analyses from diverse viewpoints. Our objective here is to unearth the overlooked and less explored facets of Albom's works, which have yet to receive substantial attention in contemporary scholarship. The discussions aim to contextualise the analysis of his works by synthesising existing research to fill in the gap specifically on the interplay between characters and their family context in Albom's (2006) selected novel. Secondly, we examine the reputation of Bowen's family systems theory (BFST) in literary analysis and address the observed shortcomings in the existing literature.

The novel, *For One More Day*, has been approached from diverse viewpoints, leading to multiple interpretations that offer insights into the intricate nature of human behaviours and relationships within familial context. A child affected by a broken home is one of the main themes explored in this novel. Studies have shown that the voices of these children are missing in policies and decision-making processes at the national level. [Chiok \(2015\)](#) wrote in *Aliran* and shared her perspective as one of the many Malaysian children affected by the absence of one or both parents in their lives. These children are often becoming the victims of violent crime and most significantly, as shown in [Albom's \(2006\)](#) novel, they contend with serious behavioural issues stemming from the traumas of their past. Chick's intimate relationship with his wife and daughter was also impacted by the unresolved emotional issues that he had with his parents. [Mutiarra \(2018\)](#) and [Aulia \(2021\)](#) delve into this theme through a psychoanalytic lens, uncovering that Chick harbours a fragile parent-child bond, with limited emotional attachments to one of his parents. Their relationships are constructed primarily around the parents' interests or desires, leading Chick to disconnect when his desires diverge from those of his parents. Divorce often diminishes children's ability to effectively navigate and resolve conflicts and this is particularly visible in Chick's character's development in this story ([Mutiarra, 2018](#)). Despite going through bad episodes in different phases of his life from childhood to adulthood, Chick's resilience enabled him to effectively cope with the challenges posed by his parent's divorce ([Nindy, 2019](#)).

Meanwhile, [Bobi \(2021\)](#) views the novel from the concept of absurdity introduced by Albert Camus, delineating that the story propels readers into a realm of existence and believing in the impossible. [Annisa \(2016\)](#) employs a descriptive qualitative method rooted in Sigmund Freud's theory to discern the psychological conflicts and moral values encountered by Chick Benetto. Her findings reveal that the conflicts are primarily characterized by the dominance of the Id during which he grapples with the tensions caused by his parents' divorce, illness, depression, and anger towards himself. The Id reactions are manifested through various negative behaviours. [Albom \(2013\)](#) has also explored other genres in his works such as magical realism in *The First Phone Call from Heaven* but once again, he portrays the roles of familial contexts in shaping the characters' acceptance and rejections of the magic phone calls that they received from their loved ones in heaven. However, this novel has been viewed from the perspective of memory to understand the characters' behaviours and their sense of self in that particular situation ([Rosmah, 2016](#)). Memory transports the characters to the past and simultaneously constructs the characters' perceptions of their reality. In [Rosmah's \(2016\)](#) words, the characters' emotional bonds of the past exert a profound impact on individuals, influencing them both physically and emotionally.

[Satri's \(2021\)](#) research did not delve into the characters and the development of their human behaviours but using the stylistic approach, she focuses on the allegory's strategy based on the theory of Allegory by Dante Alighieri to explore the author's strategy in delivering the message on *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Similarly, [Suganthi and Dhanalakshmi \(2021\)](#) use semantics through stylistics where they provide simple definitions of analepsis, anaphora, prolepsis, aposiopesis, epizeuxis and many others to analyse six of his novels. Their findings underscore the significance of employing this stylistic approach as it illuminates multiple layers of meaning with Albom's narrative, thereby enhancing its effectiveness, and facilitating deeper understanding. He is also seen as the writer who rebuilt the shattered idea of the American Dream that once prospered in *Epic of America*. From [Verma's \(2019\)](#) point of view, she sees that Albom's works,

specifically *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* and *The Time Keeper*, revived the “long lost faith and the optimistic spirit of American Dream”. In these selected novels, Verma (2019) finds that Albom’s inspirational writings revitalize and heal his readers on the complexities of life, death, and beyond, in his beautiful portrayals of magic and reality. Valdez (2014) identifies events and situations that exemplify how agape is manifested in *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* and *Tuesdays with Morrie*. In her findings, the concept of agape takes a profound philosophical significance, as it unveils the spiritual manifestations of human existence and explores themes of love, truth, and the journey towards understanding. His novels inspire Filipinos to rethink and review their values in life (Valdez, 2014) and at the same time provide pedagogical values to strengthen teachers’ and students’ relationships beyond the classroom settings (Dian & Mia, 2022).

Having explored the nuances of the critical discussions surrounding Albom’s works, it is now imperative to delve into a comprehensive review of the selected theory. By grounding our analysis into Bowen’s family systems theory (BFST) and its framework, we aim to elucidate deeper insights into the themes and motifs present in the literature, shedding light on the dynamics at play. Bowen (1978) developed this theory within a specific cultural backdrop of post-World War II. Prompted by his observations that his patients’ recovery was not consistently sustained within their home environments, he understood that the family unit is interrelated in the functioning of human behaviours and emotions. This social context has similarly been portrayed in Tennessee Williams’ dramas, exploring the changing and weakening family institutions in post-World War II America. Alzoubi’s (2016) study offers a deeper understanding of the American situations and their family functions as portrayed in Williams’ dramas. She argues that the collective functioning of family members serves as a determinant for either the harmonious emotional and functional integration or the breakdown of components within the system. Likewise, the portrayal of the deterioration and disintegration of the American family unit in Christopher Durang’s family-centred playwrights reaffirms the reality of 20th-century America. In Shereen’s (2019) discussion, Durang employs bitter satire, utilizing various language and literary tools such as irony, exaggeration, understatement, and parody to illustrate how families struggle to confront the challenges of the era, leading to individual and familial suffering and dysfunction. Her justifications for using this theory lie in its interdisciplinary nature and its potential to answer her research questions to interpret the behavioural patterns of the characters in the selected texts. In her findings, both plays adhere to Bowen’s (1978) behavioural patterns, showing the correlation between dysfunctional parents and the subsequent emergence of a dysfunctional generation.

Deng et al. (2023) have applied BFST to explore the father-daughter relationship in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* by focusing on five selected concepts namely, the differentiation of self, the nuclear family emotional system, the emotional triangle, the family projection process, and societal regression. Their findings show that this theory provides a relatively objective and scientifically grounded framework for understanding dysfunctional family dynamics to justify the factors leading to certain problems in individuals. With this in mind, it becomes clear that to explore the theme of family disintegration in this selected novel, Bowen’s (1978) theory provides a paradigm for understanding the character’s emotional illness and social acting-out problems. While the problematic relationship in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* was caused by societal factors, such as humanism, feudalism, and patriarchy (Deng et al., 2023), Albom’s (2006) *For One More Day* portrays the conditions of the broken living system in a modern American familial context. Bowen’s (1978) theory emphasises family and its overall functioning

members which provide a certain degree of stability and instability. This is in line with our objectives of examining the whole family's emotional system, rather than focusing on one single character in the story.

It is evident in the works above where psychological literary criticism takes precedence for the analysis of the characters in most of Albom's works. While character analysis remains the predominant focus in existing studies, it is essential to broaden our scope to encompass a more comprehensive examination through a different perspective. Previous studies that used Freud's psychoanalytic theory, such as [Mutiarra \(2018\)](#) and [Aulia \(2021\)](#), only deal with an individual's behaviour which is largely influenced by unconscious rather than conscious forces. This study, on the other hand, expands the discussion and moves on to use other models to incorporate contemporary psychological thinking to pose new and fascinating questions. [Bowen's \(1978\)](#) theory has earned a good standing for its application within the literary discipline. This study contributes to the existing scholarship and expands its discussion in different genres.

3. Research Methods

This study employs textual analysis and close reading techniques to coherently interpret the chosen literary text. Drawing upon the Bowen family systems theory (BFST), it guides the reading by delving into the dynamics of a parent-child relationship mainly to understand the child's (protagonist) physical, emotional and social development. The theory centres around the study of the family as an emotionally interrelated system, delineating the unit's complex interactions that intensely affect human behaviours, thoughts, emotions, and actions. It also revolves around differentiation of self and emotional fusion, emphasizing the individual's capacity to separate themselves from their family of origin both personally and intellectually ([Bowen, 1978](#)). This theory understands that members of the family function and behave unitedly. The circle and system in the family construct the way each member shapes and organizes their feelings, thoughts, and functions. [Bowen \(1978\)](#), a psychiatrist, formulated this theory and its eight interconnected concepts namely 1. Triangles, 2. Differentiation of self, 3. Nuclear family emotional process, 4. Family projection process, 5. Multigenerational transmission process, 6. Sibling position, 7. Emotional cutoff and 8. Emotional process in society or societal regression. Due to the limited space here, we are not providing an exhaustive explanation of the eight interlocking concepts or using all of them in our analysis. For this study, we will be focusing only on the three concepts; triangles, family projection process, and emotional cutoff to examine Charles Benetto's relationship with his parents. We address three questions to navigate our reading process:

- i. How do the emotional dynamics between Charles and his parents manifest in their interactions and relationships?
- ii. How do parental anxieties impact the development and behaviour of the children, specifically between Charles and his parents, and Charles and his daughter?
- iii. How does Charles manage his unresolved emotional issues?

We apply the concept of triangles to answer the first question. Triangles is one of the earliest concepts he introduced which refers to the smallest relationship system in families ([Haefner, 2014](#)). [Hall \(1981\)](#) explains when there is tension between two members of the family, the third member balances the dynamics and alleviates the stress between them. This concept is addressed in this study as it is crucial not to omit

the roles of both father and mother in shaping “Chick” Benetto’s life in this story. [Bowen \(1978\)](#) formulates that when the tension is diffused by the third person, it creates ‘an odd man out’. As the triangle shifts between dyads, it often leaves one person as the outsider. In this case, we are looking at the common pattern of the father-mother-child triangle where tension exists between the parents, resulting in Charles’s unhealthy communication patterns and relationships with one of the parents. In some circumstances, it stabilizes the family system but, in most cases, it can damage the relationships between all three individuals because they do not address the root cause of the tension.

The process through which parents transmit their emotional issues to their children is known as the family projection process. The previous concept focuses on the dynamics of the relationships in the family unit involving the protagonist and his parents. This concept, by contrast, illuminates how Chick develops symptoms when he is caught up in his parents’ anxiety about relationships. [Bowen \(1978\)](#) perceives traumatic events as significant in revealing underlying family processes, rather than directly causing them. [Hall \(1981\)](#) describes it as:

[A] mechanism through which parents transmit a substantial amount of their own emotional immaturity to a child. Immaturity is a component of the undifferentiation of fusion of the parents who use this adaptive mechanism.

This process recognizes impairments in children’s functioning, such as inherited issues that impact their lives. These may include relationship sensitivities, heightened needs for attention and approval, difficulty managing expectations, and impulsive behaviour aimed at alleviating immediate anxiety rather than engaging in thoughtful actions ([The Bowen Center, n.d.](#)). This concept will address the second question by foregrounding Chick’s responses to the anxiety that is primarily centred on his relationship with his mother, Pauline.

Finally, the third concept that we use to answer the third question is emotional cutoff or what [Bowen \(1978\)](#) refers to as “emotional distancing” and [Haefner \(2014\)](#) refers to as “emotional withdrawal” which brings us to understand the disconnection of individuals from their families to manage their unresolved emotional issues. According to [Titelman \(2003\)](#) and [Haefner \(2014\)](#), this concept describes how people use physical or internal emotional distancing as a means to detach themselves from emotional bonds with their parents or their past, facilitating a fresh start in the present. Utilising this concept will help us to identify how Chick manage his unresolved emotional issues with his parents either reducing or cutting off any emotional attachment with them. In this situation, we may be able to understand the tensions in his relationships with his parents and at the same time the risk that he is making in his new relationships.

4. Results

For One More Day is a story of Charles “Chick” Benetto, a man whose life is in shambles. In the depth of his lonely battle, Chick finds himself consumed by alcohol and overwhelmed with regret. His descent into despair reaches its nadir when he learns that his only daughter has excluded him from her wedding. This devastating blow catalyzes his decision to return to his hometown, Pepperville Beach, and end his own life. Following his failed suicide attempt, Chick is granted an opportunity to spend one more day with his deceased mother. The story unfolds through a series of flashbacks, allowing

Chick to revisit the moments of his past. These experiences lead him to uncover long-held family secrets, ultimately illuminating the profound depth of his mother's sacrifices and unconditional love. As he grapples with feelings of regret and guilt, this newfound understanding prompts him to reconnect with his younger self, redeem the love and respect for his mother and rebuild his life by forgiving himself and seeking his mother's forgiveness.

4.1. Triangles

The family unit in this story consists of a father, Leonard Benetto; a mother, Pauline Benetto; and children, Charles "Chick" Benetto and Roberta Benetto. However, in this analysis, we exclude Roberta, Chick's sister, focusing only on the three-person relationship system. The tension between Chick and his parents is sufficient to justify their emotional attachments that are important to the development of their behaviours and thoughts in this narrative. When Leonard and Pauline's relationship becomes unstable, one of them can only withstand a small amount of tension before involving a third person, which is their son, Chick. While this triangle unit provides more stability than a dyad, it also creates a situation where one individual becomes the odd person out. Hence, the anxiety stemming from being the odd person out exerts a significant influence within triangles and this is what we aim to explore ([The Bowen Center, n.d.](#)).

Leonard and Pauline were a loving couple and entered marriage with a foundation built on love. In Chick's descriptions, they are "a blend of background and cultures" drawn to each other ([Albom, 2006](#)). In their divergent personalities, interests, and backgrounds, Leonard assumes the role of the patriarchal figure within the family, wielding his full authority, control, and dominance in Chick's life. Conversely, Pauline, who came from a humble background, demonstrates adaptability and resilience, readily navigating various situations with ease. Chick observes and perceives their distinctiveness in the line below:

Parents slot into postures in a child's mind, and my mother's posture was a lipsticked woman leaning over, wagging a finger, imploring me to be better than I was. My father's posture was a man in repose, shoulders pressed against a wall, holding a cigarette, watching me sink or swim.

In retrospect, I should have made more of the fact that one was leaning toward me and the other was leaning away.

[\(Albom, 2006, p.30\).](#)

Pauline openly expresses her affection, but her inferior position from Leonard's viewpoint has consistently been viewed unfavourably by their son. The images used to describe her behaviours, such as "leaning over" and "wagging a finger" create pressure on Chick and bring the downside to his childhood memories of her mother. He adores her but her actions and affections make him take her for granted ([Albom, 2006, p. 32](#)). Chick finds Leonard's distant stance within this triangular dynamic appealing, and due to that he craves his father's love and attention. In his theory,

Kids chase the love that eludes them, and for me, that was my father's love. He kept it tucked away, like papers in a briefcase. And I kept trying to get in there.

[\(Albom, 2006, p. 32\).](#)

In his justification, the clarity of his mother's love renders him less dependent on her, yet it makes him vulnerable, and anxious, and yearns for his father's attention and affection. Chick's mother provides him stability, but his fear of losing his father leads him to seek reassurance or security from his father, who he perceives as being at risk of leaving or abandoning him. The growing emotional distance from Leonard is balanced by Pauline's over-involvement in Chick's life and well-being. Leonard is in the outside position in this conflict, and Pauline and Chick are in the inside positions. In addition, when there is a high level of tension between Chick and his mother, such as choosing a new activity to do after his parents' divorce, "the outside position becomes the most desirable" (The Bowen Center, n.d.). Chick chooses baseball over others, signalling his inclination towards his father, who currently occupies the outside position (Albom, 2006, p. 60). Leonard is now on the outside of the triangle, placing himself in a more comfortable position. Chick can also be situated on the outside of their dynamic specifically, when Leonard and Pauline fight, he goes to Chick to get feedback. Chick becomes triangulated into the conflict between the two. When tension builds between them, Chick sides with Leonard by agreeing that his mother is the problem in that situation.

The patterns in a triangle may be subject to change with increasing tension. In a scenario where Pauline is happily enjoying her favourite song and encourages Leonard and Chick to join in, Leonard responds with indifference, suggesting that behaviour is neither cool nor impressive. Chick feels torn, as he perceives, "*but since my father wasn't participating, laughter felt like a betrayal*" (Albom, 2006, p. 46). Ultimately, Leonard is the one who betrays his mother. Leonard and Pauline's relationship is unstable, and as a child, Chick acts as the outsider who works his way in to get closer to one of them. In this case, he chooses his father, leaving his mother as being the odd person in this potent force in triangles. Chick has repeated this pattern in many other situations, where he noted specifically the time that he did not stand up for his mother. Even in times of mild to moderate tension between his parents, Chick consistently aligns himself with his father, condescending his mother's efforts, actions, and perspectives.

Hall (1981) mentions in her book that the emotional dynamics in triangles are manifested as members either strive to establish closeness with each other or seek to escape tension (Albom, 2006, p.110). In situations where Pauline is pushed away, Chick does not strive to establish closeness with his mother. Instead, he attempts to evade the tension between them by aligning his emotions and thoughts with his father. However, Hall (1981) continues, that each action taken by a member of a triangle inevitably prompts a compensatory response from another member of the same triangle. The new form of close emotional twosome between the father and child is portrayed in this novel, placing the father in an inside position, and contradicting the common image of modern American families as Hall (1981) perceives in her study. Due to that, when Chick's parents split followed by his father's departure from their home, he made an effort to behave well, hoping that it might lead to his father's return. The involvement of the third person in this three-person relationship system alleviates their anxiety and prompts them to take action, as evidenced by the divorce between Leonard and Pauline. Alternatively, it can also help soothe their intense emotions and encourage reflection, as seen when Chick aligns his preferences with his father's, who now occupies the outsider position. Chick, as the third person in this system is undifferentiated or likely to triangulate others and be triangulated. According to Bowen's (1978) argument on differentiation, individuals with higher levels of differentiation tend to exhibit better

psychological adjustment compared to those with lower levels of differentiation. The latter group tends to experience more psychological and physical problems and symptoms. This is evidenced in Chick's psychological development specifically after his parent's divorce. As someone who has lower levels of differentiation, Chick finds it difficult to uphold a distinct sense of self while also forming intimate connections with others (Bowen, 1978; Lampis et al., 2019). Chick's relationship with his parents greatly influences his emotional responses and shapes his perceptions of himself and others in intimate relationships throughout his adulthood. In the next discussion, we explore these consequences.

4.2. Family Projection Process

Chick's behaviours gradually become problematic or impaired following the divorce. While his parents navigate their relationship dynamics, Chick finds himself confined by the preconceived roles within his relationship with his parents. His father's words echo and make him torn between choosing his father or supporting his mother.

You can be a mama's boy or a daddy's boy, but you can't be both.

(Albom, 2006, p.34).

In Leonard and Pauline's nuclear family, the mechanisms that govern their relationship mirror Alzoubi's (2018) findings in Tennessee William's *Period of Adjustment*, where both couples exhibit distance and dysfunction in one spouse. Leonard is the dominant spouse and Pauline is the adaptive underfunctioning one who eventually shifts to be the responsible dominant one after the divorce. From the beginning, both Leonard and Pauline encounter emotional distances from the way they live their daily life to their parenting styles. Due to this, Chick's behaviours can be explained in twofold. Firstly, Chick's upbringing has been significantly shaped by his father's parenting and secondly, his psychological problems stem from his parents' unresolved emotional conflicts. This corresponds with the concept which describes that parents transmit their emotional problems to their children or parental projection when they project negative traits onto their children. While his mother remains influential in many aspects of his life before and after the divorce, his father's influence ultimately outweighs hers. Consequently, in many situations, he has grown accustomed to prioritizing his father over his mother or diminishing her significance in order to seek his father's affection and validation. This is evidenced in the two scenarios below:

First scenario:

After the war, my father, who owned a liquor store, was more interested in profits and prophecies. And when it came to me, the only thing I had to worship was baseball. He was pitching to me before I could walk. He gave me a wooden bat before my mother let me use scissors. He said I could make the major leagues one day if I had "a plan", and if I "stuck to the plan".

Of course, when you're that young, you nest in your parents' plans, not your own.

My mother, on the other hand, didn't care for baseball... In her mind, for me, there were only books and college and the gates they would open. The best she could say about baseball was that it "gets you some fresh air".

But she showed up... Sometimes I would peek at her from inside the dugout, and she'd be looking off over the horizon. But when I came to bat, she clapped and yelled, "Yaaay, Charley!" and I guess that's all I cared about. My father, who coached every single team I played on up to the day he split, once caught me looking her way and hollered, "Eyes on the ball, Chick! There's nothing up there that's gonna help you!" Mom, I guess, wasn't part of "the plan".

(Albom, 2006, pp. 31-32)

This scene shows that Leonard and Pauline both project their self-fulfilling prophecy on their son. They assess their child's abilities according to their own needs and based on their backgrounds. In this story, Leonard believes Chick has a brighter future in baseball, while Pauline repeatedly emphasises the importance of studying. However, because his father's influence holds more weight than his mother's, Chick's self-esteem grows dependent on his father's affirmation. Both Leonard and Pauline participate equally in this family projection process but in different ways. In the scenario described, his father exudes confidence in his decisions, while his mother acquiesces and follows the plan despite, she is always excluded from this plan. This finding coincides with [Alzoubi's \(2018\)](#) argument that the "counterbalancing reciprocal functioning" and "emotional complementarity" contribute to the harmony in the relationship. Pauline plays a significant role in maintaining harmony within the relationship, despite occupying a subordinate position within the family dynamic.

However, in the second scenario, we could identify that the reciprocal functioning between Pauline and Leonard indicates that Leonard is tenacious and intolerable while Pauline is submissive and wields her limited energy on her house and family. In times of calmness, their dynamics contribute to stabilizing their relationship. During periods of heightened levels of stress, their distinct levels of differentiation disrupt this dynamic and contribute to dysfunctionality.

Second Scenario:

"Acch," my mother gasps, lowering my sister's fork. "Stop that, Roberta. You know what, Len? Make it yourself next time. You and this whole Italian cooking thing. Charley, eat!"
My father sneers and shakes his head. "Same old story," he grouses. I am watching him. He sees me. I quickly put a forkful in my mouth. He motions with his chin.
"What do you think of the ziti your mother made?" he says.
I chew. I swallow. I look at him. I look at my mother. She drops her shoulders in exasperation. Now they are both waiting.
"It's not right," I mumble, looking at my father.
He snorts and shoots my mother a look.
"Even the kid knows", he says.

(Albom, 2006, p. 54)

This scene shows his father's ability to exert power and authority in shaping Chick's thoughts and decisions. While Pauline may be the problematic one here, this scenario shows otherwise, highlighting how Leonard projects negative introjections onto his son. Instead of teaching his son to respect his mother and develop his sense of personal opinion, Leonard perceives his son as an opportunity to claim his authority or validate

his emotions. As [Hall \(1981\)](#) indicates, “parents transmit a substantial amount of their own emotional immaturity to a child” ([Hall, 1981](#)). This is the characteristic of low differentiation that has been slowly transmitted to the next generation. Consequently, Chick develops psychological dysfunction.

In this story, [Albom \(2006\)](#) portrays his protagonist as the one who is most emotionally attached to his parents as compared to his sister, Roberta. Chick’s relationship with both parents can be characterised, borrowing from [Hall’s \(1981\)](#) descriptions, as “overt closeness” and “intense repulsion”. His relationship with his father exhibits overt closeness, despite his absence after the divorce. Conversely, his relationship with his mother can be seen as intense repulsion, marked by conflicting worldviews and numerous disagreements. The evidence for these dynamics can be seen in the following two scenes.

First Scenario:

*And even as we stood there forcing our smiles, I was picturing my swing.
I tried to focus. I tried to wrap my mother’s birthday party around me. But
my father, a thief in many ways, had robbed me of my concentration.
Before the paper plates were tossed, I was down in the basement, on the
phone, booking the last plane out.*

[\(Albom, 2006, pp. 160-161\)](#)

This scene illustrates how Chick finds himself caught in a situation where he must choose between his father and mother. Despite having his own life and career to attend to, his father holds significant sway over his decisions and trajectory in baseball, making him vulnerable and indecisive in that intense moment. Consequently, he lied to everyone, especially to his mother during her birthday.

Continuation from the first Scenario:

*I had to lie to everyone there. It wasn’t hard.
I faked the return phone call. Faked my dismay. Faked a story about
having to fly to a client who could only do the meeting on a Sunday, and
wasn’t it awful?*

[\(Albom, 2006, pp. 160-161\)](#)

As the focused child in this triangular relationship, Chick becomes enmeshed in this family projection process and ultimately resorts to lying and deceiving in order to appease one of the parents. Chick, who had previously disregarded his mother, now finds himself having to rely on her as his father becomes distant and dysfunctional within this broken family unit. Leonard’s role is to support Chick’s emotional dysregulation during this intense period, but he withdraws from that position, leaving Pauline to carry the burden and responsibility alone. According to [Papero \(1990\)](#), the dysfunctionality of the parents as a unit results in the involvement of the child in the emotional dynamics between them. Chick has been affected and emotionally impaired by this separation. On one occasion, Pauline projects her anxiety and emotional dysfunction on Chick,

Second Scenario:

I couldn't understand why they were giving me food. But it wasn't like you said "no thanks" to a nun. So I took the trays and walked them home, figuring my mother must have ordered them special.

"What's that?" she asked when I entered the house.

"The nuns gave it to me."

She pulled back the wax paper. She sniffed.

"Did you ask for this?"

"Nuh-uh. I was playing catch."

"You didn't ask for this?"

"No."

"Because we don't need food, Charley. We don't need handouts, if that's what you think."

I got defensive. I didn't really understand "handout," but I could tell it meant something that didn't get handed out to everyone.

"I didn't ask for it!" I protested, "I don't even like green beans!"

We looked at each other.

"It's not my fault," I said.

She relieved me of the trays and dumped them in the sink. She mashed the meat loaf into the garbage dispenser with a large spoon. She did the same with the green beans. She moved so feverishly I couldn't take my eyes off of her, pounding all that food down that small round hole.

(Albom, 2006, pp. 65-66)

This scenario suggests that Pauline has inadvertently passed on her emotional struggles to her son. While Chick was too young to comprehend the peculiar situation happening around him, Pauline exacerbated matters by acting impulsively to relieve her anxiety in the moment, rather than approaching the situation thoughtfully. She should have responded more wisely when Chick brought the food home, instead her actions may potentially heightened Chick's vulnerability to symptoms that can be seen in subsequent chapters.

4.3. Emotional Cutoff

Chick's anxiety about himself and the family relationship system reaches its peak following the day he left home to pursue baseball, only to discover upon his return that his mother passed away in front of his daughter. The guilt of knowing that he lied for the sake of his distant father, leading to the death of his mother (Albom, 2006, p.177), intensifies the existing anxiety within him even further. In dealing with the demands of both his parents and their strong reliance on him, Chick finds himself struggling to strike a balance between the two, thereby unable to effectively manage that need. Concurrently, Hall (1981) mentions that choosing to distance themselves emotionally and geographically from the source of anxiety is perceived as the easiest and most effective way to cope with the intensity and demands of their interdependency. In the excerpt below, Chick shows the signs of his emotional cut-off:

I think from that point on, it was hard for me to face my daughter or my wife. I think that's why I drank so much. I think that's why I whimpered off into another life, because deep down I didn't feel that I deserved the old one anymore. I ran away. In that manner, I suppose, my father and I were sadly parallel.

(Albom, 2006, p. 185)

Chick finds that succumbing to alcohol and transforming himself into a different person is a way for him to distance himself from the guilt and most importantly, from his family. Apart from that, he also alienates his own family, causing them to turn their backs on him,

"I fell apart..... Catherine's gone, Mom. I drove her away.... Maria, I'm not even in her life.... She's married.... I wasn't even there.... I'm an outsider now.... I'm an outsider to everything I love..."

(Albom, 2006, p. 187)

In Hall's (1981) justification, when a parent generation severs ties with the grandparent generation, there is a strong probability that the children of these parents will also sever ties. Hypothetically, when Chicks distances himself from his parents, the more likely his daughter to sever the relationship with him. This can be seen in Chick's situation where his daughter did not invite him to her wedding. As a father, he no longer has a place in his daughter's new family unit.

"I wanted it to stop, Mom... this anger, this guilt. That's why... I wanted to die..."

I lifted my eyes, and, for the first time, admitted the truth.

"I gave up," I whispered.

(Albom, 2006, p. 187)

Death represents the ultimate emotional withdrawal, as noted by Hall (1981). Chick has reached a breaking point of anxiety, triggered by a series of events beginning with his parents' divorce, followed by his mother's death, and culminating in his daughter's decision to sever ties with him. But he is lucky enough, instead of death he was given a chance to meet his mother and change his life once again. Emotional cut-off provides temporary relief from the intense anxiety. For Chick, he nearly succumbs to this extreme condition. Ultimately, he discovers a resolution to the conflicts and a means to free himself from the deep-seated guilt that has plagued him. One day that was given to him to spend with his mother reveals the answers to all his questions. He finally finds peace amidst the turmoil. In his words,

I feel ashamed now that I tried to take my life. It is such a precious thing. I had no one to talk me out of my despair, and that was a mistake. You need to keep people close. You need to give them access to your heart.

(Albom, 2006, pp. 193-194)

In Chick's situation, this withdrawal does not pave the way for a new beginning; instead, it culminates in premature death. He resorts to an emotional cut-off as a means to punish himself for the guilt and intense emotional anxiety that has been festering since the divorce. Chick's unresolved attachment to his parents manifests in various forms. Firstly, he relies on his father to make decisions about his future in baseball despite knowing the uncertainties that lie ahead. Secondly, he seeks greater contact with his absent and distant father to resolve the missing parts of his life following the divorce, and finally, he feels enraged when his mother fails to validate his needs and desires, despite knowing her difficult situations. In short, the dynamics between parents and

child in this story highlight the complexity and the undue burden placed on the child when forced to choose between parents.

5. Conclusion

Bowen's theory offers a scientifically grounded framework for studying dysfunctional family dynamics and elucidating the factors contributing to individual problems. Through this lens, it becomes clear that BFST provides a valuable paradigm for exploring these themes in this selected text. The dysfunctional family system in [Albom's \(2006\) *For One More Day*](#) is influenced by the interdependency between Leonard - Pauline, and Chick. Parents depend on children to fulfil their needs and desires, and children depend on parents for attention and affection. In the dynamics portrayed in this story, the interdependence between parents and child is evident. Leonard seeks fulfilment of his needs and desires through his son, while Pauline relies on both her husband and son for validation and affection. When she lost her husband, her only attention was solely on her children. Despite receiving love from his mother, Chick still yearns for his father's affection and consequently neglects his mother. The unresolved childhood trauma following the divorce has impacted Chick's life such as in making various decisions specifically one that appeals to his father's preferences and his relationship with his wife and daughter. Leonard's character is significant in separating and uniting Pauline, Chick, and the Italian woman (mentioned as Leonard's first wife), leading them to finally find some closure to the unresolved emotional problems that they had with each other. BFST sheds light on this dynamic relationship, making us understand that it is not just about identifying the cause of the problems but more about resolving the problems and finding solace through a proper closure to the unresolved trauma within the familial context.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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