

INTIMATE ECHOES: UNRAVELLING CONNECTIONS IN STROUT'S *LUCY BY THE SEA* THROUGH STERNBERG'S A TRIANGULAR THEORY OF LOVE

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Abstract

This paper is based on qualitative analysis of Elizabeth Strout's novel Lucy by the Sea examining the element of intimacy using Robert J. Sternberg's A Triangular Theory of Love. The novel is a beautiful portrayal of the two characters Lucy and William who are ex-husband and wife through the course of coronavirus. They have to live together due to social circumstances and discover their lost love. Various instances in the novel provide glimpses of the intimacy developing between them. The novel also depicts intimacy between the other characters. It explores American family system and how the coronavirus situation created a better family bonding. Sternberg's theory is the basis for exploring multiple stages of love from intimacy to commitment phase in the story.

Keywords: Lucy by the Sea, intimacy, Elizabeth Strout, Robert J. Sternberg, Coronavirus, A triangular theory of love, American family system, Pandemic

Introduction

The novel *Lucy by the Sea* (2022) is a sequel of the Amgash series by Elizabeth Strout. She loves to play with characters by putting them into different situations. The paper examines intimacy in the novel *Lucy by the Sea* through the lens of Robert J. Sternberg's A triangular theory of love. Elizabeth Strout narrates the story of William and Lucy who have two daughters together and they have been divorced for many years. Lucy's second husband died and William's third wife has left him. Lucy is a writer and has a very busy social life. William, on the other hand, is a scientist. As the coronavirus starts, he understands its severity and asks Lucy to live with in in a small coastal town of Maine. It is initially for some weeks but later they live together because of the lockdown. But this situations turns out to be good for them as they discover their lost love. The remarkable feature of Strout's narration is her representation of American family system and people's lives during the coronavirus. Her perspective is quite interesting as it shows how the social situation brought families closer.

Intimacy is often confined to the idea of love. However, it is more complex than that. Sternberg explains the idea in his triangular theory of love. He divides love into three phases as intimacy, passion, and commitment. An ideal love according to him is the one that has all the three factors. Intimacy is not something entirely based on physical attraction. Rather it the connection or closeness that a person feels with his friends, family, and romantic partners. Sternberg emphasizes the fact that love is a step-wise procedure so passion develops after intimacy. Passion is more strictly related to romantic relationship. It means the physical attraction among them. But this idea is highly subjective to social norms and mindset of people. Sometimes people jump to passion phase quickly but it does not last and dies up with after a small spark. The

commitment phase is more rooted as it develops gradually in love relationships. It is a long-term bonding followed by intimacy and passion.

Intimacy and the three phases of love are evident among many characters in *Lucy by the Sea*. Though the story revolves around William and Lucy but Strout has shed light on other character to comment their dynamics as well. The exchanges between William and Lucy are not only natural and logical, but also keeps the reader's engaged. Strout reveals the hidden aspects of their personality especially through Lucy's monologues. Her conversations with Bob when she shares her feelings for William and misses her ex-husband. It depicts natural human emotions. From hating her life in the small town, she then becomes terrified of the idea of living alone in her New York apartment. William's little efforts like preparing food, bringing grocery, guiding their daughters, developing a social circle with Lucy, and making an office for her restores her faith in love. She eventually accepts that she is in love with William and the story ends at their happy ever after.

Statement of the Problem

To determine an important feature of human psychology i.e. intimacy by elaborating its phases and significant types of loves using Robert J. Sternberg's triangular theory of love in the novel *Lucy by the Sea*. Furthermore, the study presents the analysis on the establishment of family relations during Covid-19 especially in American societies as presented by Elizabeth Strout.

Significance of the Study

This papers aims to analyze Strout's *Lucy by the Sea* using Sternberg's theory on love. It will add to the existing body of knowledge by examining intimacy between multiple characters depicted in the novel. Furthermore, different types and phases of love are explored through 'A triangular theory of love'.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the components of Intimacy embedded within Elizabeth Strout's *Lucy by the Sea*.
2. To explore how has the writer depicted intimacy between multiple characters in *Lucy by the Sea* and the effect of coronavirus on social relationships in American society.
3. To uncover different kinds of love that interplay within the narration of the novel.

Research Questions

1. Which components of intimacy are embedded within Elizabeth Strout's *Lucy by the Sea*?
2. How has Strout depicted intimacy between multiple intimacy between multiple characters in *Lucy by the Sea* described the effect of coronavirus on social relationships in American society?
3. How do the different kinds of love that interplay within the narrative of the novel?

Literature Review

Calista and Pasopati (2024) examines Devon Daniels' novel *Meet You in the Middle* from the perspective of Sternberg's Triangular theory of love. It explores the love relation between Kate Adam and Ben Mackenzie. The development of the story is quite interesting as they start as enemies, overcome difficulties and prove that a democrat and a republican can thrive together. Ben initiates their relationship by apologizing for his rude behaviour. They foster mutual understanding and respect and trust for each other. This can be observed through Sternberg theory as he guides through the three stages of love as intimacy, passion, and commitment. They share their ideas, dreams, and goals with each other so they grow into the commitment phase.

Physical intimacy is also depicted by the writer as they love each other's physical appearance. Their intimacy and passion results into a long-term relationship (commitment).

Elhamsyah and Rudianto (2024) have presented an analysis of the movie *Sunrise in heaven* through Sternberg's theory of love. Love is explained as a basis for humans to form social connections with others. It is the primary emotion when studying human psychology and nothing provides a better description of psychology other than literature. Sternberg presented the concept of intimacy in his theory that has helped to study love and intimacy between various characters in the movie. Jan Hurst and Steve are the main characters whose love story is pictured as they develop true love for each other. Analysis is provided on the three levels, presented by Sternberg as passion, intimacy, and commitment phase. Their romantic relationship is shown since they meet at a young age, get married and have children, grow old and then Steve dies in a car accident. Intimacy is also evident between other characters as their daughter's grieve the death of their father. Their love is classified as consummate love as their relationship is not approved by Jan's father yet they develop passion for each other which leads to commitment as they marry each other.

Letort (2015) presents a debate on age and culture represented by the character of Olive Kitteridge adapted in mini-series which challenges the typical cultural and social norms on the construct of female gender. The plot consists of multiple chapters that are interconnected and can be undertaken as short stories to be adapted in mini-series. The novel *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout depicts social relationships of Olive living in a coastal town in Maine. She sometimes becomes the secondary character where she narrates her experiences with other people picturing their social issues. The mini-series is a perfect portrayal of female point of view where more emphasis is given to her thoughts which challenges the stereotypical female gender. It shows the twenty-five years of her age focusing on the middle age. As she is a teacher, her mindset truly reflects while she talks to her students. She is an outgoing person and more confined to her personality just as when her husband presents her with a valentine's card, she does not feels seduced. Henry, her husband is more focused on public appearances whereas Olive prefers to prioritize things her way. She saves a man from committing suicide and also a waitress who falls down the cliff. This shows her deep sense of observation and helping nature for others. The relationship between the couple Henry and Olive show their transformation from mid-life crisis to the retirement period that bring them closer. As they struggle in forming a social status, Olive is frustrated with house chores and Henry feels overwhelmed with his job, they both reach the stage of self-fulfillment.

Santoso and Pramesti (2023) have analyzed Colleen Hoover's novel *All Your Perfects* through Sternberg's triangular theory of love. Two characters, Graham and Quinn, they fall in love and marry each other, but face many issues seven years after their marriage. They have focused on the consummate component as explained by Sternberg in his theory to analyze the main characters. The theory essentially comprises of three components as intimacy, passion, and commitment phase, further there are several types of love that have two or all of these components. Consummate love is the most ideal as it has all three of the components. Their love story is shown as a complex where they believe that love and happiness are not co-dependent. It is evident by Quinn's situation that she loves Graham but is dissatisfied due to her inability to have children. The love spark they experience in the early days somehow causes challenges when they are married. The passion phase was evoked very quickly between them but the commitment phase was a tough one. As they faced infidelity and infertility, their bond with each

other was challenged. However, the novel shows an ease where they can overcome all the issues as they are sincere and devoted to each other.

Tager (2019) explores Elizabeth Strout's novel *The Burgees Boys* explaining the social, geographic, and cultural perspectives that have divided America. Though the novel explores family dynamics also focusing on these themes as some of family members are living in New York and some in Maine. The main narrator of the story, though born in Maine, goes to live in New York and chooses her life over there. She also marries a Jewish man and is alienated from her birthplace and hometown. This somewhat resembles Strout's life story. Secondly, there is a detailed discussion on story of the siblings Jim, Susan and Bob. They are born at the same place but both the boys decide to practice law in New York whereas Susan lives in Maine. She is a widow and have children. Depending upon the place she choose to live, she does not have much chances of prosperity as compared to her brothers. This displays the class struggle prevalent in American society. Thirdly, the study emphasizes on the conflict between native and foreign Americans as the Somali refugees started arriving in Maine. Strout has well researched on the issue and presented the idea in her non-fiction work. The work shows that Burgees family is divided on demographic and class differences basis.

Tangi (2024) explores the social construct and family lives during covid-19 pandemic taking in account two works *French Braid* by Anne Tyler and Elizabeth Strout's *Lucy by the Sea*. Both the writers are renowned for adding up minute details and providing a sneak-peak into character's everyday life. These works are focused on middle-class Americans, Tyler shows characters within a specific social class whereas Strout's characters are more dispersed in terms of social areas. The novel *French Braid* tells the story of three generations of Garrett family from 1959 to 2020. The characters live in their own world and there is very less influence of the social situation. However, the last part of book emphasizes on how the pandemic changed family lives. The ending sheds light on the character of David who is the youngest son of Robin and Mercy. He marries Greta and has a son named Nicholas. The year 2020 shows Nicholas as a father of a five-year old and his wife Juana is a doctor. The family lives in New York. As Juana has to be socially distanced from her family, Nicholas moves to live with his parents. David who is shown very shy from the beginning has adapted well to live with his wife. Living together brings so much joy in their lives just as David suggests he is happy tired because of being with his grandson. The old couple becomes much more energetic. In *Lucy by the Sea*, the story centers on the main character of Lucy and her family life is explained. Her situation is more of a surprise to her as her ex-husband William thinks that she is at a high risk of getting Covid-19 and they move from New York to a small coastal town in Maine. Her relationship changes with her ex-husband William, her daughters Becka and Chrissie and with her siblings. She also becomes more social and becomes friends with Bob Burgees, an inhabitant of Maine and William's old friend who lends them his house. Both of them find the time to revive their relationship. Pandemic also allows them to rethink about their past and to find out how their past was like lockdown where family and social circumstances had affected them greatly. Their close bonding with each other and their family is discussed in detail as the novel covers the span of coronavirus.

Theoretical Framework

Robert. J. Sternberg (1986:119) defines intimacy as, "The intimacy component refers to feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships". (p.119). Intimacy works on two levels either a physical bond with someone or a sexual connection. The triangle has three components intimacy, passion and thirdly commitment. He defines love as a result of social

interaction and also a part of a human's biology as, "Love is a complex whole that appears to derive in part from genetically transmitted instincts and drives but probably in larger part from socially learned role modeling... denned as love". (p.120). So, a better understanding of love and intimacy is possible by studying human nature on biological, social, and psychological level. These psychological and social examinations based on theories of love and are studied in their relation to a larger social phenomenon.

The Intimacy Component

Intimacy as explained by Sternberg is more of a social connection rather than a sexual connection where a person struggles for the betterment of people he/she loves. It includes regarding them, protecting them from harm, and caring for them. It can occur in romantic relationships and even among family members.

The Passion Component

Passion component is highly subjective to social norms and psychological upbringing. It refers to the physical relationship and a further step in developing intimacy. Sternberg argues that it establishes quickly once intimacy with the opposite gender is developed. He says, "...passion may be aroused by intimacy. In some close relationships with members of the opposite sex... the passion component develops almost immediately..." (p.122). Intimacy and passion work closely where one leads to another and vice versa.

The Decision/ Commitment Component

The decision or commitment phase according to Sternberg is the final component of love. It is not a pre-planned phase rather happens organically when intimacy and passion develops. In romantic relationships, the sequence is followed but sometimes it can be a commitment first; in case of family where a person cannot choose their partners and then intimacy or commitment arises. It is a voluntary or controlled phase. Most people do not know when intimacy occurs but commitment is generally a long-term contract.

Kinds of Love

What follows are the eight kinds of love as enumerated by Sternberg:

- (a) Nonlove which is mostly a formal one between classmates, coworkers, business purposes. It may follow some commitments but are generally short-termed.
- (b) Liking means love, warmth or intimacy, bonding between friends, random strangers or family without any form of sexual or physical relationship. As Sternberg says, "The term liking is used ... to describe the feelings one has toward casual acquaintances and passers-by in one's life."(p.123).
- (c) Infatuated Love is perhaps the most dangerous and short-termed as it is purely based on passion or as he puts it "love at first sight." (p.124). It is highly influenced by social setting.
- (d) Empty Love is what happens between family members and old couples, as it only has a contact or purpose of duty/ commitment and it lacks true feelings or physical connection.
- (e) Romantic Love is the fairytale love or the honeymoon phase in any relationship where strong intimacy leads to passion. The connection not only remains physical but is also deeper at psychological level.
- (f) Companionate Love is defined as "... love evolves from a combination of the intimacy and decision/commitment..." (p.124). Physical intimacy is not prominent in this type of love.
- (g) Fatuous Love is the one with high divorce rate where people do not judge their feelings correctly and make hasty decisions based on physical attraction only. As intimacy needs time to

develop whereas passion arises almost instantaneously. Long-term commitments are followed by mad passion only.

(h) Consummate Love is the most ideal love in human experience as it has all the three components. It is the social and biological need of people and Sternberg states that it is hard to achieve and harder to maintain.

Analysis and Discussion

Intimacy as defined and explained by Robert. J. Sternberg works not only on physical, but also on social and psychological levels. He divides feelings of love into three components and further identifies different kinds of love. Intimacy on a broader spectrum refers to the feelings of closeness but it is not limited to romantic relationships only. It occurs among family members, friends, and co-workers varyingly. The novel *Lucy by the Sea* is based on coronavirus situation and how people's relationships evolved during the complicated time. Family relationships, social conditions, psychological complexities and intimacy are the most prominent themes in this novel by Strout. Sternberg's theory is a guide to explore development of intimacy and underlying psychological complexities not only between Lucy and William but also other minor characters.

Intimacy or Liking

As the novel opens, the introductory lines tell about the relationship between William and Lucy. Though they were divorced, they had a friendly relationship. As Lucy narrates, "William is my first husband; we were married for twenty years...We were friendly..." (p.3). This shows the mutual respect and liking they had for each other as they had two daughters. Furthermore as she says, "There was a politeness to us that was consistent; so it was a little strange, but nice." (p.5) Lucy was shocked on leaving her apartment suddenly and shifting to a coastal town in Maine. As she was a writer and a very social person, she did not like the idea of moving to a small town life by the sea, yet she tried to adjust with the different phase in her life. She started to like the small house with its view of the sea and islands as she tells, "...I thought again how astonishing it was, just open water...I could see two islands..." (p.19). Also "There was a sweetness I felt at the sight of these two islands..." (p.19)

The horror progressed with the news of people dying due to the virus. William and Lucy felt strangely alienated. The condition of people dying in the city and not getting a proper burial disturbed them. After the quarantine period ended, Bob came to visit them. Lucy was thankful to see someone in the lonely house. They shared things about their families and the coronavirus situation. Lucy expresses her liking as, "I couldn't stop thinking about Bob Burgess...had made me feel so much less lonely!" (p.33). This shows that intimacy is present not only among the major characters but also between the minor characters.

As they started living together, William took over the cooking and Lucy agreed as she was not a fan of cooking herself. They enjoyed meals together. It shows William's effort to make things better which lightened the spark of intimacy between them, "He wanted a lot of praise for every meal he made...so I praised him to the skies." (p.40). These small instances show how a few actions can lead to long-term relationships.

Lucy then talks about the breakfast time she liked the most by saying, "...we had Cheerios, and we sat at the table and had our breakfast...it was maybe my favorite part of each day." (p.42). This depicts her adaption to a coastal town life with William. "But I liked it now because William was...mostly- familiar to me..." (p.42). Lucy had started to appreciate small gestures from William as she cared for her by cooking for her and ordering warm clothes for her.

Thus, Lucy was eventually happy when she heard from her friends living in the city. They were trapped in their apartments and did not have the chance of going out without catching the virus. She felt relieved at William's choice of moving to Maine, "I thought then that William had been right to bring me up here, where I could walk freely even if I didn't see many people." (p.43). She could take walks in the town alone and even with William which helped to distract her from the coronavirus situation.

Lucy had started to realize that her love for William had resurfaced as she tells, "I did not know how I felt about William. My feelings changed about him, they went up and down like the tides." (p.88). Those kind gestures of William by taking care of their daughters and going out on walks with Lucy, making dinner and keeping her company finally invoked intimacy between them as the narration tells about her feelings, "...it reminded me of when I was married to him, and how often I had felt that." (p.88)

William reminded her of their wedding vows while saying that she wanted an everlasting love that continued even after death. Then he praises her by saying, "You're a spirit, Lucy... There is no one else out there like you." (p.133)

Lucy expresses her feelings about William firstly with Bob and he is the one to encourage her to live with William and reconsider their past relationship. As she expresses her liking for William by saying that, "He made me feel that I mattered. Bob Burgees was the only person who seemed able to do that for me right now." (p.248)

Passion and Commitment Phase

As for the outbreak of virus, people were unsure of its severity and were confused. William a scientist, understood that it would be deadly and people will have to leave their job and work from home soon. He is very concerned about his daughters Becca and Chrissy and wants them to leave New York as, "William had called our daughters... begged them to leave the city..." (p.6). This indicates his commitment to his family as he was concerned about their safety first.

Lucy got very close to her brother Pete and sister Vicky during the lockdown. As the narrator says, "I called my older brother each week... and I called my sister each week..." (p.38). Vicky and her daughter worked in a nursing home which was a high risk but they could not leave their jobs. As Lucy remarks, "I was worried about both of them working in a nursing home..." (p.38).

Becca while living in New York found out that her husband had a relationship with another woman. William took care of the situation and helped her move out of the city to live with her sister Chrissy. "So William made a phone call to the driver he had used for years..." (p.66) "...he trusted the man completely, that he had told him his daughter's life depended on the car being clean." (p.66). He made all the arrangements to get the car cleaned to move his daughter. The situation was tough because of the risk of getting a virus.

William had a half-sister Louis whom he came to know about much later after the demise of his mother. He tried to develop bond with her but she rejected to meet him. Later on, while she realized of the blood-relation they had, she mailed Lucy expressing her love for her brother. It is a depiction of how the troubled time of coronavirus brought people closer as they had the time to reconsider their relationships. As she writes to Lucy about William, "...tell him that I wish only good things for him. Please tell him I hope he is safe..." (p.70)

Sternberg elaborated the term 'liking' which can be seen practically between William and Lucy. They valued each other while providing themselves the space to rethink about their past mistakes. When William was sleepless, he came to chat and Lucy acknowledged his feelings. This sharing shows the connection of friendship, respect and liking they had for each other.

“...William came into the room... a little moonlight and so I could not see his face...but I understood immediately that he was distressed.” (p.76). Then she adds, “We talked for hours, William sat up next to my bed, and we talked about all the people we had known together...” (p. 78-79).

Lucy was happy about her friendship with Bob. She started talking walks “...we had a wonderful time on that walk. I told him about David, ... I told him all sorts of things, and he kept turning his head to listen to me...” (p.84). Though she was well adapting to live with William, yet she missed her second husband David who had passed away. Bob acknowledged her feelings by calling her a fresh widow giving her the better angle to understand her complicated sentiments.

She shows her perplexed state by telling Bob that, “...it was so weird to be with William except it wasn't always weird...” (p.84)

When Lucy experienced the newly formed affection between them, she happened to learn about his prostate cancer and how William had it removed. She grieves at their loss and thinks about how William handled this situation alone. These lines show her commitment towards him that she wanted to be a part of his life and his support, “I could not sleep that night. I kept thinking of William and how he had cancer and had his prostate out...” (p.91)

The intimacy between them developed to passion as they went to see their daughter's together. They were exhausted after the drive but the storm at night seemed quite refreshing to them in each other's company. As Lucy recalls, “We sat on the couch, holding hands...the thunderstorm made me feel better. It might have made William feel better too...” (p.104). These small yet intense moments predict the spark of passion between William and Lucy.

William felt bad on ending up his marriage with Lucy and he called up Trey that he was a fool to leave Becca just as he was when he left Lucy. His character transformation shows that he is more involved in fixing his relationships with his daughters, half-sister, and Lucy. He visits his sister in Orono and his delight on seeing his sister is visible as Lucy narrates, “He came almost bouncing into the house...Lucy, she loves me!” (p.152). Strout has predicted intimacy beautifully not only on the part of major characters but also among other characters like Bob, Chrissy, Becca, and Louis.

Compassionate Love

Lucy's development of compassionate love is evident from the fact that she liked living with William now and the thought of going back to New York in her small apartment dreaded her. She did want to live alone anymore. The intimacy that manifested into commitment with William and eventually compassionate love with them. As she says, “...it continued to bother me to think of my apartment in New York...I pictured finally walking back into the place...it filled me with a kind of despair.” (p.141)

An expression of commitment and intimacy is presented when Lucy expresses her feelings as, “A strange compatibility was taking place gradually between me and William...we were essentially stuck together, and we sort of adapted to it.” (p.160). She was contented in being with William and explains how felt alone while living in her apartment in New York which never felt like a home. She misses her sweet family with William as she longed for the past where they lived together with their girls, “The only real home I ever had in my whole life, I had with you. And the girls. (p.177)

A unique reference to intimacy is presented by author using Lucy's childhood memory where she correlates her situation with PingPong balls. She recalls watching a movie where white PingPong balls were dancing on the screen and they moved closer or farther while bouncing. She expresses her commitment with William by providing the metaphor of PingPong balls that how she had bounced back to William and they got closer, "And I thought of this that night, how my Ping-Pong ball had bumped into William's..." (p.186).

Her commitment and longing for a long-term partnership with William is presented in the monologue as Lucy thinks, "I thought of how I would live...on a small cliff on the coast of Maine with William, how Bridget would come to us in the summers..." (p.245). She started to think about her midlife and settling down with William. Moreover while chatting with Bob Lucy confesses about her feelings and her future with William, as she says, "...I suspected that William and I were together now until the very end, and that I was glad..." (p.248)

After her shots of vaccination for coronavirus are completed, she visits her daughters and they discuss about her future with William, she is delighted to start altogether with him in Maine. She then calls him to tell about the meeting and William responds, "Lucy, can I come over and spend the night with you? I don't want to stay in this apartment tonight." (p.285). These lines from the narration show that William finally succeeded in his efforts to save Lucy from the pandemic and revive their relationship presenting the concept of compassionate love as elaborated by Sternberg.

The adaptation of the complexity of multiple family relationships end at a happy note when Lucy and William get back together as he confesses, "I love you, Lucy Barton, for whatever it's worth." (p.288). The novel shows development of intimacy or liking not only between the main characters of William and Lucy but also among the minor characters such as Lucy and Bob Burgees, William and his half-sister Louis, and Lucy's liking towards William's other daughter Estelle.

Conclusion

Intimacy refers to closeness or connection between two people, it is quite a complex phenomenon and has many layers that have been described perfectly by Robert. J. Sternberg. He has divided love into three phases as intimacy, passion, and commitment phase. The novel *Lucy by the Sea*, explores the American society and lives of the characters during the coronavirus pandemic. The novel is multifaceted and has many thematic concerns while exploring on a deeper level. Intimacy is the most prominent theme and is evident not only between William and Lucy who start over their lives in Maine after being divorced for many years but also among others characters in the novel such as Bob Burgees and Louis. Lucy at first is confused and not contented to leave her busy and social life in New York and live in lockdown in Maine. But this turns out to be a blessing in disguise for her as she finds the time to re-explore her love with William. The three phases of love are gradually uncovered as they first develop liking and reach the commitment phase that is a perfect blend of intimacy and passion.

Moreover, the novel also shows the impact of global pandemic on the American family system by presenting the sub-characters and exploring their relationships. For instance, William gets to know about his half-sister Louis and tries to develop a better siblings bond with her. He works on being closer with Lucy by realizing the mistake of cheating on her and leaving her. He also assists his daughters Chrissy and Becka by understanding the severity of the virus and ensuring their safety, and by helping them, he make better decisions regarding their relationships. Lucy also works to establish better relationship with her brother and sisters and William's daughter

Estelle with his third wife. The pandemic gave them the chance to slow down on their busy city lives and the social distance resulted in intimacy between them.

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