

## Agape as the Quintessence of Human Existence in Mitch Albom's Selected Novels

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**Abstract** - This study generally aimed to analyze the doctrine of agape as the quintessence of human existence in Mitch Albom's selected novels and their implications on noted Filipino values. This paper employed the qualitative philosophical method of research in analyzing the tenets of agape in the representative literary works chosen. This involved the science of textual criticism and hermeneutics supported by the researcher's analysis and insights with reference to the content of the texts to bring about the philosophical treatment of the identified works.

The results of analysis and interpretation revealed that the signification of agape in Mitch Albom's selected novels defines the deep philosophical meaning of the quintessence of human existence; Albom is one of the thinkers who philosophizes that the essence of being is agape and the self cannot genuinely encounter reality unless man assumes the existential attitude of love as it encompasses truth, freedom, peace and death; the spiritual manifestations of human existence with reference to the foregoing themes were unveiled through the author's use of some literary devices; and Albom's writings can challenge and inspire the Filipinos to change the way they think and review their values through the tenets of literature supplied by the re-examined contemporary novelist and his commitment to life here and thereafter.

**Keywords:** Agape, Human Existence, Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, *Tuesdays with Morrie*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary age, dominated as it is by science and technology, calls for a strong will on confidence and serene faith: not only in God, but also in man and his existence. Man needs faith that tells him that every person matters, and that each person is doubly important. Man should treat life not just like a string of unrelated and meaningless events. Life then for him is a chord that holds together a bundle of related events, which when analyzed moves a thing of ultimate meaning.

Man's questions about life have mixed meanings on love and truth, joy and sorrow, God and faith, sin and freedom, God and redemption, human relationships and even that of violence and peace. These are questions that belong not to a particular age, but to the commonality of humanity. Mitchell David "Mitch" Albom dealt with these questions and he stressed that man's existence and behaviors ought to focus on the spiritual. For him, the spiritual awakening is the most essential thing in man's life, and it is the sole purpose of being.

Spirituality is not something people *try to gather in* in the midst of a challenging hectic world. Spirituality, according to Shannon (1999), has to do with man's whole life - hectic and all - carried out in its totality

under the influence of God's Spirit. This spirituality is the realization that there is more to life than what one perceives. Topping what the computer ad says: *what you see is what you get*, spirituality insists that one gets more than what one sees. It is attuned to a world of reality below and above one's ordinary daily experience. It is this world alone that is truly real; yet those who are content to live simply on life's surface are completely oblivious of these wonders that exist within and about them. Man's life turn into changes when he is made aware of other deeper dimensions.

This dimension of inner depth is present in every one. It can be sensed (or perhaps better, unrecovered or recovered) by those who are willing to submit to this discipline, which is truly a life demand. While this discipline may require a change in behavior, still its principal aim is to achieve a change in consciousness whereby man views reality differently. Man discovers God's place at the center of his very being which is the center of all - reality.

It is the discovery of this dimension of human existence that makes life worth living. Yet others seem not to realize his worth.

Man lives in an age of seekers: for people who experience a sinking feeling float in emptiness aimlessly. Like Dante Alighieri's observation, men find

themselves *in a dark wood*, where *the right way* seems to have been lost. The fare of *bread and circuses*, which life on the surface of existence offers them are no longer sacrifices. They search for meaning. They want to know where life leads.

The Book of Ecclesiastes' concern is in the purpose and value of human life. While admitting the existence of a divine plan, it considers such a plan to be hidden from man, who seeks happiness without ever finding it here on earth. The said book inquires,

*How can anyone discovers what life mean? It is too deep for us, too hard to understand. But I devoted myself to knowledge and study. I was determined to find wisdom and the answer to my questions.*

The Holy Bible is full of guides for men during these times. It tells men to realize that they are but pilgrims on earth, bound for the realization of the quintessence of their existence.

Mitch Albom registered in strength of conviction that life does have a meaning. He averred,

*So many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half-asleep, even when they're busy doing things they think are important. This is because they're chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning.*

With the sure hand of a master teacher, he entangled life's confusions and led men into the path of faith and reason. It is not always, he readily admitted, an easy journey to walk; but he is sure that it is the right one. He threw light in an extra ordinary manner on the value and sense of life through spiritual awakening. He had a particularly depth and penetrating way of looking at his relationship with God and humanity.

One of the strong appeals of Albom is the emphasis he puts on spirituality. He advised people to find what is sacred for them, to attend to it, or to worship it, in their own way (Albom, 2013).

Man must discover the true meaning of human existence in its beautiful simplicity through spirituality. Life becomes worth living and death worth dying, as it becomes but a gateway to the realization of one's existence. The second book of John chapter 1 verse 6 urges man to reflect on how he should lead in his life:

*Love means living the way God commanded us to live. As you have heard from the beginning his command is this: Live a life of love.*

Substantial and truly subtle are the words, but they become more concretely significant when paraphrased in the light of Mitch Albom's treatment of his characters as being and becoming searchers for the quintessence of human existence. It is the hope of this study to reinstate and to redirect people on the real meaning of human existence. In this paper, Albom is a grand master, and his interpretation deserves an in - depth treatment.

After he gained audience from the idols of millions throughout the world, mainly in the United States, the opportunity to study his writings which are full of wisdom that lovingly captures the simplicity beyond life's complexities is timely. Most of Albom's novels are marked with nuggets of wisdom. Within the pages of these works there surface a collection of gems, reflecting deep philosophy and unique expression.

The wisdom embodied in the selected works of Albom is one of the motivating factors that could help the Filipino people reexamine their lives and values when they become aware of his genuine spiritual dimension. His writings could define spiritual habits that define the Filipino attitude towards life in general and towards specific actions in particular. They may rightly be regarded as modifiers of human acts, influencing their deep motivations. They are intertwined in the raw materials of the social development of a Filipino as a person existing in a community of persons. They lend support certainly to the efforts of nation building.

Profound and significant concepts of arts and literature may be gleaned from every literary critique. In this case, the most important element is the value centered on the knowledge of *agape* provided for by Mitch Albom, whom researchers consider to be one among the greatest prose writers in the recent years. Albom is immensely popular in the United States of America. Yet he may be unknown except among literati, in other parts of the world. A study of his works, therefore, would hopefully introduce him to a wider literary reading public in any part of the world.

Another relative value of the study is the lessons related to the meaning of human existence as derived and presented from the analysis and interpretation of the selected works. So substantial are the citations from Albom's work to illustrate his phenomenology of life. Thus, after serious handling of the values in this study, the readers are expected to catch the breadth, depth and agapeic feeling of Albom's literary works. The

knowledge and experience they may gain from the study will be more significant if the bits and pieces of life situations drawn from this paper will be fully crystallized and reflected in their deeds and ways.

The study features the interplay of literature with philosophy. The intertwine of these two disciplines will guide the readers, particularly the teachers and students, to broaden their perspective of love among human circles. As readers of researches, it is their responsibility to live by the values this study offers. The true essence is love, which is the quintessence of human existence. And this study will provide the explanation why love is inherently and justifiably part and parcel of man's being.

Likewise, this study may serve as an instructional material in the teaching of humanities specifically on the contemporary American Literature and inspire further literary research. Reading the selected works shared by this study will certainly widen the teachers' perspective on spirituality and human existence and thus transform them to persons and teachers who treasure literature and meaningful life.

This study, in the area of research and humanities, will provide a bridge to explore the rich literature of contemporary times and further inspire them to explore into other unheard and read literary studies. In one's exploration, literature readers will build bridges and strong connections to literature and life as it is. This study hopes to contribute in the body of research on American prose, which needs support from people in the literary field. Finally, the real development and appreciation of philosophical and literary enrichment can best be found in the rich thoughts of Alбом as an explorer of life, *agape* and eventual reality.

With this wisdom in mind, the researcher was deeply motivated to analyze how the doctrine of *agape* is reflected in the selected works of Alбом; to determine how the virtues of truth, freedom, peace and death are manifested in the selected works, to identify the literary devices used in unveiling the authors' doctrine of *agape*; and to gain honest implications on the influences noted and dominant in the Filipino values.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study is an analysis of the selected works of Mitch Alбом entitled *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* pointing out events and situations on how *agape* is reflected in his works.

Likewise, the study aimed to present how the virtues of truth, freedom, peace and death are manifested in the selected works of Alбом, to identify

the literary devices used in unveiling the writer's doctrine of *agape*, and to bring about from these works the implications of *agape* on Filipino values. This research was guided by the idea that literature can be a writer's channel for conveying the philosophical dimension of *agape*.

### MATERIALS AND METHOD

This study employed the qualitative philosophical method of research in analyzing the tenets of *agape* in the representative literary works chosen. This involved the science of textual criticism and hermeneutics supported by the researcher's own analysis and insights with reference to the content of the selected texts to bring about the philosophical treatment of the identified works and their implications on Filipino values.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study yielded the following findings.

#### 1. The Doctrine of *Agape* Reflected in the Works of Mitch Alбом.

Mitch Alбом's selected prose propounded the truth that the quintessence of human existence is in the conscious and progressive manifestation of that principle or source of everything. The manifestation in man is well portrayed by love or *agape*; thus *agape* becomes the core of human life and the divine supreme law that should guide and sustain natural laws.

For Alбом, *agape* stands for spiritual love, although not limited to Christianity. His philosophy extrapolates the philosophy of *agape* illustrated in the New Testament, and makes it a natural, universal phenomenon true to all creeds. Therefore, an individual may need not be a Christian to practice *agape* for such love is primarily a metaphysical datum and its directives apply unconditionally to anyone who wants to live morally worthy, in as much as it is a psychological rule for developing a healthy personality.

Mitch Alбом emerged as one of the inspirational writers who philosophized through his pen that *agape* or love is the ontological core of existence.

His doctrine of *agape* is best manifested in his statement: *Love each other or die*. His works encompass one of his most important lessons in life: In the absence of love, there is a void space that can be filled only by loving human relationships. When love abounds, he says, a person can experience no higher sense of fulfillment. He added that love is a state wherein a person is as concerned about someone else's situation as he or she is about his or her own. Throughout his works, he divulged that love is the

essence of every person, and every relationship, and that to live without it, is to live with nothing (SparkNotes, 2014).

According to Albom, there are multiple forms of love, some stronger than others and can be felt even across enormous distances.

Furthermore, Albom described life as a series of pulls back and forth - that it is a tension of opposites, like a pull on a rubber band. He compared life to a wrestling match where most of the people live somewhere in the middle. When asked which side wins? He replied love wins. Love always wins. He believed that life has to end but love does not - that is the power of love, even after death.

## 2. Albom's Manifestations of the Virtues of Truth, Freedom, Peace and Death.

### 2.1 Albom's Manifestations of the Virtue of Truth.

With reference to truth, Albom centered on the ground that love develops the genuine bonds of inter subjectivity. He reiterated the simple truth that man is a communal creature. No man is an island. He stressed that the self owes to others what he possesses and how he behaves existentially. The self can at no times and place divorce his existence from the presence of other minds. The self somehow is mandated to live his life every time and everywhere, even during solitude, in relation to other selves. The idea that nothing is random runs throughout the book. He emphasized that there are no random events in life. All lives and experiences are interconnected in some way, and even the little things people do can affect other people's lives and experiences dramatically.

Albom practiced the principle of brotherhood and love as the very solution for establishing authentic interpersonal relations. He advised men to be compassionate and to take responsibility for each other. He believed that if men only learned those lessons, this world would be a much better place.

Likewise, Albom advocated that love, the *in-between*, is the best human achievement on knowing one's self-identity. He in rest contents himself with the theistic existentialist that the individual establishes his selfhood in so far as he really believes in the existence of others. He allows this belief to influence his very conduct of life.

### 2.2 Albom's Manifestations of the Virtue of Freedom.

As regards the meaning of human existence with reference to freedom, Albom stated that love guarantees freedom. It is paradoxical, and as it seems

that there could be no real freedom unless love animates human relationships. For Albom, the freedom engendered through love is not a freedom of absolutism that would preserve the individual from stringent forces or of libertinage. There one can do anything he pleases. Rather it is freedom that imposes limitations on the instincts, impulses and self-interests. It prescribes norms and conditions of conduct. Freedom is not easily obtained; it is a heavy burden and it weighs much on the individual's sense of responsibility.

It is noteworthy to mention that Albom is not advocating an absolute freedom of doing; it's quite the contrary, for he is aware that man is extremely limited physically. The only type of freedom he accepts is his own thinking. In the region of thinking, man's privacy is safeguarded from the intrusion of any outside element. It is precisely in the thinking of the lover that the beloved occupies his existential place. The essential of love is not to follow popular culture because it is a dictator under which the human community suffers. In his own life, Albom has fled this cultural dictatorship in favor of creating his own culture founded on love, acceptance, and open communication. He developed his own culture as a revolt against the media-driven greed, violence and superficiality which has tarnished the mores promoted by popular culture. He encouraged readers to free themselves of this corrupt, dictatorial culture in favor of their own, and it is only when they do that they begin to reassess their lives and rediscover fulfillment (Spark Notes, 2014).

In addition, Albom associated freedom with detachment. He derived his method of detachment from the Buddhist philosophy that one should not cling to things, as everything that exists is impermanent. In detaching, he is able to step out of his tangible surroundings and into his own state of consciousness, namely for the sake of gaining perspective and composure in a stressful situation (SparkNotes, 2014).

### 2.3 Albom's Manifestations of the Virtue of Peace.

Human existence, according to Albom, is anchored on love that commands universality in the attainment of peace. His meaning of human existence with reference to peace is basically Christian. It is founded on the nature of man as rational social being.

A closely related issue to the limitlessness of the feeling of love is the meaning that love *per se* entertains no national, cultural or political frontiers. For Albom, love ought to be *universal*. His selected works depict love as an inexhaustible *power*. By this token he conveys that the human heart has the *natural capacity* to encompass the whole humanity. *Agape* motivates

man to enter into communion with the entire creation if only to attain peace. In his opinion, the cultural, religious, and political values are largely responsible for the restrictions imposed on the power of love. Love is the creative force as well as the power that draws all people into a unity of peace, protecting and shielding every individual against disruptive life forces.

Furthermore, Albom suggested that men have to forgive and conquer their feelings of anger and regret if they are to find real peace.

2.4 Albom's Manifestations of the Virtue of Death. As regards Albom's meaning of human existence congruent to the idea of love for the departed souls, he maintained that death does not separate the lover from the beloved. For Albom, love proves philosophically the immortality of the soul. He wrote bite-sized philosophies about living with death's shadow. He stressed the truth that once a person learns how to die, he learns how to live. Man lives on - in the hearts of everyone they have touched and nurtured while they were here on earth. Death ends a life, not a relationship.

Love *per se* involves a relation with communication, no bounds, for then it would be futile and existence as such would be absurd because there would be no guarantee, indeed, for the loved ones.

Likewise, Albom emphasized that death is not contagious. It is as natural as life and is a part of the deal people made. Men think such things are random. But there is a balance to it all. One withers, another grows. Birth and death are part of a whole.

3. The Literary Devices Used in Unveiling Albom's Doctrine of Agape. Commonly, the term literary devices refer to the typical structures used by writers in their works to convey their messages in a simple manner to the readers. When employed properly, the different literary devices help readers to appreciate, interpret and analyze a literary work (<http://literarydevices.net/>, 2014).

These devices collectively comprise the art form's components; the means by which Mitch Albom created meaning through language, and by which readers gained understanding of and appreciation for his works. In the selected works, Albom utilized the following literary devices to unveil his doctrine of *agape*: allusions to show how his novels refer to another work of literature, work of art, historical figure, place, or event (WiseGEEK, 2014); similes and metaphors to *spice up* and add visual and symbolic comparisons to the dialogue (Scribd, 2009) and to show how he feels about the times in his life; irony and foreshadowing to

help build suspense (Wein, 2009); and personification of death (Wein, 2009).

4. The Implications of the Doctrine of *Agape* on Noted Filipino Values. One of the problems of the Philippine society is that Filipinos live in a culture that tends to make the people one - dimensional people: content or, worse still, condemned to live on the surface of life with scarcely any sounding of life's depths. The violence in the country, the exploitation of the poor, and the poverty that haunts the land - are so many the signs of a one - dimensional society that has lost the ability to see and to care. So much media coverage - with its brief segments of factual information to the scrutiny of moral dimensions wherein values are seriously discussed - also signals a culture that is morally and spiritually bankrupt. It has become very singly dimensional or better yet biased.

In these troubled times where the atmosphere is not conducive to the promotion of piety, asceticism, mysticism and spirituality a challenge is at hand. Yet by all indications, the Filipinos can say that their busy everyday life still affords them great latitude to practice and attain agapeic love of the highest order, they being Orientals and God - loving perhaps.

Aside from prayers, meditation, and sacraments (for the Christians) ever at man's disposal, Mitch Albom provided insight and abundance of wisdom on how to make use of life's situations even under the most adverse conditions even in their work places and elsewhere.

The aforementioned literary philosopher, with the serene confidence of his faith and his equally confident trust in human reason is a very much two - dimensional person who through his writings can inspire the Filipinos themselves see beyond the surface and turn to the transcendental dimension of humanity.

The Filipinos must listen to the wisdom embodied in the writings of Mitch Albom. It is the intent of this study to open up that gate of wisdom through literature to the Filipinos who may never have heard or read about them. Who knows however all too well what it is to sit around and pluck wisdom from his lines. The value of Albom's novels will lift them to be involved in the relationship between the wisdom of the East and West. They should thirst for great minds, minds that are challenged and motivated to treat the best for humanity.

Note that Albom's selected works entitled *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* may be taken as something of a summation of the essential elements of spirituality. Progressing in that spirituality and the goal to which it is intended to lead

them to is of worth. Albom's spirituality is not focused on prayer or contemplation. It talks about life. It has to do with man's whole life embodied in its totality under the influence of God's goodness. Certainly, lives of men are changed when they become fully aware of the deeper dimensions of life. It is the surfacing of his dimension of human existence that makes life worth living.

This dimension of inner depth is present in every Filipino and can be attained or better, uncovered or recovered by those thoughts so sublime. The Filipinos must submit themselves to the discipline for which life was created. While this discipline may require a change in behavior, still its mission is to achieve a change of consciousness for people to view reality differently.

This transformation the Filipinos seek shall begin with themselves. Nothing shapes the Filipino's life more than the commitments he chose to make. To change his life, he must change the way he thinks. Behind everything he does is a thought for change of outlook motivated by a belief, and duly supported by proper attitude and mission in life.

The Filipino can change the way he thinks if he first steps into spiritual growth reviewing his values through the tenets of literature supplied by the just re-examined inspirational writer and their commitment to life here and thereafter.

## CONCLUSIONS

Mitchell David "Mitch" Albom is an American best-selling author who pondered deeply on the predicament of human existence. The signification of *agape* in his selected novels defines the deep philosophical meaning of the quintessence of human existence.

Albom is one of the thinkers who philosophizes that the essence of being is *agape* and the self cannot genuinely encounter reality unless man assumes the existential attitude of love as it encompasses truth, freedom, peace and death. The foregoing virtues find their noblest expression and exemplifications on his life and works. There surfaces the mystifying thread interwoven in the selected works.

The spiritual manifestations of human existence with reference to the foregoing themes were unveiled through the author's use of some literary devices.

Albom's writings can challenge and inspire the Filipinos to change the way they think and review their values through the tenets of literature supplied by the re-examined contemporary novelist and his commitment to life here and thereafter.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher recommended that Mitch Albom's works be taken as required home reading and class requirements for students not only for the author's craft and literary devices but also to develop among students appreciation and sense of values to guide and allow them to crystallize and synthesize what philosophy of life is best to learn and live; that literature teachers may work in partnership with teachers of philosophy and humanities in presenting *agape* as the quintessence of human existence using their own instructional approaches, materials and media for wider dissemination and readership; that teachers of philosophy and humanities be invited to attend conferences, seminars, workshops, trainings, retreats and recollections to get the feel of the values intrinsic in *agape*; and that researches be done for other works written by Asian and Filipino writers in the veins of the recent research for academic enhancement to have a cross dissection of views of life and the nature of an Asian and his political, theological and intellectual background.

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