

**“I wondered if he was as lonely as I was”: The
Multimodality of Grief and Loneliness in Jeff
Lemire’s *Essex County* Trilogy**

English Studies Master’s Program

General Line

Master's thesis

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5.5.2024

Helsinki

Faculty: Faculty of Arts

Degree programme: English Studies Master's Program

Study track: General Line

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Title: "I wondered if he was as lonely as I was": The Multimodality of Grief and Loneliness in Jeff Lemire's *Essex County* Trilogy

Level: Master's thesis

Month and year: May 2024

Number of pages: 40

Keywords: Jeff Lemire, multimodality, graphic novel, literature, grief

Supervisor or supervisors: Nely Keinänen

Where deposited: Digital Repository of the University of Helsinki HELDA (e-thesis)

Abstract:

In this thesis, I analyse the representation of grief and loneliness in Jeff Lemire's graphic novel trilogy *Essex County* (2009) by exploring Lemire's use of both visual and verbal language. By analysing the graphic narrative style, drawing techniques, and panel compositions, this thesis explores how Lemire effectively communicates the characters' silent grief and inner struggles. In addition, I examine the interconnectedness of characters and narratives within the geographical setting of Essex County, demonstrating how the trilogy presents the themes of isolated communities and the healing power of human connections in the face of grief and loss.

The graphic style in *Essex County* evolves noticeably from the beginning to the end of the novel. Lemire's early use of jagged and distressed lines gradually gives way to cleaner imagery and panel compositions. These changes serve to deepen the emotional resonance of the narrative, reflecting the characters' internal struggles and thematic motifs surrounding grief, resilience, and human connection.

Drawing from the literature of emotions, this thesis investigates how grief and loss are traditionally represented in written narratives and explores how Lemire utilises the multimodality of graphic novels to portray these themes. Through in-depth character analyses of each of the three main characters: Lester, Lou, and Anne respectively, this thesis examines the depictions of individual experiences of grief, the reasons behind their trauma, as well as their coping mechanisms.

Furthermore, the thesis explores the recurring theme of ice hockey, a quintessential element of life in *Essex County*, and its role as a coping mechanism for the male characters. By analysing the symbolic significance of hockey and its representation in each story, the study highlights its thematic relevance in the narratives. Additionally, the thesis situates *Essex County* within the broader literary landscape, emphasising its significance as a contribution to the growing body of scholarly literature on graphic novels, specifically as a medium for exploring the complexities of the human condition.

Through this comprehensive analysis, I aim to analyse the multimodality of silent grief embedded within Lemire's *Essex County*. Such research is particularly important given the rising popularity of graphic fiction and the dearth of work on this particular series, emphasising the necessity for further exploration.

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1 Introduction

Loneliness and grief are universal topics which are often explored through literature. How does one navigate the solitary world of loss when there is no correct vocabulary for expressing it? Although grief is an experience shared by everyone, the lack of a shared method of communication can often lead to loneliness. Grief narratives, therefore, serve as essential vehicles for exploring the intricacies of human emotion and resilience. In Ontario, Canada, an aspiring comic book artist, Jeff Lemire, penned his published graphic novel, which in 2009 took the form of a trilogy called the *Essex County* (Holland). This trilogy marked Lemire's entry into the realm of published graphic literature.

In the novel, Lemire delves into the world of silent grief, offering a contemporary take on the issue, emphasising how living in a shattered and secluded community can amplify that silence. Despite the lack of extensive academic analysis on *Essex County*, I believe that the novel presents a compelling opportunity to examine the complexities of silent grief and the impact of communal isolation, as the characters are united by their collective experience of solitude, and thus I have chosen it as the central focus of my thesis. It is noteworthy that despite the novel being published 15 years ago, there exists a notable scarcity of previous academic work on *Essex County*. This dearth of scholarly attention further underscores the significance of this study, as it endeavours to fill a critical gap in the academic discourse surrounding graphic narratives.

In *Essex County*, the interconnected narratives of Lester, Lou, and Anne intricately explore themes of grief, isolation, and resilience within the geographical location of Essex County. Through nuanced characterisations, distinct coping mechanisms, and visual storytelling techniques, Lemire illustrates the impact of loss and the importance of familial bonds and communal support in navigating life's challenges.

The narrative style of *Essex County* is notably restrained, defined by its sparse textual content, embodying the narrative technique of “show, don't tell,” where meaning is often found in actions or the lack thereof from the characters. While light on text, the graphic novel compensates with rich visual language. In this thesis, due to the

multimodality of the medium, I will explore how Lemire embodies both visual and verbal language in *Essex County* to articulate the emotional turmoil experienced by the main characters. Through this exploration, I wish to present this novel's significance within the broader literary landscape and contribute to the growing body of scholarly literature on graphic novels as a medium for exploring the human condition.

In addition to the themes of grief and isolation, *Essex County* explores the intricate relationship between emotions and masculinity, particularly within the context of ice hockey, which is a recurring motif throughout the narrative. Within the novel, hockey serves as a lens through which masculinity is portrayed and explored, reflecting deeply ingrained societal expectations of strength, toughness, and emotional restraint. This theme intersects with the characters' struggles with emotional expression and coping mechanisms, especially in the context of grief. By exploring the intersections of hockey, masculinity, and emotion within *Essex County*, Lemire provides a portrayal of Canadian identity and the complexities of male experiences. In this thesis, I will analyse the role of hockey in the story, exploring its impact on the link between masculinity and emotional expression, as well as its role as a unifier between the male characters.

In the subsequent section, I will begin with a comprehensive background section, first introducing the graphic novel and its graphic narrative style. Secondly, I will explore the literature of emotions and the representations of grief, masculinity, and ice hockey. I will then move to the analysis, analysing the experiences of Lester, Lou, and Anne, respectively, focusing on how Lemire portrays their expressions of grief. Lastly, I will explore the theme of solitary connections and the shared sense of loneliness prevalent throughout the novel.

2 Background and Theory

2.1 Essex County

Jeff Lemire, a Canadian comic book artist, was born in 1976 in Essex County, Ontario. His trilogy *Essex County*, both written and illustrated by him, first published in 2009, offers an exploration of grief, loneliness, and the quest melancholy of life in rural Canada, in the fictionalised version of Lemire's hometown (Moran). The graphic novel is a collection of three stories first published separately, then later bound together into a single book, *The Complete Essex County*.¹ In addition to the *Essex County* trilogy, *The Complete Essex County* also includes two other short stories, "The Essex County Boxing Club" and "The Sad And Lonely Life Of Eddie Elephant-Ears". Although the two stories continue the exploration of relevant themes such as grief and loneliness, I am omitting them from my analysis, as my thesis revolves around the three main characters found in the main trilogy, and they are not present in the two aforementioned short stories.² The three stories that I will analyse are titled "Book One: Tales From The Farm", "Book Two: Ghost Stories" and "Book Three: The Country Nurse". For simplicity's sake, I will be referring to these books as "Tales From The Farm", "Ghost Stories" and "The Country Nurse" during the rest of this thesis.

On the back cover of *The Complete Essex County*, Lemire presents a question essential to the themes of the graphic novel: "can anything heal the wounds caused by a century of loss and regret?". This question encapsulates the thematic nature of the stories, capturing the sense of loss and grief that permeates the narrative, emphasising the collective grief experienced by the characters. Lyttikäinen notes that often with literary texts, there is a certain "emotional atmosphere" that encompasses the work (248), and *Essex County* is no exception. Throughout the novel, an overwhelming sense of

¹ The first book "Tales From The Farm" was first published in 2007, after publication Lemire began working on "Ghost Stories" and that is when he decided to expand the work into a trilogy (Holland).

² *The Complete Essex County* features an extra section titled "Barnyard Scraps Bonus Material" where there are a few more deleted pages from "The Sad And Lonely Life Of Eddie Elephant-Ears". In these pages, Anne goes to fix Eddie's bandages. Lemire notes that the two short stories were featured in early drafts of "The Country Nurse" but were later turned into their own stories (506). Because Anne is only featured in this bonus material of the story, I do not consider it as part of the main story. However, their original intention of being part of "The Country Nurse" explains why they could thematically fit the scope of this thesis.

melancholy tied to grief and loneliness appears to be constantly present. This atmosphere is carried out by the themes of the novel as well as the repeating stylistic choices.

With each story, Lemire introduces characters struggling with their own tragedies, slowly revealing the reasons behind their trauma and how they have chosen to carry it with them. With each individual story, new characters are introduced, and each story has its own main character. By the end of the last story, it becomes evident that the stories and characters are intertwined. Through this revelation, Lemire creates a sense of suspense and anticipation, allowing the interconnectedness of the characters' lives to gradually unfold. This narrative technique emphasises the complexity of human relationships and the enduring impact of familial connections on the characters' well-being. Most apparently, all three stories are connected by the geographical location of Essex County. However, in addition to the physical and familiar connection, the stories are connected through the repeating themes of the quiet and lonely life in the countryside, as well as the sense of grief and loss. By focusing on the connections between the characters and narratives, it is possible to delve deeper into how individuals cope with their grief, and how it is possible to find solace in a community. To ensure clarity and coherence throughout the subsequent analyses, I will provide a brief synopsis of each of the three stories.

In "Tales From The Farm", after Lester's mother's death, he moves to a farm with his uncle Kenny, never having known his biological father. Around ten years old, Lester copes with his grief by donning a cape and mask, imagining himself as a superhero. Emotional detachment characterises Lester and Kenny's relationship, marked by sparse communication often leading to arguments. Lester finds solace in befriending Jimmy Lebeuf, a former hockey pro turned gas station attendant, whose presence triggers tension with Kenny, revealing deeper familial complexities.

"Ghost Stories" delves into the life of Lou Lebeuf, a former hockey player haunted by regrets. Reflecting on his past, Lou grapples with the fallout of an affair with his brother's wife, Beth, and the emotional wounds of a career-ending injury. As he travels through his past, he contemplates how his actions shattered familial bonds, leaving him isolated and alone, primarily reflecting on the events that fractured his

relationship with his brother Vince. As he delves deeper into his memories, he increasingly loses touch with reality.

“The Country Nurse” follows Anne Quenneville, a dedicated traveling nurse in Essex County, as she tends to the physical and emotional needs of the community. Interwoven with Anne’s present-day efforts is the historic tale of her grandmother, Sister Margaret Bryne, who guided stranded orphans to the safety of Essex County after a devastating fire. Lester and Jimmy’s stories reach a conclusion, revealing the long-held secret that Jimmy is actually Lester’s biological father, while glimpses into Essex County’s history offer insight into its collective identity. At the end of the story, an illustration of a family tree reveals the deep familiar bonds between the male characters present in the stories. Lou and Vince are the sons of one of the orphans who escaped the fire, Jimmy is Vince’s grandson, and Lester is Jimmy’s son.

2.2 Graphic Novel Analysis

Graphic novel analysis is no longer a strange topic in literary studies, as it has become a more broadly studied and accepted subgenre of literature. Although placing image in a sequence is an age-old method of storytelling, a graphic novel embodies a complex narrative. In the 1980s, the rise of the graphic novel (with works such as Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*) brought with it much more complexly structured narrative strategies often borrowed from, for instance, film and traditional literature. (Horstkotte 27). This complexity is echoed by Kukkonen’s observation that sequenced images in graphic novels can for instance, represent focalisation, switching the point of view of certain events between different characters. He also notes that flashback techniques clearly borrowed from film are often present within graphic novels (37). I believe that the complexly structured graphic narratives are why graphic novels can be studied within the academic field of literary studies. Though comics are not a language on their own, Neil Cohn argues that because comics adapt both a visual language and a writing system, they reflect the “multimodality of human expression” (93), as face-to-face communication is almost always multimodal because it involves the incorporation of multiple senses at once (Jensen 2). In addition, Cohn notes that many studies on comics come from the fields of cognitive science (specifically cognitive psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and developmental psychology) due to inspection of how the multimodality of the

language in comics is comprehended (93–94). However, due to the scope of this thesis, my discussion will be limited to literary studies. I believe that it is still important to acknowledge the cross-disciplinary studies that contribute to the study of comics and graphic narratives.

As the graphic novel combines both visual and verbal mediums, it cannot be analysed in completely similar matter as a conventional novel. Graphic novels use the interplay between visual and verbal elements in order to convey information and advance the narrative. The interaction between images and words is what shapes its storytelling potential (Kukkonen 49). Lefèvre notes that because the graphic novel exists as a hybrid medium, it shares many features with other media, but uses those features in a unique way. He has deconstructed the graphic narration into three different aspects: “drawing styles, the temporal dimensions of individual panels and the interpretation of sequences of panels” (14). In this thesis, when analysing the visuals of *Essex County*, I will be focusing mainly on the drawing style as well as the temporal dimensions of panels, as I believe that they are the most relevant aspects when observing the representation of grief and loneliness. I will further discuss the drawing style and temporality within the context of *Essex County* in the following sections.

2.3 Graphic narrative style in *Essex County*

In this section, I am going to discuss the overall look of the graphic novel, as well as the stylistic choices Lemire repeats in it. Further discussion on some of the more detailed choices and their context within the story itself will be discussed during the analysis section of this thesis. Graphic narrative style, within the context of comics as a medium, mostly consists of the graphic style, composition, and the sequencing of panels (Lefèvre 15). In addition, due to the collection consisting of three stories with three different protagonists, there is a subjectivity to the narration. Differences in the visual style can be an indication of a specific character’s emotional and mental state (Mikkonen 101–102). For instance, the differences between illustrations in “Tales From The Farm”, where the protagonist is a child experiencing the trauma of loss, and “The Country Nurse”, where the protagonist fulfils the role of an emotional backbone of the community, is quite drastic. In the former, the lines are messier and

unpolished, while in the latter they are straight and clean. In addition, a different style of illustration is used to represent memory in “Tales From The Farm”.

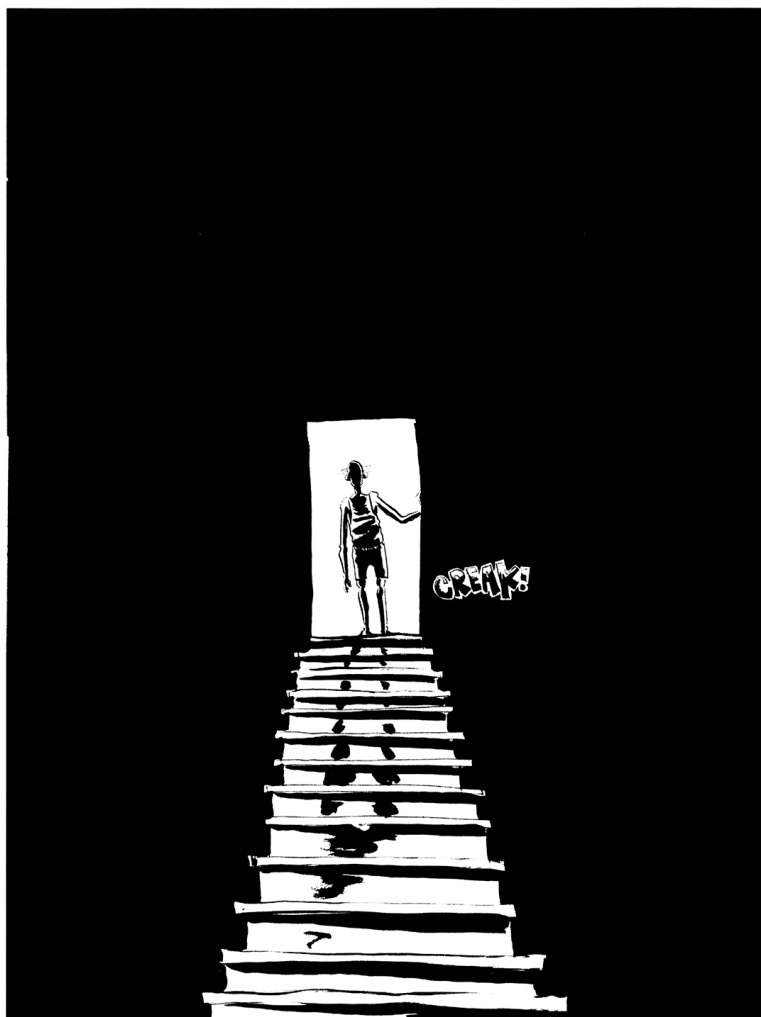
2.3.1 Graphic Style

The style of illustration is unique in the sense that it might come across almost as a rough draft rather than what a conventional inked version of a comic would typically look like. The conventional style of line work, particularly in western comics, is considered to be the *ligne claire*, ‘clear line’, which according to Mikkonen, can restrict “the expressive use of the line” (113). Because of this omission of the ‘clear line’, the stylistic choice of *Essex County* leaves a lot of room for analysis. Instead of using the line as a way of creating interpretable images, the line itself becomes another section that can be interpreted in various ways. According to Lefèvre, stylised images, although less comparable to reality than for instance, filmed images, can “effectively capture the essence of an object or a person” (16). In *Essex County*, Lemire does not look to mimic reality, but uses the unique illustration style as a tool for more effective and expressive visual storytelling. The characteristics of his style include chunky lines and a certain type of “messiness” to indicate a rawness in the portrayed emotions. Lemire has achieved the “messy” look, by purposefully having lines that look jagged and rough instead of straight and clean. This evokes an uneasiness in the reader that can be associated with an emotional state where one feels detached from reality, like when dealing with the loss of a loved one. The style of the comic might seem jarring to some readers, but I believe that it is the purpose of the illustrations—it essentially adds another narrative layer in to the story, as the reader is able to experience the characters’ grief through a visceral reaction to the lines on the pages.

In addition to the distinctive linework, another stylistic choice that Lemire has made is the colouring—or the lack thereof. The graphic novel is done completely in black and white. I will argue that this is an effective stylistic choice, although it is not a unique decision since the black and white format is more of a rule than an exception within the world of graphic novels, as many seem to embrace it and its dramatic effects (Martin 171). Due to the colouring of the pages, the graphic novel has a lot of contrast, as large areas of some panels are coloured solid black while other are left completely blank (see Picture 1). In addition, all shading is done in solid blacks as

there is no greyscale. The contrast created by the solid black areas and the blank spaces in the panels of the graphic novel serves to emphasise the themes of loneliness and isolation. The stark juxtaposition between the black and completely blank areas draws attention to the emptiness that permeates the small-town setting. The absence of greyscale and the use of solid black shading further intensify this feeling of isolation, reinforcing the sense of hopelessness and solitude experienced by the characters.

Furthermore, *Essex County*, as is typical for many graphic novels, borrows narrative techniques from film, incorporating, for instance, panoramic shots, close-ups, and bird's eye views (Horstkotte 23). This cinematic approach to panel compositions and angles adds a dynamic visual dimension to the narrative. I will further analyse how the unique visual characteristics of the story tie in with the general narrative later during the analysis section, providing a comprehensive understanding of their significance in conveying the themes and emotions explored in the novel.



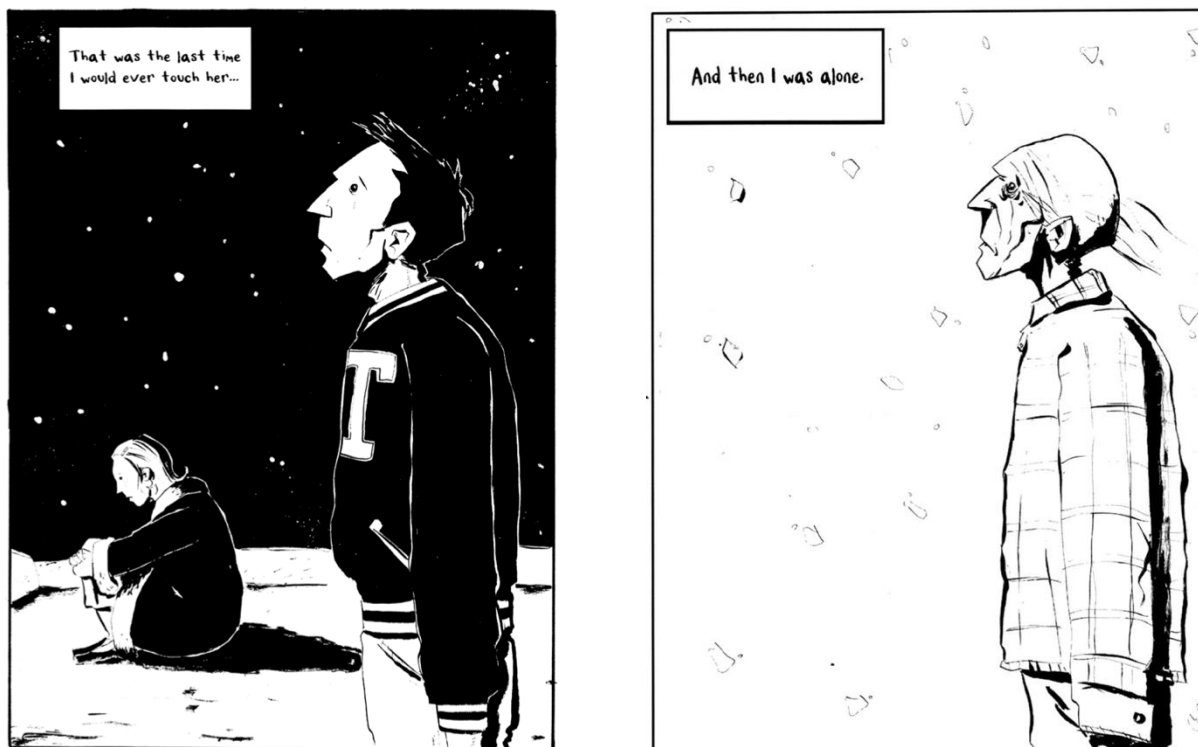
Picture 1. Visual example of the contrast of black and white. The surrounding black background makes Lou look small and emphasises how lonely and isolated he feels (171).

2.3.2 Temporality

In exploring the temporality of *Essex County*, it is important to consider how the pacing and sequencing on panels contributes to the emotional resonance of the narrative. While the graphic novel is often compared to the medium of film, one of the most drastic differences is that a graphic novel is static and sequenced images can be viewed at the same time, as opposed to film where single images are viewed in rapid succession. Comic artists combat the limitations of the static page by creating dynamic motions through the manipulation of “size, shape and juxtaposition on panels” (Potsch and Williams 14). In comics, panels serve as fragmented units of time, capable of encapsulating both brief moments and longer temporal stretches (Lefèvre 23). Since multiple panels are often presented on the same page, readers are able to view multiple panels simultaneously. This multi-tracking of time allows readers to engage with the narrative at their own pace, lingering on panels or

sequences as desired (24). Since linear sequence is only one of the many possible methods of narration in comics (Horstkotte 36), and there are a lot fewer technologically limiting factors than for instance in film, and because multiple images can be viewed as once (as opposed to reading a novel), panels do not necessarily need to be sequenced directly in a grid, one after the other.

Although, most of the panel sequencing in *Essex County* is done linearly in a left-to-right, top-to-bottom path, there are some moments where the sequencing is interrupted. Most of these disruptions are instances where another set of panels are placed inside a splash page (119, 196, 346) which is a page that is entirely made up of only a single panel (Horstkotte 27). These interruptions invite readers to pause and reflect, amplifying the emotional impact of certain scenes. Quiet moments characterised by still images, such as those depicted in splash pages, evoke a sense of slowness and contemplation. As an example, two splash pages show Lou reminiscing about his past with Beth (Picture 2), where decades pass between two panels while Lou remains in the same pose (203–204). This portrayal of stagnation underscores the theme of grief and isolation, emphasising the passage of time and the emptiness of Lou's life. Time passes, yet Lou cannot let go of his memory. The stark contrast between black and white, accentuated by the aging wrinkles on Lou's face, further amplifies the feeling of isolation and the weight of time's passage. The two panels take the reader only a few seconds to glance through, however they portray the passing of a significant amount of time between them. This conveys how time has passed by Lou while he has chosen to stay in the past through his memories. These moments of quietness and stillness in *Essex County* reflect the characters' internal struggles with grief and loss. The slow pacing of the narrative mirrors the characters' sense of loneliness and detachment from the outside world, highlighting the extreme impact of their emotional turmoil. Conversely, moments that break the quietness, such as emotional breaking points or instances of heightened intensity, serve as pivotal junctures in the narrative. For example, the dynamic motion and movement depicted during hockey games in “Ghost Stories” introduce a stark contrast to the overall pacing of the story, emphasising moments of emotional release, as Lou is at his happiest when he is on the ice.



Picture 2. Two panels taking up an entire page each, indicating the stillness and emptiness in Lou's life after losing Beth (203-204).

In addition, some seemingly identical panels are repeated multiple times in succession as to bring attention to the stillness of rural life. For instance, when Lester's uncle Kenny orders him to go to his room in "Tales From The Farm", the same scene of Kenny sitting alone at the dinner table in front of a window is repeated in four panels. There is only a slight change of expression on Kenny's face and a sound effect "slam!" indicating a closed door on the second panel (73).

2.4 Literature of Emotions

Emotions play a major role in literature, and literature itself functions as an important source of data for the study of emotions (Hogan 5). Thus, exploring different portrayals of emotions in literature can help in understating the human condition. In this chapter, I am going to lay down the theoretical groundwork for the study of emotions within the literary field and how I am going to apply it into my analysis of *Essex County*. Due to the topic of this thesis, the focus of this analysis will be on grief and its expression. In this section, drawing from Patrick Colm Hogan's insights, I will explore the common literary techniques employed to depict grief, including symbolism, imagery, and narrative structure. When discussion emotions

within the scope of literature, it is important to note the subjectivity of emotions. A reader can have a certain emotional reaction to certain texts or images, which in itself is an interesting topic of discussion. However, with the limitations of this thesis in mind, I am far less interested in the reaction itself, than I am in the textual and visual elements that Lemire intentionally uses in order to represent a certain emotion and to evoke a reaction from the reader.

2.4.1 Representation of Grief

Grief is a complex emotion which can be difficult to represent, as its expression can vary from person to person. Despite the challenges, authors have utilised a myriad of different literary devices to depict grief in literature. In the world of *Essex County*, grief is closely linked to moments of silence and stillness, longing, and sometimes even anger. The constant reminders of grief and its effects are what creates an atmosphere of melancholy that carries throughout the novel. Lyytikäinen ponders whether the general atmosphere of a story could matter more than the actual (263), and it is a thought that could be presented when discussing *Essex County*. A sense of melancholic grief is present all throughout the novel, and it is by large created by the everlasting presence of winter, and cold often being associated with death and grief (Hogan 113). For instance, in “Tales From The Farm”, the changing of seasons is indicated by a large splash page, like establishing shots in movies, naming the current season, and framing the narrative around the four seasons. From all four seasons, winter is by far the longest season, spanning through 34 pages, while for instance, summer only spans through 14 pages. This asymmetry creates a sense of an almost perpetual winter, where the cold is inescapable. Death and cold are even more linked for people living on a farm, as it is a time when the earth freezes, and the crops die. The literal death of the soil on *Essex County* is heavily related to the metaphorical death of the characters’ spirits.

2.4.2 Coping Mechanisms and Mood Repair

When faced with loss and grief, people often turn to different type of coping mechanisms in order to manage day to day life. Hogan discusses the mechanism of mood repair when faced with grief (113) and how it had been applied to characters in literature. For instance, he notes anger as one quite obvious case of mood repair, where the attention from grieving the loss shifts into anger towards other people

(114). In *Essex County* especially Lester and Lou seem to have shifted their focus from grief to resentment, Lester towards his uncle and Lou towards his brother and later towards his caregiver, Anne. The mechanism of mood repair has triggered for the both of them, likely unwillingly, as such a shift in attention is not deliberate. Consequently, the tension between Lester and Kenny is rooted in grief, but neither one of the characters wishes to or is capable of acknowledging it. I will further discuss the relationship dynamics in the story during the appropriate analysis sections of this thesis. Guilt and anger are recurring emotions in both Lester and Lou's stories, and they are in fact, considered common emotional responses to loss (Doka and Martin 10).

Doka and Martin discuss Staudacher's notion that the only way to eventually resolve the loss of a loved one, is to experience all the necessary emotional effects of the loved one's death (6). *Essex County* seems to offer a similar conclusion, suggesting that instead of hiding one's emotion, facing the reality of the grief is how one can begin to move on with their life.

2.4.3 Ice Hockey, Masculinity, and Emotional Restraint

Despite the scarcity of academic literature specifically focused on *Essex County*, most works seem to focus on the representation of masculinity within the novel. Although the focus of my thesis is mainly on the portrayal of grief, masculinity remains a crucial theme in my analysis as well. However, given the limited availability of scholarly analysis, my approach will prioritise an examination of the themes of masculinity relating to the expression of grief, offering a fresh perspective on the topic. The exploration of emotions and masculinity in *Essex County* delves into cultural norms surrounding the expression of feelings, particularly within the context of ice hockey. Research on the cultural expectations of masculinity and its relation to sports serves as a foundation for understanding the characters' —specifically Lou's— interactions and coping mechanisms in the graphic novel. The collection includes a quote from Canadian author Stephen Leacock stating that:

Hockey captures the essence of Canadian experience in the New World. In a land so inescapably and inhospitably cold, hockey is the chance of life, and affirmation that despite the deathly chill of winter we are alive (112)

The inclusion of the quote underscores the importance of hockey in the narrative of *Essex County* and affirms the strong connection between hockey and the Canadian identity. While hockey is prominently featured in *Essex County*, it is noticeably absent in “The Country Nurse”, where the protagonist, Anne is a woman. This absence perpetuates the stereotype that ice hockey is a masculine sport, highlighting the gendered nature of the hobby. There seems to be no place for hockey in a narrative about emotional healing and sharing, highlighting societal expectation regarding gender and emotional expression.

Moreover, the depiction of grieving patterns in *Essex County* reflects stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity. There is a suggested difference in grieving patterns relating to gender, however in popular literature that difference often is presented through the stereotypical notion that men are “ineffectual grievers” (Doka and Martin 7). In fact, *Essex County* presents a quite stereotypically gendered vision of grief since in a patriarchal society, emotional vulnerability is often linked with the feminine (Boker 3). The male protagonists repress their emotions, and the one female protagonist attempts to heal both their physical wounds (as a nurse) and their metaphorical wounds by encouraging them to communicate their feelings. In one of the few academic articles on *Essex County*, Jocelyn Sakal Forese provides a more nuanced exploration of masculinity and gender relations within the novel, predominately informed by queer theory. For instance, Forese observes how the role of the women in the novel (mainly Anne and her grandmother) is reduced to that of caregivers, even though women are fundamental when discussing history and lineages (265). While I agree that this observation holds true to an extent, it overlooks the nuanced portrayal of Anne's character. Anne's significance within the story exists beyond her caregiving responsibilities, as her character operates as the metaphorical backbone of the community. The portrayal of her character explores the reality faced by many women who often must set aside their own problems in order to ensure the well-being of their community. Her character highlights the pivotal role of women's resilience and their dedication to community welfare as the cornerstone for fostering a united and thriving community. However, a more detailed study of gender roles and gendered expression of grief could merit its own thesis, and thus I will mainly focus on the reasons behind the emotional restraint experienced by the main characters.

In the graphic novel, male characters often exhibit emotional restraint, evidenced by the lack of dialogue indicating an unwillingness to share their emotions openly. This restraint is reminiscent of narratives by authors like Ernest Hemingway—an author famous for his ideas of hyper-masculinity, who famously employed the iceberg theory of writing, where emotions are submerged beneath the surface (Strychacz 141). However, despite the characters' reluctance to verbalise their feelings, the visual aspect of the graphic novel vividly portrays the damage caused by emotional restraint.

Within the novel, hockey serves as a lens through which masculinity is portrayed and explored. The deeply ingrained societal expectations of masculinity, as reflected in the sport of hockey, contribute to the characters' struggles with emotional expression and coping mechanisms, particularly in the context of grief. Closely related to Leacock's quote on hockey and the Canadian experience, Buma discusses the supposed role of hockey offering Canadians a sense of unity and identity (11). He also argues that creating such a strong national identity around hockey has caused a normalisation and internalisation of traditional masculine ideals, cantered around violence and toughness (148). Although Buma's research is within the context of Canadian hockey novels, the context of his analysis is relevant in order to understand the significance of hockey in *Essex County*. For many of the male characters hockey represent something more than just a sport: it reflects on the societal expectations of masculinity, strength, and toughness. The sport offers a shared sense of unity, as for instance, Kenny and Lester share a common interest in the sport and many of their interactions revolve around it. However, the deeply embodied social expectations of masculinity are perhaps the reasons behind the characters' incapability to discuss their feelings outside the realms of hockey. By exploring the intersections of hockey, masculinity, and emotion within *Essex County*, Jeff Lemire provides a nuanced portrayal of Canadian identity and the complexities of male experiences.

Dale Jacobs and Greg Paziuk's article "The Chance of Life: Jeff Lemire's *Essex County* Trilogy, Canadian Identity, and the Mythos of Hockey" focuses on the role of hockey in *Essex County*, specifically in constructing the Canadian identity. Jacobs and Paziuk provide an analysis similar to the one in this thesis, seeing that within the story, hockey acts both as an emotional obstructor as well as way of belonging (78). The

article strongly focuses on the Canadian identity, citing for instance intertextuality of the graphic novel and actual Canadian sports events (84). Certainly, there is a connection between the novel and reality, and there are aspects of the novel that Canadian readers will perhaps find more familiar. Although Canadian identity and the hockey myth are relevant to my analysis as well, I will provide an analysis which is slightly more neutral and detached from the Canadian identity. The importance of hockey on Canadian identity does seem to be echoed by the reviews of the novel as well, as for instance, in a review of the graphic novel by Multiversity Comics, editor Brian Salvatore commented how since hockey is most prevalent in “Ghost Stories” it is also the “most Canadian of all the stories”.

3 Analysis

I will analyse the coping mechanisms and emotional journeys of the characters in *Essex County*, focusing on the main character of each of the three stories, Lester, Lou, and Anne. Each of the characters attempts to navigate through their grief in unique ways, which are intricately linked to their personal experiences with loss, as well as societal expectations. Lester's method of coping with his trauma is to escape into a superhero fantasy, where he has become a powerful superhero. Lester's escapisms into his imagination are depicted through visual cues in the graphic novel. Lou copes with his trauma by reminiscing about his past. His intense longing for the past causes him to detach himself from reality and social connections. Through contrasting past and present moments, the graphic novel underlines Lou's grief and isolation, especially regarding his relationship with his brother Vince. Transitioning to Anne's narrative in "The Country Nurse", her role as a caregiver reflects themes of isolation and emotional detachment similarly experienced by Lester and Lou. Anne's resilience and stability are depicted through cleaner visual styles, highlighting her emotional strength in contrast to the other characters. However, her reluctance to confront her own trauma and tendency to prioritise others' needs over her own also reveal the complexity of her character and offers yet another perspective for coping with one's own trauma. Together, all three narratives of grief offer a multifaceted exploration of grief. Through the interconnectedness of the stories, Lemire explores the consoling sentiment that we are not alone with our grief, and there is strength to be found in shared empathy and understanding.

Lester: Coping Mechanisms and Escapism

The story of Lester, a ten-year-old boy who has recently³ lost his mother Claire to cancer, and does not know who his father is, is explored in the first story of the *Essex County* trilogy. Like many of the characters in the trilogy, Lester appears to live a quiet and solitary life. He seems to spend most of his time either working on the farm, or alone with his comic books. His peers bully him on the bus (26), and he is unable to properly communicate with his primary caregiver, his uncle Kenny, the brother of Lester's mother.

³ The story does not offer an extensive timeline of the events; however, Lester does note that his mother "died last year" (34).

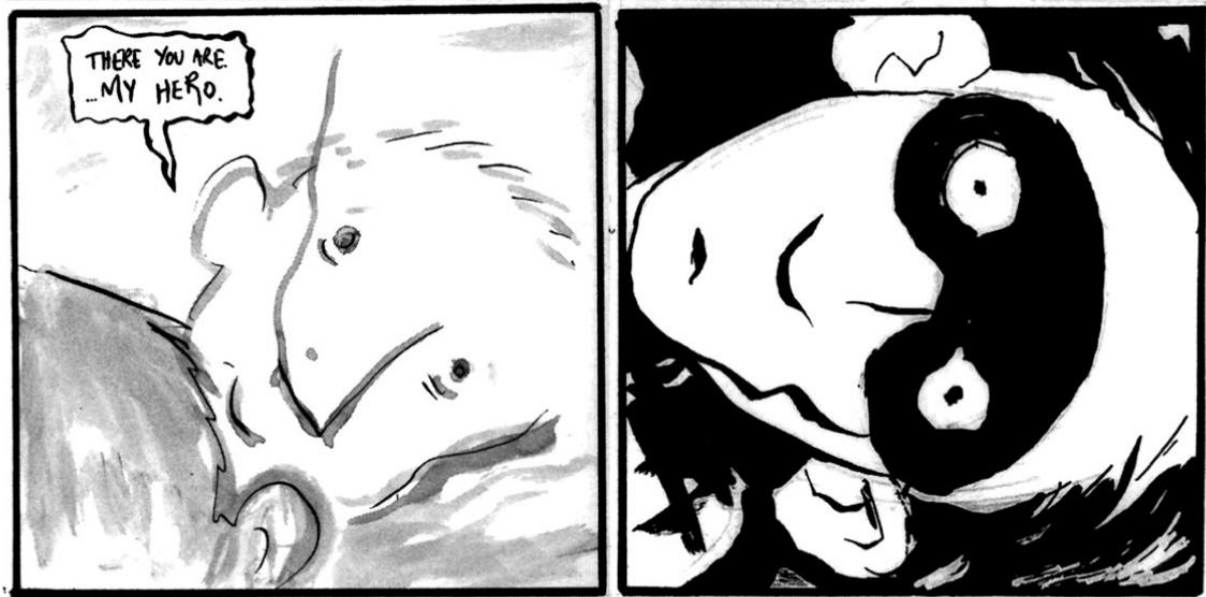
3.1.1 Superhero persona

Superheroes have been a central theme in graphic narratives since the dawn of the comic book industry. Many prominent graphic novelists such as Alan Moore and Frank Miller have used superheroes as vessels through which to explore, for instance, different political topics, societal issues, and personal struggles (Round 335). Thus, Lester's superhero persona seems to fit perfectly into the pages of a graphic novel. Lester's coping mechanism of escaping into his imagination through superhero fantasies serves as a central theme in "Tales From The Farm". The opening pages of the graphic novel depict Lester momentarily taking flight as a superhero, highlighting his need for escapism amidst grief. He is brought back to reality by his uncle Kenny shouting his name and telling him to feed the chickens and to "take that damn outfit off!!" (13). Although it is not explicitly explained, Kenny's anger suggests that Lester has been dressing up as a superhero for a while, likely ever since his mother passed away. When Lester takes flight, black is noticeably absent from the panels and the panels are spacious and bright, creating a sense of quiet peacefulness in the reader. The moment Lester's fantasy is interrupted, the colouring of the panels changes into one that is more heavily reliant on solid black and busy linework, which is more in line with the visual style of the rest of the story (see Picture 4). This juxtaposition seems to suggest that Lester's life is depressing and grim compared to his imagination, and that is why he refuses to let go of his superhero personality as he is seen wearing a mask and a cape until the very last panel of the story.

In addition, the numerous panels that Lester appears in, Lemire has drawn him almost exclusively with a downturned mouth, indicating that he is truly unhappy. There are only three panels in the graphic novel where Lester is drawn with a smile on his face: when he is reading a new comic book at a gas station (18), when Jimmy compliments the comic book Lester made (65), and when he is imagining himself as a superhero destroying an alien spaceship (100). All these brief moments of joy are related to escapism and comic books. The reader is able to understand Lester's emotions through the use of visual language. I believe that this way of constantly reminding the reader of the distressed emotional state of Lester could not be as possible while only using the written language. Through the medium of the graphic

novel, Lemire can constantly bring attention to Lester's grief—to the point where it is impossible for the reader to ignore it.

Near the end of "Tales From The Farm", the reason behind Lester's superhero persona becomes apparent, when a short memory sequence, only four panels long, shows Lester's mother on her deathbed, whispering the words "There you are ...My hero" to Lester (83). The memory is distinguished from the main story through its visual representation. Switching, for instance, the colouring of panels within the same page, is a common technique used in graphic narratives in order to indicate a shift in space or time (Horstkotte 11). During Lester's memory, the illustration is done with hazy, soft lines and grey watercolours instead of using the signature heavy black ink (see Picture 3). As mentioned before, the stylistic difference makes it easier to differentiate between memory sequences and the main story as well as to add emotional intensity to the scene. However, in addition, the soft haziness could indicate how Lester sees the memory—perhaps it is a lot less defined because of the traumatic nature of the memory, underscoring its emotional weight and the lingering impact of grief. Lester does not want to remember the death of his mother, but the memory still exists. Lester's obsession with his superhero persona underscores his need for escapism and the comfort he finds in his imagination amidst his grief. As Hogan notes, when experiencing grief, it is common to wish to take actions to change things (113), perhaps Lester's escape to the superhero persona is some sort of way to imagine himself as someone who would be able to make a change. Lester is unable to back and save his mother, but in his superhero fantasy, he is able to save the world from an imaginary alien invasion (Lemire 96).



Picture 3. The stark difference in colouring between memory and the present (83).

During the imaginary alien invasion, Lester tries to save Jimmy Lebeuf, a gas station attendant he has grown accustomed to, by telling him to run and hide, but Jimmy responds by telling him: “No... No more running. It’s time to face things” (97). Lester replies by saying that he cannot do it alone, but Jimmy assures him that “sure you can pal. . .Yer the hero” (98). This seems to fuel Lester’s imagination, as he takes flight and destroys the imaginary invaders. However, after the fight, Lester recalls another memory. He is sitting on a porch, presumably of his mother’s house, when Kenny tells him how he promised Lester’s mom he would look after him. Lester does not respond until Kenny asks him if he still likes hockey (108). Lester does, and he takes Kenny’s hand as they walk towards his truck. This memory is what causes Lester to finally take off his cape and mask, and the two last panels of the story show Lester’s cape and mask hanging from a tree branch as he walks towards the farm (110). The abandonment of the costume symbolises his journey towards finally facing reality and moving past his escapism, visually representing his emotional growth and healing process. In addition, as Lester is walking towards the farm, the abandoning of the costume seems to represent his desire to reconnect with Kenny. Due to the nature of the previous memory of Kenny, Lester appears to understand that Kenny wishes to connect with him but does not necessarily know how. In the next section, I explore the relationship between Kenny and Lester, focusing on their lack of communication and their difficulties to connect.

3.1.2 Emotional detachment and miscommunication

Throughout the graphic novel, Lester's struggles to connect with his uncle Kenny are evident through sparse communication and misunderstandings. The dialogue between Kenny and Lester is often filled with ellipses, indicating an uncertainty in the way they speak, further emphasising the character's difficulty in expressing themselves fully, ultimately mirroring the themes of loneliness stemming from emotional disconnect. The two argue often, and both seem to have unconsciously, as a method of mood repair, shifted their attention away from dealing with Claire's death. Instead, they seem to be more comfortable in expressing their anger towards each other as a means of coping with their grief. According to Hogan, conflict between surviving family member is often a common way of misguiding one's grief during times of distress (114). Due to the resentment and lack of proper communication and connection between the two, Lester feels emotionally detached from his uncle and unable to express his feelings. Likewise, Kenny appears to be unable to communicate clearly with Lester.

When Kenny asks if Lester has fed the chickens and Lester says that he has, Kenny, not convinced, says "If I come and those chickens aren't fed again..." (29). Lester does not take the accusatory question well, as he shouts, "They are!!", his shout indicated by a jagged-lined speech bubble, with the words typed in large, bolded letters (30). This interaction highlights the tension between the two characters. Before the interaction, Kenny was driving his tractor, and saw Lester waving at him. The following panel shows a close up of Kenny with a wide smile on his face (28). In this moment, Lester is likely too far away to see Kenny's face, so it is safe to assume that Kenny's reaction is genuine, implying that he does care about Lester and is happy to see him. The smile seems especially significant since Kenny, much like Lester, is rarely drawn with a smile. However, due to some misplaced accusations on Kenny's part, the interaction becomes a negative one. When Lester decides to walk away from Kenny, ending the conversation, a close up of Kenny's face shows how devastatingly saddened he is (30). Compared to the close up of him smiling, large shadows have appeared under his eyes, as well as multiple lines on his face, making him look tired and older. In addition, more black shadows have appeared behind him. In these

panels, Lemire is once again contrasting black and white in order to signify an emotional shift.

Some of the indicators that the two of them have not shared many conversations are, for instance, when Lester asks Kenny “You knew my dad?” (52) after significant amount of time has passed since Lester moved in with him. In addition, it appears that the two have difficulties communicating their feelings to each other. When it is time to take the chickens to the butcher, Lester does not want to take part in it. A few tears fall down Lester’s face and Kenny gets visibly angry with him, stating that “You can’t just cry every time you don’t like something!” (53). Kenny refuses to discuss the matter any further, slams the car door shut and leaves Lester outside in the snow. The last panel of the page is a zoom in on Lester’s boots, covered halfway in snow, as he stands outside alone. Similar to cinematic close-ups, the purpose of the framing of this particular panel is to convey emotion (see also Martin 173). By lingering on Lester’s boots Lemire brings attention to the cold, and truly alone Lester is.

Kenny’s inability to acknowledge Lester’s feelings is one of the reasons why he appears to escape into the superhero persona since a strong superhero is someone who would not feel sad and who would not need to be comforted. Because of the death of his mother and the emotional unavailability of Kenny, Lester feels alone and isolated. The visual imagery of the story effectively captures his feelings of isolation. For instance, when Lester is sitting in his room, drawing a comic book, the room looks huge and dark compared to Lester, who is hunched over his table. He is alone, surrounded only by his posters and comic books (41). The jagged lines and stark contrasts between light and shadow further emphasise the emotional distance between the characters—during dinner, Lester is sitting in the shadows while Kenny sits in front of the window (14). This dynamic is repeated every single time Kenny and Lester are sitting at the dinner table, indicating that the disconnect between the two characters is constant.



Picture 4. Kenny and Lester at the dinner table (14). Example of the visual style in “Tales From The Farm”.

Despite their disputes, Lester and Kenny do find some common ground through their mutual interest in hockey, solidifying the idea that hockey is the one almost mythical unifier between Canadians (Buma 11). Nevertheless, when Kenny asks Lester to sit down and watch a game with him, Lester refuses only to go upstairs and watch the same game from a small television in his room (16). In this instance, the common interest is used in order to signify how much Lester appears to resent Kenny, preferring to watching the game on a small television while sitting on the floor, rather than joining Kenny on the couch. Jacobs and Paziuk note the significance of this scene as emphasising the juxtaposition between community and isolation. Kenny and Lester have a physical distance between them created by the “spatial layout of the page” (81), as they are both alone in their own individual panels. However, despite the physical distance, they both still share a connection through the game of hockey. Jacobs and Paziuk then observe that this connection created through the game of hockey seems artificial, as “isolated and visibly depressed characters must rely on the shared viewing as their only sense of community” (81). This sentiment echoes Buma’s concerns regarding the hockey myth and how hockey is supposed to act as a “great leveller, a bringer of unity where none would exist otherwise” (113).

The two of them eventually end up facing their grief as Lester recalls the memory of her mother on her deathbed during a time of distress (83), when he has run away from home after arguing with Kenny, only to find himself shivering in cold inside an empty farmhouse. After the memory sequence, the next panel is a close up of Lester's face, where his eyes are wide open, as if he has come to some sort of revelation. Kenny finds Lester and the two apologise, Kenny stating that he has been “worried sick” (84) when he could not find Lester anywhere. The following page shows a splash page with the words “Spring”, indicating the change in seasons. From this sequence of events, it appears that Lester's memory of his mother is what causes him to apologise to Kenny, as if he realises that Kenny is dealing with the same loss, and they only have each other left. The revelation brings with it Spring, indicating that the coldness of winter has now passed as relationship between the two becomes warmer.

3.2 Lou: Loss and Longing

The story of Lou Lebeuf, the central protagonist of “Ghost Stories”, unfolds against the backdrop of familiar bonds and ice hockey—a sport which is closely tied to Lou's identity and sense of self-worth. Lou's story is filled with regrets and unresolved emotions, largely stemming from his brief affair with this brother's wife Beth, as well as his career ending injury that shattered his dreams of a career as a professional hockey player. The narrative structure of "Ghost Stories" is notably characterised by the interplay of temporal elements, where the past and present intersect as Lou loses touch of his reality.

3.2.1 Journey to the Past

Similarly to “Tales From The Farm” where Lester escapes into his imagination, Lou is depicted as escaping into his past. Although both Lester and Lou share a longing for something that once was, the manifestation of that sentiment differs significantly. Lou's portrayal suggests a more direct engagement with the past, while Lester's approach is more indirect, as he hopes to have been able to save his mother. Lester's method is much more emblematic of childhood innocence typical for children, where he wishes he would have been able to prevent the tragedy of losing his mother. Lou is depicted grappling with his past in much more tangible manner, almost as if he is literally living in his past, unable to move forward. Portraying a way of longing which

is much more typical for someone older. Thoughts and memories towards a lost one are typical for someone overcome with grief, and those memories can become so vivid, that the deceased person feels like they are physically present (Hogan 120). However, Lou appears to take this notion to the extreme, as he escapes deeper into his memories.

In “Ghost Stories”, Lou’s method of dealing with this loss is portrayed through his journey unto the past, where he is able to reminisce and relieve moments of his life. As Lou escapes into his past, he becomes more confused in the real world, his cognitive disorder operating as a vessel for his descent into his memories. This retreat into his memories reflects his emotional detachment from the present and underlines his longing for what once was. Visual techniques, such as contrasting past and present moments, emphasise Lou's grief and isolation.

In addition, instead of using conventional flashback sequences, Lou’s memories are often depicted with his older self, inserted into the scenes, often coexisting with his younger self. However, none of the characters in the memory sequences seem to notice or interact with older Lou. This technique highlights Lou’s descent into his memories, where he is inserting himself into them, literally living in his past, unable to move forward. Mikkonen notes, that one of the ways to convey meaning and present the character “mental life” (112–112), is differences in graphic style and narration. Lemire drawing old Lou into some of the memories, and in some cases, having Lou attempt to interact with the people in the memories, such as attempting to touch Beth only for her to fade away (165), indicates that Lou is beginning to confuse memory with reality. This becomes more apparent when Lou is putting on a jacket, frustratingly stating “this isn’t my uniform” (236), as he then moves to a memory of his younger self putting on a work uniform and saying “There... That’s better!” (237). Lou’s confusion is clearly tied to some sort of cognitive disorder which is affecting his short-term memory. Lou ponders about his own condition saying how it feels like he is “sort of like drifting in and out of a nap” (120). When grieving, for moments, the real world can become imaginary, while the memories can feel real (Hogan 121). However, again, Lou seems to take this to the extreme as he is constantly confused in the real world, for instance when eating his breakfast he

wonders “how much time I got before work” (221) even though he is retired and living in a nursing home.

3.2.2 Relationship Dynamics

The most pivotal moments of Lou’s story revolve around his brother Vince, as well as Vince’s wife Beth. Lou's regrets and emotional turmoil are deeply rooted in his past actions, notably his affair with Beth, which ultimately leads to his isolation from his family and friends. By examining key memory sequences and interactions, such as Lou and Vince's childhood bond over hockey and Lou's romantic entanglement with Beth, I will uncover the underlying themes of guilt, regret, and longing that shape Lou's narrative arc.

“Ghost Stories” begins with a confused Lou walking towards a lake. As he walks closer, the first of the many memory sequences unfolds. A splash page, consisting of Lou as a child on ice, holding a hockey stick and asking Vince if he’s ready, and of Lou in the present, drowning and crying under the ice contrasts the happier past with Lou’s depressive reality (126). Lou does not actually drown in the lake, as he seemingly snaps back to reality, as his feet are submerged in the lake, and makes his way home (127). Since the first memory presented being of Lou and Vince playing hockey, it seems to imply the significance of both hockey and Vince. The second time Lou escapes into his past, it is a memory from Toronto, when Vince joins Lou to play in a “semiprofessional hockey club” (138). The two brothers embrace and are clearly happy to see each other (138), making it clear that the two have a good relationship with one another. During the same memory, Lou meets Vince’s girlfriend Beth, and Lou and Beth share intense eye contact, indicated by a closeup on Lou’s face then on Beth’s (135). During the closeups, the background is completely black, indicating that the two are focused only on each other. Lemire uses the same technique again, when Lou’s memory takes him into a bar where he dances with Beth. The two of them stare at each other on the dance floor, as the background turns into solid black (164). Lou contemplates how “all these years [he] swore [he’d] do anything to take it all back...” (164) but as he sees his younger self with Beth he would “do anything to touch [her] again” (165). This interaction cements Lou’s feelings for Beth—he has immense amounts of guilt over what happened, as he has always hoped to “take it all back”, however, even after all these years, his romantic feelings for Beth are still stronger

than his guilt. Eventually, after a party where Vince has fallen asleep, Beth and Lou sneak up on the roof and end up having sex (201). Lou's contradicting feelings about Beth are once more present, as while younger Lou follows Beth to the roof, older Lou stays in, turns the music down, and covers Vince with a blanket (198), indicating that he does care for his brother and might wish that his younger self would have stayed inside with Vince. After, a splash page depicts Beth and Lou on the roof, Beth sitting on the ground staring at her feet, and Lou standing up, staring into the distance, as Lou recalls how it was "the last time [he] would ever touch her" (203). The physical distance between them, as well as their facial expressions seem to indicate a sense of regret. Lou's comment on it being the last time they touched, underscores the fact that the two of them regretted what happened, and chose to ignore their feelings for one another. Lou continues to recall how they never told Vince, and Beth and Vince decided to move back to Essex County and get married (205). While Lou is citing this memory, he is standing alone in the snow (206) emphasising how alone he felt when they moved away, and how alone he still is.

The affair and its aftermath cause Lou to distance himself from his family. He lives alone in Toronto, while the rest of his family live in Essex County. Lou begins to miss his life in Essex County, even noting that it should snow in November (222), but in Toronto "all it does is rain all the damn time" (223). He often thinks about Vince and wonders "if he was as lonely as [he] was" (228), however, deep down he knows that he is not, as he has his family with him. Visually, Lou's life is portrayed in parallel with his brother's, as both brothers are sitting on a couch watching the same hockey game, Lou alone while Vince is cuddled up under a blanket with his wife and daughter (Picture 5). By visually contrasting the differences between the experiences of Lou and Vince, Lemire emphasises the themes of loneliness and isolation. The brothers appear to have a very similar day-to-day life, where they work during the day and watch television before bed. However, Vince's facial expression is notably happier, the corner of his mouth upturned, indicating that the company of other people, especially family, is what brings him joy. This notion solidifies one of the novel's core ideas, which is that isolation and a lack of communication leads to unhappiness.



Picture 5. Juxtaposing images of Lou and Vince watching the same game on television (231).

3.2.3 Death and Guilt

In the exploration of death and guilt within Lou's narrative, it becomes evident that four significant losses have deeply affected him: the passing of his mother, Vince's wife Beth, Beth's child Mary, and ultimately the death of his brother Vince. In addition to grief stemming from death, Lou also appears to grieve his lost career in hockey, due to a serious injury. However, I will discuss the importance of ice hockey within Lou's story more thoroughly in the subsequent section.

Much like Lester wishing he could have saved his mother, Lou wishes that he could have been able to do things differently. However, unlike Lester, who in reality, has no way of saving his mother, Lou's wishes relate less to the deaths themselves, but to the actions he could have made before those deaths occurred. Lou appears to carry a tremendous amount of guilt relating to each of the four deaths, and perhaps his sense of guilt is why it is difficult for him to cope with those losses, and why he is escaping into his memories rather than facing the reality. His guilt is intertwined with feelings of isolation, as he reflects on missed opportunities to be more present in the lives of those he cared about. As Hogan notes, guilt is often mixed with shame and regret

(180), and it appears that Lou's expression of guilt also mixes those emotions, especially regret. His feelings of guilt and regret appear through moments of self-reflection, as he confronts the weight of his actions and their consequences. One of these moments of reflection occurs as Lou recalls his mother's funeral, realising the extent to which Vincent and Beth had cared for her in her final years while he remained distant (249). This realisation weighs heavily on Lou, highlighting the lasting impact of unresolved emotions and the burden of guilt.

After Lou finishes reminiscing about his mother's funeral, he finds himself in a new memory. He recalls how his life turned for the better once he rediscovered his passion for ice hockey after becoming an assistant coach for a junior team, noting that hockey "is like family... It won't let you go, no matter how long you've been away" (282). This statement foreshadows another tragic death in Lou's life, as he gets a phone call informing him of a traffic accident that killed Beth and her daughter Mary, but Mary's son Jimmy "didn't even catch a scratch" (290). The accident left Vince unable to walk, causing Lou to return to the farm to take care of Vince and the farm. The memory of the accident is interrupted by Lou returning back to reality, where he is sitting on the floor of the nursing home stating "I want my niece!" (288). The return to the real world captures Lou's grief and confusion as he is still unable to process the death of Beth and Mary. Lou's longing for his niece, despite knowing she is gone, highlights the enduring impact of loss and the emotional damage that his way of coping with his trauma is causing him.

Lou's feeling of guilt become more apparent when lastly, Vince passes away. Lou's journey into his past began with a memory of him and his brother, and the last memory shown is the death of Vince. Lou finds Vince lying on the floor unable to move (324) and after Lou says that he is going to call an ambulance, Vince asks him not to go and stay with him (325). As Vince passes away in Lou's arms, Lou expresses his guilt and regret as he does not want Vince "to go yet" because he does not "want to be alone again" (326). Even though the brothers did not see each other for years, and even though they seemed to constantly argue during their time on the farm together, the two seemed to need each other's company.

Throughout these recollections, Lou's experience of guilt serves as a central theme of "Ghost Stories", underscoring the profound impact of loss on emotional well-being. Lou's journey is filled with a desire to reconcile with the consequences of his actions, ultimately highlighting the complex interplay between grief and guilt.

3.2.4 Hockey

Experiencing loss, and therefore by extension grief, is not solely death-related (Doka and Martin 16). Although in *Essex County*, loss and grief is most often associated with death, For Lou, his most impactful non-death-related loss is the loss of his career as a professional hockey player. Hockey serves as a significant aspect of Lou's character in *Essex County*, intertwining themes of identity, masculinity, and belonging. Lou's self-worth is closely tied to the game and his career ending injury causes him significant amount of emotional damage. Since he was a young boy, Lou's dream has been to play hockey professionally.

His injury not only robs him of his physical abilities but also undermines his sense of masculinity, leaving him feeling emasculated and lost. After losing his identity as a hockey player, Lou struggles to find meaning and purpose in a world that suddenly feels strange, as after his injury he states that "without hockey I had nothing left" and that he "never felt so far from home" (212). The memory is paralleled by Lou, in reality, leaving his farm to go to a nursing home, continuing the thought that he had "never felt so far from home" "until now..." (213). In both of these scenarios Lou grieves the loss of his identity, and both seem to threaten his masculinity, as moving away from the farm means that he is too weak to take care of himself. Lou's isolation following his injury is depicted through a visual composition: a large panel captures him standing alone in the middle of the street, being towered by large residential buildings (212). Through the use of perspective, Lemire makes Lou look small, emphasising his sense of loneliness and how insignificant he truly feels.

However, even before his injury, hockey begins to lose its significance in Lou's life after Vince goes back to Essex County to tend to the farm, as Lou reflects: "my lifelong dream of playing pro hockey seemed empty without my brother beside me" (209). This sentiment underscores the impact of Vince's absence on Lou's relationship with the sport. Without his brother by his side, hockey no longer serves

as a unifying force or a meaningful pursuit. This shift highlights the interconnectedness of Lou's personal relationships and his connection to hockey, illustrating how the absence of one can diminish the significance of the other. Lou's struggles with his brother's departure further accentuate the complexities of their relationship and its influence on his identity and sense of purpose.

Similarly to Kenny and Lester's relationship in "Tales From The Farm", hockey in "Ghost Stories" also reflects the notion of the "hockey myth" and its role as a unifying force in Canadian culture. This is exemplified through a series of panels depicting Lou, Vince, and Mary's son Jimmy sitting together in the living room watching hockey. In the second panel Jimmy has become larger while Vince seems to have shrivelled down, indicating that a significant amount of time has passed, however life has remained stagnant—and the central focus of that otherwise stagnant life appears to be Hockey Night in Canada. In the third panel, Lou and Vince are sitting in the same living room, while the fourth panel shows the "rookie Lebouf" winding up for a shot on television (307). Vince and Lou have remained in the same place, while Jimmy has become a professional hockey player for the Toronto Maple Leafs. Another contrasting panel is shown of Lou back in the present, where he is sitting alone in the nursing home watching as "the Leafs lose 5 -2" (308). Ultimately, hockey serves as both a source of comfort and a painful reminder of what could have been. Lou's lifelong dream of playing professional hockey may remain unfulfilled, but the game continues to hold a special place in his heart. It is through his connection to hockey that Lou finds moments of clarity and connection, offering a glimpse of hope amid the darkness of his grief.

3.3 Anne: Caregiving and Resilience

In the concluding story, "The Country Nurse", the protagonist Anne, a middle-aged nurse, operates as a link between all three stories, influencing the lives of the other characters. She appears to offer a sense of resilience and compassion amidst a broken and grieving community. Compared to the narratives of Lester and Lou, Anne's interactions with other community members offers a stark contrast to the two, by showcasing her ability to seemingly navigate the world of grief. Similarly to the previous stories, "The Country Nurse" offers an exploration of grief and isolation, however, Anne's role as a caregiver gives the story a unique perspective. Although

Anne has experienced loss herself, her method of coping with that loss differs from those of Lester and Lou's. Instead of mood repair, or diverting her feeling of grief into another emotion, Anne copes by immersing herself in her work and her community. Despite the demands of her job, which require frequent interactions with others, Lemire emphasises Anne's sense of solitude through visual language as well as her interaction with her son. Visually, Anne's storyline is distinguished by its cleaner lines and imagery, mirroring her emotional stability and inner strength. Yet beneath her composed exterior lies a nuanced portrayal of coping mechanisms, as Anne channels her own trauma into caring for others, highlighting the complexity of her character. Additionally, Anne's story introduces a distinct perspective to *Essex County*, diverging from the male-centric focus on hockey and masculinity prevalent in other parts of the graphic novel, emphasising the importance of caregiving and emotional support within the community.

Throughout the story, Anne's narrative intertwines with the story of her grandmother, who travels through the cold Canadian wilderness with a group of orphans in search of Essex County, after a fire burns down the orphanage and takes the life of the other caretaker, Charles.

3.3.1 Backbone of Essex County

Throughout the narrative, Anne's actions and interactions with other characters showcase her emotional stability and her willingness to help others. Through her career as a nurse, she is connected to most of the other characters in *Essex County*. Although Anne appears as Lou's caregiver in "Ghost Stories", her connection to other characters is more thoroughly explored in "The Country Nurse", as it becomes apparent that Anne was the one to take care of Lester's mother before her death (360). Likewise, she has a connection to Kenny as well, as she comes over to look at his stitches (363). However, Anne's willingness to help others goes beyond physical care, as she seems to have a genuine desire to help make a difference in people's lives. This becomes evident as she goes to see her grandmother and tells her that she wonders if she does "any good at all" (384). She then promptly tells her that there is "no sense sitting around feeling sorry for myself..." (385), indicating that Anne is interested in placing the well-being of others over the well-being of herself. The parallel narrative of her grandmother's journey to Essex County offers more insight

into Anne's character and her values. Moreover, thematic parallels between Anne's caregiving efforts and her grandmother's journey highlight the recurring motifs of resilience and hope across generations. Both narratives explore the theme of healing from past traumas, showcasing the power of compassion and familial bonds in overcoming hardships.

Anne's involvement in uncovering Lester's biological father serves as a testament to her commitment to supporting and guiding those around her. After Lou passes away, Anne gives Jimmy, Lou's nephew, a box of old photos and remarks that he is now the "only Lebeuf left" (417). By emphasising her words, she influences Jimmy into finally facing Kenny and demanding that he reveals to Lester his true identity. Earlier in the story, as Anne visits Kenny, she urges him to tell Lester the truth about his father, saying that "Lester needs all the family he can get right now" (365). This interaction indicates just how important familiar connections are to Anne, however, it again brings focus on one of the central themes of the graphic novel, that bonds, especially familiar bonds, are essentials in order to manage grief.

3.3.2 Personal Struggles and Emotional Suppression

Although Anne acknowledges the importance of familiar bonds, her own family life appears to be almost non-existent. As a single mother, Anne faces the isolation of her own family dynamics, particularly evident in her strained relationship with her adult son. Despite her attempts to interact with him, he remains distant. For instance, Anne tries to initiate conversation in the morning, but her son is late for work and does not even sit down to eat the breakfast she has made for him (345). Anne's loneliness is highlighted in a frame where she sits alone at the end of a dinner table, with two empty chairs visible around the table (346), underlining the absence of her family. Although it might seem as if Anne no longer grieves the death of her husband Douglas, as she seems more content with her reality as opposed to Lester and Lou, it appears that she might not have fully accepted her husband has passed on. Lemire present's Anne's expression of grief through the interactions she has with Douglas' grave (374) as well as his photograph (450), where she tells him about her day as if he would be able to listen and respond to her. It is not atypical for a person who has experienced the loss of their spouse to wish to hold on to the relationship (Doka and

Kenneth 18), and it seems that Anne is unable to let go of her relationship with Douglas.

Furthermore, Anne's interactions with other characters, such as Lester and Lou, provide insight into the complexities of caregiving and the toll it takes on her emotional well-being. Despite her outward strength, Anne still struggles with her own grief and loneliness, often using her caregiving responsibilities as a coping mechanism to avoid confronting her own trauma. This aspect of Anne's character adds layers of depth to her portrayal, highlighting the nuanced interplay between personal struggles and caring for others. For instance, Anne's response to Lou's death provides a fascinating insight into her personal struggle and emotional suppression. As she goes to check on Lou's farmhouse, she wipes dust from a table with a disappointed "tsk" (396). This seemingly mundane act becomes significant as it possibly serves as a distraction from the pain of Lou's passing. In this moment, she redirects her focus to a task, avoiding the raw emotions associated with grief, similar to how she "meddles" in other people's lives in order to avoid facing her own problems.

3.3.3 Change In Graphic Style

In "The Country Nurse", Lemire uses a slightly different graphic style from the two other stories, as for the most part, it seems to adhere to the western standard of the *ligne claire*, with the signature jagged look of the graphic novel being less noticeable. This stylistic choice seems to symbolise Anne's role in the novel, as she is often tasked with maintaining the overall well-being of the community. One interpretation of this stylistic difference is that Anne appears more emotionally stable than the other characters, reflected in the more "put together," calmer, and collected visual language of the story. However, the stylistic consistency is not absolute, and Lemire strategically employs changes in style during dramatic moments to emphasise emotional distress. A small shift in the visual language happens when Anne goes to do her rounds at the nursing home, she is informed that Lou passed away in his sleep (380). As she goes to sit in Lou's room (381), the graphic style reverts to the jagged, distressed aesthetic, mirroring the emotional distress of Anne. Once Anne leaves the room, the graphic style back to the more conventional style, as seen in Picture 6. Anne is presented hiding her grief as the visual language shifts only when she is

alone. After she leaves Lou's room, she returns to her calm and collected emotional state, masking her grief behind her work.



Picture 6. Example of the straight lines in "The Country Nurse" (page 382).

3.4 Solitary Connections

In addition to the exploration of individual characters' experiences, the stories in *Essex County* contribute to the overarching theme of shared loneliness and isolation. Throughout all three stories, a shared sense of loneliness permeates *Essex County*, shaping each character's experiences of grief differently. The geographical location itself serves as a symbol of isolation, with the perpetual winter emphasising the characters' emotional distress. Despite their individual coping mechanisms, Lemire seems to suggest that emotional bonds are essential for healing.

Forese notes that *Essex County* is "oriented towards the past", that the present moments of individual characters make more and more sense as the story progresses through the narratives depicting their pasts (265) suggesting that the current circumstances of the characters are influenced by their collective histories and past experiences. With this orientation towards the past, Lemire entertains the idea of

using the past to make sense of the present, and how ones past and family history can reflect on their own present.

In addition, Anne's pivotal role within the community of Essex County is intricately tied to the interconnectedness of its residents and the shared resilience that binds them together. The discovery of Lester's true father is just one example of how the narratives of Essex County intertwine, revealing the importance of familial bonds and communal support in navigating life's challenges.

Through moments of connection and shared struggle, Essex County emerges as more than just a setting—it becomes a character in its own right, shaped by the resilience and interconnectedness of its residents. As Anne navigates the complexities of caregiving and emotional support, she embodies the values of empathy, strength, and solidarity that define Essex County's identity. In the end, it is this shared resilience and interconnectedness that sustains the community through its darkest moments and binds its residents together in a web of mutual support and understanding. Despite the characters' individual coping mechanisms, their intertwined narratives underscore the importance of familial bonds and communal support in navigating life's challenges. The revelation of Lester's true father exemplifies how the narratives of *Essex County* intertwine, revealing hidden connections and emphasising the significance of familial ties in the characters' emotional journeys.

Furthermore, the visual narrative reinforces the idea of interconnectedness across generations, particularly through shared experiences. For instance, two panels in in "Ghost Stories" (128) and "The Country Nurse," (355) both depict characters playing hockey on the ice of the same frozen creek, illustrating how this activity transcends time and connects the characters across multiple generations. This motif underscores the enduring presence of shared experiences and memories within the community, highlighting the theme of familial bonds and the collective sense of loneliness and isolation that permeates the novel.

With the use of visual language, Lemire further explores the interconnectedness of the character. For instance, in "The Country Nurse", during Anne's grandmother's journey to Essex County, one of the orphans catches sight of a crow. The boy stands tall, a blanket on his shoulders waving in the wind, resembling a cape (442). The pose he is drawn in mirrors one of the opening pages of the book, where Lester is standing

in his superhero outfit, about to take flight (10), suggesting a parallel in the inner strength of the characters. Despite enduring hardships beyond their years, the two boys demonstrate the kind of superpower one might need to carry on in the face of grief.

In addition to familial connections, the interconnectedness of *Essex County* is further emphasised through the motif of a crow. This symbol, often associated with death, is present through the narrative, guiding characters through moments of emotional revelation and offering a beacon of hope in the face of their collective grief and solitude. Lemire's choice to use a crow as a connecting thread throughout all three stories creates an interesting contrast between death and hope. Although the sight of a crow might often be a bad omen, in *Essex County* it symbolises the possibility of moving on and finding solace despite the inevitable nature of death. Throughout the graphic novel, the crow is present in moments of emotional intensity and revelation. For example, when Lou reminisces about dancing with Beth, his hazy memories transform into an image of a crow flying over Essex County (165-166). This transformation suggests a sense of closure and acceptance, as Lou's grief dissipates into the air, carried away on the wings of the crow.

4 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored the ways in which Lemire has portrayed experiences relating to loss and grieving through both visual and verbal languages. Throughout the narrative of *Essex County*, Jeff Lemire employs a dynamic and evolving graphic style that mirrors the emotional journey of the characters. Initially characterised by a somewhat messy line work and an unpolished aesthetic, the graphic style reflects the portrayal of the sense of despair and isolation experienced by Lester, Lou, and Anne. However, as the narrative progresses, subtle shifts in the visual language occur, signalling moments of resilience and hope amidst the desperation. In “The Country Nurse”, for instance, the graphic style adopts a cleaner, more composed aesthetic, making use of the more predominantly adapted style ‘*ligne claire*’, reflecting Anne's emotional stability and inner strength. These shifts in style serve as visual markers of character development and thematic progression in the story. Moreover, Lemire strategically employs changes in style during dramatic moments to emphasise emotional distress, such as when Anne learns of Lou's passing. This intricate approach to storytelling not only adds depth and nuance to the exploration of grief and coping mechanisms, but also underscores the symbiotic relationship between narrative and visual elements in graphic storytelling, fully embracing the multimodality of the medium.

The exploration of Jeff Lemire's *Essex County* offers a journey into the depths of human emotion, coping mechanisms, and the enduring impact of loss and longing. Through the narratives of characters like Lester, Lou, and Anne, Lemire explores the interconnectedness of the characters, who are each grappling with their own struggles in the isolated backdrop of the Canadian countryside. The central themes of grief and loneliness are constantly present throughout the graphic novel, manifesting in the characters' experiences and emotional journeys. From Lester's longing for his deceased mother to Lou's haunting regrets and unresolved emotions, the narrative explores into the complexities of human relationships and the ways in which loss shapes our lives. The visual storytelling techniques employed by Lemire further enhance the narrative, with shifts in style and imagery mirroring the emotional turmoil of the characters.

Furthermore, the motif of hockey serves as a symbol of identity, masculinity, and belonging, underscoring the interconnectedness of the characters and their community. As the characters navigate their individual paths of healing and redemption, the narrative underscores the importance of familial bonds and communal support in overcoming life's challenges. Through moments of connection and shared struggle, Essex County emerges not only as a setting but as a character in its own right—a symbol of resilience, hope, and the enduring power of human connection. In essence, *Essex County* stands as an exploration of the human experience, capturing the complexities of grief, longing, and resilience through the multimodality of its storytelling.

This thesis not only sheds light on the thematic richness of *Essex County* but also highlights the importance of graphic narratives in general as vehicles for exploring complex emotional landscapes. As scholars continue to uncover the complexities of graphic narratives, I wish *Essex County* will occupy a prominent place within the canon of contemporary graphic novels, inspiring further exploration and analysis to come. Noting the scarcity of previous academic work on *Essex County*, this dearth of exploration elevates the significance of this study, as it explores the multifaceted portrayals of grief and emotional resilience within the pages of *Essex County*. By addressing this critical gap in the academic discourse surrounding graphic narratives, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of the graphic novel's thematic richness and its implications for broader literary discussions. Future studies on *Essex County* could explore various aspects of the novel, such as the exploration of gender roles and coping mechanisms, the impact of familial bonds on emotional resilience, or even conduct empirical studies on the emotional reaction to the novel.

Additionally, an exploration of the two other short stories featured in the novel, which I omitted from this analysis, could offer valuable insights into the narrative's broader thematic landscape. Given the limited scholarly attention received by *Essex County*, these avenues of research hold potential for expanding our understanding of the novel and its place within contemporary literature.

In conclusion, the critical analysis of *Essex County* presented in this thesis serves as a foundational exploration of the graphic novel's thematic depth and narrative complexity. By illuminating the intricacies of grief, coping mechanisms, and

emotional resilience within the narrative, this study contributes to a broader conversation surrounding graphic narratives and their capacity to depict the human experience. Moving forward, I believe that further research on *Essex County* has the potential to uncover new layers of meaning and expand our appreciation for the storytelling inherent in graphic literature.

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