

# Grief Morphs into Fear: The Role of Greek Mythology in Alex Michaelides “*The Maidens*”

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores how ancient Greek myths influence character development and thematic outline in Alex Michaelides's novel, The Maidens. The paper delves into the psychological and mythological perspectives of the narrative, exploring how grief transforms into fear. The Novel explores dark academia, highlighting the complexities of obsession, trauma, and the intricacies of the human psyche. My research focuses on the character of Mariana Andros, a group therapist who gets involved in a series of murders at the University of Cambridge, where her unresolved grief evolves into pervasive fear and is a reflection of internal conflicts with acceptance and residual effects of past relationships. The investigation of murders highlights the transformative power of grief, which brings to light its intricate connection with the darker aspects of the human psyche and the relevance of mythological narratives in contemporary literature. This psychological journey shows how Michaelides textures mythological references, particularly the myth of Persephone, to enrich the novel with multifaceted thematic layers.*

**Keywords:** *Transformation, Unresolved Grief, Pervasive Fear, Trauma, Obsession, human psyche, Greek Mythology*

*“Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape.”*

(Lewis, 1961)

The journey through grief is painful but can lead to personal growth and self-discovery. It allows individuals to confront their emotions, better understand their values, and develop empathy for others. Despite its challenges, this process often fosters a deeper appreciation for relationships and resilience, ultimately providing new insights into oneself and the world. In the final chapter of *A Grief Observed*, Lewis describes grief as “a long valley” where each bend may reveal a new landscape. Mourning can make happiness feel elusive, but over time, the pain eases, much like the warming of a room or the arrival of daylight (Kincaid, 2012). The severe

pain of grieving fades; this pain may be replaced by fear: fear of moving on, forgetting, or facing life without the person or thing that was lost. The valley of grief represents an emotional journey after loss, marked by various feelings such as sadness, anger, and guilt. This journey is nonlinear, often leading to disruptions in daily life, strained relationships, and health issues. However, this journey also offers opportunities for healing and personal growth. As individuals process their grief, they can develop coping strategies, strengthen connections with others, and find moments of joy amid sorrow. Ultimately, the transformative experience deepens self-understanding and can lead to acceptance, resilience, and new possibilities. Lewis observed that even after reaching new levels of understanding or acceptance, there may be times when one feels like they have been put back (Analysis on A Grief Observed, 2024). Throughout the novel, Mariana Andros, a group therapist, enters into a string of murders and homicides at Cambridge University. In the process of her psychological journey, she undergoes a nonlinear grieving process filled with twists and turns that challenge her in many ways throughout her experiences. She passes through denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and, at last, acceptance. As she digs further into the case, Mariana senses the looming dangers of the murderer trailing behind her and also the inner demons of grief and fear she undergoes. Additionally, Greek mythology intertwines deeply and complexly in *The Maidens*. Alex Michaelides weaves cultural knowledge from Cyprus into a timeless story filled with mythological references, particularly the myth of Persephone, which explores the characters' psychological states, motivations, and fears.

Mariana Andros's Grief

Mariana's grief stems from the loss of her husband, Sebastian. Alongside her mourning, she becomes

entangled in the mysterious murders of a group of students known as the 'Secret Society,' which Professor Fosca refers to as 'Maidens'. This investigation leads Mariana to uncover the truth while deepening her grief. She knew Sebastian was not the man she loved; she recognized the need to renounce him, but her love for Sebastian persisted. When Mariana is at home, she is surrounded by boxes containing Sebastian's belongings. One box, which holds a pair of shoes, symbolises her grief. She tried to get rid of it, but it was impossible. She states, "*Parting with them would be an act of self-harm, like pressing a knife to her arm and slicing off a sliver of skin.*" (Michaelides, 2021, p. 6). She felt life was "*muted and grey and far away – behind a mist of sadness.*" (Michaelides, 2021, p. 7) This feeling stemmed from her obsession with his possessions.

In Freud's essay (Mourning and Melancholia, 1917), he examines two different responses to loss, specifically mourning and melancholia. Mourning is a conscious process where the individual gradually comes to terms with the loss of a loved one. At the same time, Melancholia is an unconscious process where the individual cannot fully comprehend or identify the loss, often leading to pathological symptoms. Unresolved grief can often lead to more profound psychological disturbances, as Freud emphasizes that "grief is a process of detaching from the lost object (in this case, a loved one). When this process is incomplete, it can lead to melancholia, where the individual's ego becomes overwhelmed with self-reproach and irrational guilt. In melancholia, the ego feels hunted by the super-ego, leading to feelings of fear and worthlessness, which can be projected outward." (Mourning and Melancholia, 1917) Mariana Andros is grieving for her husband, Sebastian, who died a year ago, and she is aware of her loss as she actively reflects on it. Her interactions with Henry and the way she addresses others, such as Fred and Julian, indicate that she is processing her grief. However, there is still something haunting that does allude to melancholia. Mariana's reflection on the multiple tragedies she and Zoe have faced—her mother's death, her sister and brother-in-law's car accident, her father's heart attack, and Sebastian's drowning—indicate a profound and pervasive sense of loss.

Mariana's life is profoundly affected by the accumulation of grief, as each tragedy adds layers of emotional weight that create fear and vulnerability, making it difficult for her to process her emotions; this ongoing struggle can lead to melancholia,

trapping her in a cycle of sorrow and hindering her ability to find closure or solace amidst the pain. Mariana's involvement in the inquiry into Tara's death intensifies her emotional struggle as she urges Zoe to report to the police and investigate Edward Fosca, attempting to regain control amid chaos. This situation reflects Freud's theory that melancholia arises from an inability to process loss. Overall, Mariana embodies the complexity of melancholy and mourning as she grapples with unresolved grief while actively grieving for Sebastian. Mariana's investigation into Tara's murder reveals her deep grief and quest for understanding.

Her suspicion towards Fosca and others, coupled with a heightened emotional reaction at the conclusion, indicates a melancholic state where she internalises the trauma. This is evident when she becomes paranoid after Fred mentions Naxos, feeling threatened. During dinner with Fosca, discovering an underlined passage in "Iphigenia" symbolises her obsession with loss and her desire to find someone to blame. Her argument and violent outburst suggest she is projecting her inner turmoil onto Fosca, a common aspect of melancholia where self-reproach is directed at others. Mariana's initial belief that the letter comes from Fosca represents her attempt to externalize her grief and confusion, a typical response during mourning. However, at the climax of the novel, Zoe reveals the truth about Sebastian's betrayal and his involvement in her father's murder, and Mariana's grief shifts towards melancholia. "The danger that arises to someone when a love object is 'lost'—through death, or betrayal, or disappointment—is not primarily the loss of that particular person or institution or ideal; the danger is to the person's sense of himself, which depends on his sense of an ongoing internal attachment to his loved object" (Mourning and Melancholia, 1917). Mariana experiences a deep sense of loss and self-doubt as a result of internalising the betrayal and learning that her trusted husband was planning an attack on her. She is initially in a conscious state of mourning, attempting to understand the shock and sadness of losing her spouse and the life she had assumed. This is evident when she is completely shocked by the truth about Sebastian being a money digger and refuses to speak to Zoe, indicating her struggle to come to terms with the betrayal and the subsequent loss of her perceived reality. Mariana's ego plays a crucial role in this narrative, particularly in the revelation of Sebastian's betrayal, which initially shatters Mariana's sense of self. "In melancholia, it is the ego itself." (Freud,

1917). However, she gradually begins to rebuild her sense of self, as evident when she visits Fred and thanks him for saving her life. This indicates a movement towards acceptance and the reformation of her ego.

#### Mariana's Grief: An Application of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Five Stages

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, born in 1926 in Zurich, Switzerland, completed medical school before the University of Chicago recruited her in 1965, where she interviewed 400 terminally ill patients in front of 40-50 theological and medical students, psychiatry residents, nurses, social workers, and attending psychiatrists. As a result of the interviews, Kübler-Ross developed her famous, influential publication *On Death and Dying* (Kosminsky, 2022). In it, she outlined her five stages of grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Grief can manifest in various ways, including physiological symptoms like disrupted sleep and appetite, as well as emotional states such as sadness, anger, and even guilt. The experience of grief is highly individual, and people may go through different stages, such as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. "The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again, but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to." (Kübler-Ross, 1969)

**Denial:** Sebastian's disappearance begins with shock and fear of losing him. "*No, stop, stop - she had to focus, she had to concentrate, she had to find him. Where was he? He couldn't possibly have gone swimming - not in this weather. He never would have been so stupid.*" (Michaelides, 2021, p. 48). This reaction captures Mariana's refusal to accept the possibility that Sebastian might have gone swimming and met with an accident, in spite of the evidence suggesting otherwise. Her mind is trying to reject the reality of the situation, which is a common reaction in the denial stage of grief.

**Anger:** After Sebastian's death, Mariana was Numb. She remained in a state of shock, unable to accept or believe it. "*Like a dam breaking, all her tears came rushing forth, a waterfall of grief.*" (Michaelides, 2021, p. 75) The anger is complex and deeply rooted in her grief. Mariana blames herself and Sebastian,

perceiving his reckless behaviour—swimming in dangerous weather—as the cause of his untimely death. Her anger arises from feeling betrayed, as she believes his carelessness has undermined the trust she placed in him. This belief intensifies Mariana's self-blame; she wishes they had remained in London rather than going to Naxos, thinking it might have saved him. She feels that Sebastian disregards both his life and hers, deepening her turmoil. Thus, Mariana's anger is a painful mix of betrayal, self-blame, and frustration, marking a critical stage in her grief.

**Bargaining:** Mariana's interest in the case may stem from her quest for justice to make sense of her loss. Her interactions with Clarissa highlight her inner conflict between professional duties in London and the emotional pull of her past at St Christopher's. When Clarissa asks her to stay a few days for college, Mariana's response reveals her struggle to cope with Sebastian's loss while wanting to remain connected to familiar people and places. Mariana states, "*I don't see how I can help. I'm a psychotherapist, not a detective*" (Michaelides, 2021, p. 84) underscores her unwillingness and the boundaries she tries to set. However, Clarissa's gentle probing about how it feels to be there without Sebastian brings Mariana's unresolved grief to the surface. Her admission, "*I don't know how it feels*" (Michaelides, 2021, p. 84), highlights her struggle to process emotions and her internal bargaining for control in the wake of loss. This interaction illustrates the bargaining stage of grief as Mariana attempts to reconcile her professional identity with her pain. To cope, she immerses herself in work and the investigation into the murders at Cambridge University; this way, she temporarily escapes or avoids dealing with her emotional pain and grief.

**Depression:** Mariana's journey highlights key aspects of depression. Her world feels "muted and grey," reflecting a constant state of sadness and emotional numbness. Her urge to "hide from the world" and isolate herself at work and home suggests withdrawal from social interactions. Struggling to accept the loss of a loved one is crucial; failure to do so can lead to "pathological mourning," as Freud described, a precursor to depression. The phrase "behind the veil" symbolizes the barrier between Mariana and the vibrant world she once knew, effectively illustrating how depression isolates and obscures. Her inability to move beyond her feelings

for the deceased Sebastian highlights the impact of unresolved grief on mental health.

Acceptance: "Grief is like an unkempt beggar." (Oberman, 2024) Grief lingers at the edges of our existence, demanding to be felt and expressed. It reveals the depth of love and loss experienced. For Mariana, grappling with her husband Sebastian's death is challenging. Despite her efforts to accept reality, she remains deeply affected by his absence. She seeks solace in her work and relationships, yet her journey towards understanding and confronting her grief is complex and ongoing. In the beginning of the novel, chapter 1, Mariana is entrenched in denial, holding onto Sebastian's belongings and memories. Her home is filled with his possessions, and letting go feels like a symbolic death of their love. *"She couldn't throw away his possessions – by holding on to them, she could keep Sebastian alive, somehow, just a little bit – if she let go, she'd lose him entirely."* (Michaelides, 2021, p. 6) This resistance to accepting his death anchors her in the past, making it difficult for her to move forward. Grief is a complex, fluctuating process that is not straightforward. (Harmon, 2013). Mariana's involvement in the murder investigation distracts her from confronting her emotions. In the end, she starts to realise that clinging to the past is preventing her from living. Her acceptance of Sebastian's death is gradual, intertwined with the trauma of the investigation. Only by facing the truth about her relationships and her circumstances can she acknowledge that Sebastian is truly gone and that she must step out of his shadow.

#### Grief as a Catalyst for Fear

*"No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear."*  
(Lewis, 1961)

Aristotle defines fear as *"a kind of pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future."* (Aristotle, On Fear, 2017). Aristotle's concept of fear as a 'mental picture' suggests that grief creates vivid and painful images in the mind, often centred on death, loneliness, or future suffering. After a significant loss, the mind fixates on what might happen next, imagining potential threats and pain, whether from living without a loved one or facing more heartbreak. This fear is fuelled by uncertainty about the future, leading to imagined scenarios filled with sorrow and loss. Many who grieve experience a common fear of enduring further loss or emotional collapse, making the pain of grief feel inescapable. In one passage in

the novel, Mariana's reflection on Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem, *The Vision of Sin*, "Tell me tales of thy first love— April hopes, the fools of chance; Till the graves begin to move, And the dead begin to dance" (Selection from the Works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson). This reflection mirrors her grief for Sebastian, transforming her sadness into a determination to "fight" against the professor, Fosca, who is seen as an external enemy. This shift from mourning into action illustrates how her unresolved grief morphs into an outwardly directed fear and obsession. Mariana's inability to fully process her loss traps her in a cycle of anxiety and paranoia, which are defence mechanisms against more profound emotional pain. In (Obsessions and Phobias, 1895 (1894)) Freud notes that fear can arise from internal processes like melancholia, where the ego feels threatened by unresolved conflicts. Mariana's journey, intertwined with Greek mythology and psychological turmoil, highlights her struggles with grief, fear, and identity. Her unresolved grief transforms into paranoia, especially in her suspicion that Professor Edward Fosca is the murderer haunting Cambridge. Much like Persephone, who is pulled into the underworld, Mariana navigates the shadowy depths of Cambridge. Mariana's journey into Cambridge University mirrors Persephone's descent into the underworld, emphasising themes of duality and transformation while suggesting that embracing imperfections and darkness is essential for achieving wholeness and that personal growth often requires confronting her shadows. *"There is no light without shadow and no psychic wholeness without imperfection."* (Jung, 1968). Her grief transforms into an obsessive search for hidden truths and buried traumas. Fixating Fosca as the culprit aligns with Freud's theory that unresolved chaos seeks an external target. Unable to process her turmoil, Mariana projects it outward, believing that finding a tangible villain will bring her peace. However, her lack of concrete evidence against Fosca leaves her feeling helpless and frustrated. Like Persephone, Mariana confronts dark forces beyond her control. While Persephone learns to reconcile her dual existence between the world above and the underworld, Mariana struggles to accept her roles as an investigator and grieving mourner. Her bond with her niece Zoe, whom she sees as a daughter, complicates her psyche further. Mariana's insecurities as a therapist revive childhood wounds, especially feelings of neglect from her father. Her desire to protect Zoe and prove her worth fuels an

anxiety that mirrors her emotional deprivation, deepening her obsession with the murders.

Ultimately, the novel crafts Mariana as a character caught between myth and reality, past and present. Her journey echoes the myth of Persephone's cyclical descent, representing how unresolved grief can manifest as paranoia and fear. Edward Fosca is a murderer, but without proof, she feels helpless, unable to confront or accuse him entirely. (Fives, 2022). This growing fear manifests in Mariana, as described in *The Maidens*. She feels his guilt "in her bones" (Michaelides, 2021, p. 1), highlighting her psychological and physical drop into anxiety. Mariana's fear and anxiety can be understood through the psychoanalytic framework. According to Freud's theory of anxiety, defence mechanisms (Nersessian, 2013) arise as a response to internal or external danger. Mariana's unresolved grief and her fixation on Fosca could be seen as her mind's way of warning her of perceived dangers: the loss of her husband and the looming threat of further deaths.

#### Mariana's Thanatophobia

Mariana Andros' grief over her husband Sebastian's death gradually transforms into various fears, which play a central role in the narrative. This progression reveals how unresolved grief can manifest as pervasive fears of the unknown, vulnerability, and loss of control. Initially, Mariana's grief is a profound emotional wound after Sebastian's sudden death. Unable to accept his loss, she clings to his belongings and memory. Her deep love for him, combined with the finality of his absence, leads to psychological paralysis. *"She was still in love and didn't know what to do with all this love of hers... She couldn't throw away his possessions – by holding on to them, she could keep Sebastian alive."* (Michaelides, 2021, pp. 5-6)

**Fear of the Unknown:** Sebastian's death disrupts Mariana's life, leaving her uncertain about the future. Her fear is heightened by mysterious murders at Cambridge, which she feels compelled to investigate. Grief makes her emotionally adrift and detached, amplifying her vulnerability to the unknown. The murders around her reflect the unpredictability of death and loss she experienced with Sebastian. *"A monster with a knife was among them, unseen, prowling the streets....She did feel fear."* (Michaelides, 2021, p. 190)

**Fear of Re-experiencing Loss:** Mariana's intense grief instils a deep fear of losing more loved ones, driving

her protective instincts toward her niece, Zoe, who becomes entangled in a murder investigation. This heightened awareness of potential losses, especially concerning Zoe, leads Mariana to project her unresolved feelings about Sebastian's death onto her concern for Zoe's safety. *"Zoe needed her – that was all that mattered. If only Sebastian were here, he'd know what to do."* (Michaelides, 2021, p. 24) This fear intensifies because she cannot save Sebastian, and the idea of being powerless to protect Zoe echoes her previous loss. This is an extension of how grief can heighten sensitivity to potential loss and fear of further abandonment.

**Fear of Vulnerability:** Mariana's grief leaves her emotionally vulnerable, which is evident in her interactions with the enigmatic Professor Edward Fosca and the secret society, Maidens. This unresolved pain has made her feel exposed and defenceless. Theo Faber, a psychotherapist, offers advice to Mariana during her investigation. He highlights her fear of vulnerability, showing that it is deeply rooted within her: *"A kind of – fear. You're afraid of something. And you think it's out there...But it's not – it's in here."* (Michaelides, 2021, p. 258)

**Fear of Change:** The loss of her husband forces Mariana to confront significant changes in her life. Her fear of adapting to a new reality without Sebastian is a recurring theme, influencing her actions and decisions throughout the novel. Mariana's grief keeps her in stasis, unable to embrace the changes in her life or move forward. She remains stuck in her emotional pain, and her fear of change stems from the realization that to move forward would mean fully accepting Sebastian's death: *"Life was muted and grey and far away, behind a veil – behind a mist of sadness."* (Michaelides, 2021, p. 7) . Her fear of change is essentially the fear of confronting her grief head-on, which would mean letting go of Sebastian and accepting the permanence of her loss. The murders in the novel force her to engage with her grief by confronting new fears that echo the emotional tumult she is experiencing internally.

**Fear of Losing Control:** Mariana's grief leads to a fear of losing control over her emotions and life, worsened by the chaotic investigation into the murders. In her quest for control, she immerses herself in the investigation, aiming to compensate for the helplessness she felt after Sebastian's death. Her

obsession with catching the killer is about seeking justice and reclaiming power over the chaotic and painful aspects of her life. *"She would sit up all night...remember everything...Every single detail. And she would catch him."* (Michaelides, 2021, p. 1)

## CONCLUSION

The exploration of grief and its transformation into fear in Alex Michaelides's *The Maidens* sheds light not only on individual psychological journeys but also on broader societal implications. The interplay between Mariana Andros's personal grief and the societal backdrop of dark academia reflects how collective trauma and loss can shape communities. In today's fast-paced society, where emotional vulnerability is stigmatized, the novel shows that one needs to confront their grief in order to heal and grow. The characters in *The Maidens* are examples of how unresolved grief can interlink with societal expectations, thus causing isolation and destructive behaviours. As Mariana goes through her inner turmoil while investigating the murders, she underscores the critical need for open discussions about grief and mental health in contemporary discourse. The mythological references, especially to Persephone, further resonate within a societal context, illustrating how cyclical patterns of loss and renewal are mirrored in life's shared experiences. After all, Michaelides's story remains a poignant reminder that grief is not just a personal disease but a social condition that has vibrations across society. It calls on the readers to accept the complexity of grieving and be compassionate and empathetic towards others in an emotionally distanced world. Bringing both psychological insights and mythological elements together, the book inspires a deeper understanding for society's values and behaviours resulting from grief, which leaves avenues open for a collective venture through phases of acceptance, resilience, and finally healing. However, the study's limitations include a narrow focus on a single myth and character perspective. Future research could explore additional myths and character arcs in *The Maidens* to enhance understanding of its dark academic and psychological themes.

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