International Journal of Arts and Social Science
ISSN: 2581-7922,
Volume 9 Issue 5, May 2026

Annotating Grief: Affective Narration, Intimate Practice, and Intergenerational Responsibility in Yiyun Li's *Must I Go*

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Abstract: This article reads Yiyun Li's *Must I Go* as a narrative of annotated grief rather than a retrospective love story. Drawing on affective narratology and intimacy-as-practice theory, it argues that Lilia Liska's rereading and annotation of Roland Bouley's diary transform a male archive of self-remembrance into an affective counter-archive centered on Lucy's death. Lilia's grief is not expressed through sentimental confession but displaced into correction, judgment, memory-work, and intergenerational address. By redirecting Roland's desire for posterity toward Katherine and Iola, the novel reimagines intimacy as textual care and transmission. In this way, *Must I Go* offers a non-sentimental ethics of mourning, in which grief is preserved without being simplified or redeemed.

Keywords: affective narratology; annotated grief; intergenerational responsibility

Existing commentary on *Must I Go* has often noticed the novel's formal complexity. Elizabeth Fifer's review in *World Literature Today*, for instance, observes that the novel contains a layered narrative structure in which "two narrators split into four" and memory itself becomes subject to revision. This observation is useful, but it remains largely descriptive. What still requires fuller critical attention is how this divided narrative form functions affectively: why does Lilia Liska read, annotate, correct, and rewrite Roland Bouley's diary, and what emotional work does this act perform? This article argues that the novel should not be read primarily as a retrospective romance or as an elderly woman's autobiographical self-justification. Rather, it is a narrative of grief, mediated through annotation, in which Lilia transforms a failed archive of male self-fashioning into an intergenerational record for Katherine and Iola.

The theoretical starting point of this article is affective narratology. Hogan (2011) argues that stories are organized not only by plot events but also by emotional structures that guide attention, expectation, and response. In this sense, emotion is not merely represented in narrative; it can become the very principle that organizes narrative progression. This is particularly relevant to *Must I Go*, where grief does not appear simply as a psychological state attached to Lucy's death. Instead, grief structures the novel's movement: Lilia's return to Roland's diary, her irritation with his self-mythologizing, her repeated revisions of the past, and her address to future generations all unfold from an unresolved emotional wound. Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative is also useful here, since it reminds us that narration involves ethical relations among narrator, character, audience, and implied author (Phelan, 2005, 2007). Lilia's narration is therefore not just a private recollection but an ethically charged act of telling: she must decide what to reveal, what to withhold, and how to transmit the dead Lucy's story to those who survive her.

This article also draws on theories of intimacy as practice. Jamieson (2011) defines intimacy not as a stable emotional possession but as something produced through ordinary practices of care, attention, disclosure, and responsibility. This framework helps move the analysis beyond sentimental understandings of maternal love. Lilia is not conventionally tender, confessional, or emotionally transparent. She often resists the language of love

and mocks the consolations of feeling. Yet the novel repeatedly shows that intimacy can be enacted through non-sentimental practices: raising Lucy, preserving a record for Katherine and Iola, correcting Roland's distortions, and refusing to let Lucy disappear into confusion or male narrative vanity. In this sense, Lilia's annotation becomes an intimate practice. It is a form of care performed through reading and writing rather than through overt emotional confession.

The article further engages with scholarship on narrative, memory, and intergenerational transmission. Cavarero (2000) argues that the self becomes meaningful through the narration of a life, while Hirsch's concept of postmemory emphasizes how later generations inherit stories, images, and silences from traumatic pasts (Hirsch, 2012). Although *Must I Go* is not a Holocaust or collective-trauma narrative in Hirsch's specific sense, it similarly concerns the transmission of an emotionally difficult past to those who did not directly experience it. Katherine and Iola inherit Lucy not through direct memory but through competing stories, silences, omissions, and Lilia's belated record. Cvetkovich's (2003) idea of an "archive of feelings" is also relevant, because Lilia's annotations preserve affects that ordinary historical or family records might exclude: irritation, resentment, grief, jealousy, endurance, and unspoken maternal responsibility.

By combining affective narratology with intimacy-as-practice theory, this article makes three claims. First, the central affective problem of *Must I Go* is not romantic regret but unresolved maternal grief. Second, this grief has a structural function: it motivates Lilia's rereading of Roland's diary and organizes the novel's layered narrative form. Third, the novel represents intimacy not through sentimental language but through practices of correction, annotation, memory-work, and intergenerational responsibility. Lilia's hard, often unsympathetic voice therefore should not be mistaken for emotional absence. It is precisely through her resistant style that the novel imagines a non-sentimental ethics of care.

I. Grief as the Hidden Affective Problem

The novel opens with an emphatic address: "POSTERITY, TAKE NOTICE!" (Li, 2020, p. 3). This opening immediately frames Lilia's narration as an act of transmission. She does not speak simply to remember herself; she speaks to those who will come after her. The word "posterity" gives her private record a public and intergenerational orientation. Yet the force of the opening is quickly complicated by Lilia's severe view of life: "Life is repetitive" (Li, 2020, p. 3). The statement seems cynical, but it also reveals the emotional logic of the novel. For Lilia, life repeats not because events are identical, but because loss, disappointment, and misunderstanding return in different forms.

This is why the novel's real emotional center is not Lilia's youthful affair with Roland Bouley. Roland's diary provides the textual occasion for Lilia's narration, but Lucy's death provides its affective necessity. Early in the novel, Lilia's emotional hardness is described through the image of a heart that is not "porous" enough to become the breeding ground of disappointment (Li, 2020, p. 7). The metaphor is crucial. It shows that Lilia's toughness is not simple coldness; it is a defensive structure produced by repeated exposure to loss. Her refusal of sentiment is therefore part of the novel's affective grammar.

Lucy's suicide is the event around which this defensive grammar is organized. Lilia tells Katherine that her mother "was a brave woman" (Li, 2020, p. 11), but the statement does not resolve the meaning of Lucy's death. Instead, it exposes the inadequacy of available language. "Brave" is at once protective, evasive, and insufficient. It allows Lilia to offer Katherine a usable memory of Lucy while also avoiding a fuller confrontation with the pain of suicide. The novel thus turns grief into a problem of narration: how can the dead be remembered without being simplified, and how can the living inherit a story that even the survivor cannot fully master?

This tension becomes clearer when Lilia reflects on Lucy's parentage. The question is not merely biological; it is ethical. Lilia insists that no one has the right to decide "for which father Lilia was raising Lucy" (Li, 2020, p. 84). This sentence is central to the novel. It shifts the meaning of motherhood away from romance, biology, and patriarchal legitimacy. Lucy's identity is not reducible to Roland, nor to Gilbert, nor to any male claim. What matters is Lilia's practice of raising her. The sentence therefore transforms maternity into an act of responsibility rather than a sentimental or biological category.

II. Annotation as Intimate Practice

Lilia's reading of Roland's diary should therefore be understood as an intimate practice. Roland's diary initially appears to be the text of a male writer's self-creation. Yet Lilia refuses to remain a marginal figure in his archive. She observes that she appears in the diary only as "L" and only a handful of times (Li, 2020, p. 9). This reduction is important: Roland's writing diminishes Lilia into a trace, an initial, a passing object in his personal mythology. Her annotations reverse this relation. By reading against Roland, she turns his diary into the ground of her own counter-narrative.

The novel repeatedly questions whether words are adequate to life. Lilia remarks that "a story is not always a love story" and that "a book is much more" than pages of words (Li, 2020, p. 4). Later, she reflects on words as "the most useless things you cannot afford to lose" (Li, 2020, p. 229). These statements capture the paradox of the novel's form. Lilia distrusts words, yet she cannot abandon them. She knows that language distorts, reduces, and fails; nevertheless, without language, Lucy may be forgotten, Katherine may inherit only confusion, and Iola may receive no meaningful account of the family past.

In this sense, annotation becomes a practice of care. It is not care in a soft or sentimental form. Lilia does not write in order to display maternal tenderness. She writes to correct, preserve, and transmit. Her annotations perform the ordinary labor that Jamieson (2011) associates with intimacy as practice: attention, responsibility, and the maintenance of relational bonds. However, Li's novel expands this theory by showing that intimate practice can also be textual. To annotate is to stay with another person's words long enough to resist them. To correct Roland's diary is also to protect Lucy from being absorbed into a male-centered story.

III. The Structural Function of Grief

Grief in *Must I Go* is not only a theme; it is the structural engine of the novel. The text moves between Lilia's present in Bayside Garden, her memories of youth, Roland's diary, and her commentary on that diary. This layered structure resembles the movement of grief itself: recursive, interrupted, repetitive, and resistant to closure. Lilia's opening claim that "Life is repetitive" (Li, 2020, p. 3) thus describes not only her worldview but also the novel's narrative method.

The repetition of reading and correcting also reveals the incompleteness of mourning. Lilia returns to Roland not because he remains the central love of her life, but because his diary gives her a structure through which to revisit the unresolved question of Lucy. Roland's self-dramatizing language irritates Lilia, but that irritation is productive. It gives her a reason to speak. In affective-narratological terms, irritation becomes a narrative energy. It keeps the story moving, but beneath it lies grief. The visible emotion is annoyance; the deeper affective structure is loss.

This explains why the novel resists conventional consolation. Lilia does not arrive at emotional reconciliation in any simple sense. Nor does she convert Lucy's death into a redemptive lesson. Instead, she creates a record that allows contradiction to remain. Lucy was loved, but not fully understood. Roland mattered, but not as much as he imagined. Gilbert was a father in practice, even if not in biology. Lilia appears hard, but her hardness protects a wounded fidelity to the dead. The novel's structure holds these contradictions together without forcing them into harmony.

IV. Intergenerational Responsibility and the Ethics of Telling

The final significance of Lilia's narration lies in its orientation toward Katherine and Iola. If Roland writes for self-display, Lilia writes for inheritance. Her narrative is an attempt to give later generations something more reliable than rumor, silence, or sentimental myth. This is why the novel's title becomes ethically charged. Near the end, Lilia reflects on the question implied by the title: "Must you go?" (Li, 2020, p. 347). The question is not only addressed to those who leave through death, abandonment, or distance. It is also addressed to language itself, to memory, and to the fragile bonds between generations.

Lilia cannot prevent departure. Lucy has already gone. Roland is dead. Gilbert is gone. Her own life is near its end. What she can do is leave a record. The act of writing does not undo grief, but it prevents loss from

becoming total erasure. In this way, *Must I Go* transforms narration into an ethics of intergenerational responsibility. Lilia's annotations do not heal the wound of Lucy's death, but they keep Lucy within the family's field of attention. They make grief transmissible without making it simple.

The novel therefore asks readers to reconsider what intimacy looks like in late life, after romance, after motherhood, after bereavement, and near death. Lilia's intimacy is not expressed through softness. It appears through correction, refusal, endurance, and the stubborn labor of remembering. Her voice may be abrasive, but it is ethically serious. Through that voice, Li suggests that care does not always sound like love. Sometimes it sounds like argument. Sometimes it takes the form of annotation. Sometimes it survives as a difficult record left for those who still need to know.

V. Conclusion

This article has argued that *Must I Go* is best understood not as a retrospective love story but as a narrative of annotated grief. By reading the novel through affective narratology and intimacy-as-practice theory, we can see that Lucy's death is the central affective problem that organizes the text. Lilia's grief does not appear as open lamentation; instead, it is displaced into irritation, correction, memory-work, and intergenerational address. Her annotation of Roland's diary transforms a male-centered archive into a counter-archive of maternal responsibility.

The article's contribution lies in three points. First, it shifts attention from Roland and romantic memory to Lucy and maternal grief. Second, it shows that grief functions structurally, shaping the novel's recursive and layered narrative form. Third, it demonstrates that intimacy in Li's novel is represented not through sentimental disclosure but through practices of textual care. Lilia's narration is therefore an ethical act: she writes not to redeem the past, but to prevent the dead from being misremembered or forgotten. In *Must I Go*, to annotate is to care, and to care is to keep the difficult past available for those who inherit it.

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Funding: This study was supported by the Key Project of Humanities and Social Sciences in Anhui Province (Grant No. 2022AH051290) and the Teacher Education Reform and Innovation Research Project (Grant No. 2024XTTZXM10).