Anne Enright's *The Gathering*: The Five Stages of Grief in a Liminal Space

Margaret Bonass Madden

Department of Humanities, Dundalk Institute of Technology

Abstract

Applying Kübler-Ross's theory of The Five Stages of Grief to a reading of Anne Enright's 2007 novel The Gathering*, this paper will trace the journey through grief and how it is a flexible entity which affords different reactions and experiences of grief within the liminal space. The Kübler-Ross theory defines the stages of grief within five parameters: Denial and Isolation; Anger; Bargaining; Depression; Acceptance. She notes how the immediate days after the death are filled with viewings, organising travel itineraries and funeral arrangements. These days are a blur of paperwork and shock and are often accompanied by loss of appetite, lack of sleep and a removal from reality. It is when the burial is complete, and the mourners have departed, that the process of grief can re-commence. Enright's* The Gathering *focuses on the aftermath of the death of Liam Flaherty and the subsequent gathering of the Flaherty family for his wake and funeral. The Five Stages of Grief are applied in a non-linear form, enabling a more nuanced situational narrative within the liminal space. In* The Gathering*, we follow Veronica Hegarty's stages of grief, following the suicide of her younger brother, and observe how she chooses – for the most part – to cope in isolation. The liminal space afforded to Veronica enables her to process her grief through the medium of memory and her composition of an (imagined) biography of her grandmother. Enright's unreliable protagonist is creating a bio-fictional past whilst dealing with a stark present. Grief is a personal journey and closure is not always inevitable.*

The purpose of this paper is to examine the stages of grief described by Kübler-Ross's theory (2005) through the characters portrayed in Anne Enright's 2007 novel *The Gathering.* The analysis lays emphasis on the significance of liminal space, how it offers different reactions and experiences to the bereaved in the aftermath of grief itself. This trajectory, of the stages of grief and the liminal space, will be explored through the protagonist, Veronica, in *The Gathering*. People find themselves deeply thrust in grief, followed by traditional rituals, due to the loss of their dear ones. This causes them to wander through unknown depths of sorrow, here, liminality guides them through such unaccustomed stages of grief. Van Gennep's theory of liminality (1960) argues that the rituals and rites that surrounds death and burial provide respite from the normal structures and expectations of daily life. Liminal space allows and aids this journey through grief and the eventual reincorporation into society (Ní Éigeartaigh, 2022, p. xi). Kübler-Ross's theory examines and defines grief through five stages: denial and isolation; anger; bargaining; depression; acceptance. She notes that the event of death is immediately followed by viewings, organising travel itineraries and funeral arrangements.

During this period, one is blurred with shock; accompanied by the loss of appetite and lack of sleep which expels one from reality, in addition to the legalities of paperwork. One endures the process of grief, after the completion of the funerary process as the mourners depart. Enright's Booker Prize-winning novel *The Gathering* focuses on the aftermath of the death of Liam Flaherty and the subsequent gathering of the Hegarty family for his wake and funeral in Ireland. The Five Stages of Grief are applied in a non-linear form, enabling a more nuanced situational narrative within the liminal space. This article outlines Veronica Hegarty's journey through grief, following the suicide of her brother, and maps out how she chooses – for the most part – to cope in isolation. The liminal space offered to Veronica enables her to process her grief through the medium of memory and her composition of an (imagined) biography of her grandmother. Enright's unreliable protagonist creates a bio-fictional past as she deals with her stark present. This article focuses on the stages of grief, which enables a deeper understanding of Veronica's personal journey through grief, and how she encounters her own version of closure.

In this article, prominent themes in the novel such as grief, ritual and tradition will be explored using Kübler-Ross's theory of the Five Stages of Grief. The stages of grief were postulated by Kübler-Ross in 1969 in *On Death and Dying*, and later revised in 2005. She explains that these stages were not designed to be "stops on linear timeline in grief" but were designed to help people "frame and identify" their feelings (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 7). She re-visits the theory from the perspective of the bereaved, rather than the person who is dying, as had been the original focus of *On Death and Dying*. Here, she emphasises that the bereaved does not "enter and leave each individual stage in a linear fashion" but rather they shift, often jumping back and forth, between stages (*ibid*., p. 18). This trajectory can be clearly documented in *The Gathering*, where Veronica navigates through each stage, to varying degrees, in a non-sequential manner, as she narrates Liam's death, his wake and funeral. The theory of liminality compliments and aids in unbinding the stages of grief. Liminality offers a broader understanding of separation and acts as a significant marker in traversing through the stages of grief (Van Gennep, 1960). Furthermore, the reader observes theories of liminality, especially when Veronica travels to identify her brother's body in Brighton where she seems to be detached and dissociated from her normal life, and snuck into the liminal space of death, grief, and mourning. Ní Éigeartaigh explains that this space rejects the normal regularities of ordinary society (Ní Éigeartaigh, 2022, p. xii). The stages of grief are now seen as an accepted, albeit fluctuating, measure of how one reacts to loss and enables the bereaved to deal with their grief at their own pace. Hence, the following paragraphs will outline Veronica's journey, in

and out of this liminal space, as she traverses through the stages of grief, aided by the character representations that delineate the themes of memory and trauma.

The Gathering opens with Veronica's encounter with personal grief experienced on account of her brother, Liam's death. Liam had died from suicide in Brighton, England, and Veronica was burdened by the overwhelming task of delivering the news to their mother. Reluctantly, she enters the Hegarty house and is repulsed by its very fabric. She notices the size, the layout, and the smell (pp. 4–5). Consequently, she observes the negative aspects of the house, thus denying any of its association to her happier childhood memories. Enright provides details of the family members and how they navigate in unison before Liam's wake (Wheeler Centre, 2017). Although the wake is an event towards the end of the book, descriptions of the members in the earlier pages aids in gauging their behaviours and attitudes when the reader encounters them in the book.

Veronica prepares to relay the news of her brother's death to her mother: "I turn my face towards her and ready it to say the ritual thing" (p. 6). The novel frequently refers to ritualistic words and expected facial expressions, thus demonstrating the importance of traditional practices at the time of grief. When she hears the news, Veronica's mother hits her, demonstrating a mother's grief who has lost her child. The mother seems in denial about the accuracy of the news and lashes at her daughter. Her initial silence is followed by a sound that is described as "terrible…and Quite soft" (p. 9). Her mother accepts the news of Liam's death as her brief denial and anger subside. Again, Enright uses facial expression to display grief when her mother faces her:

> so that I can witness her face; the look on it, now, and the way it will never be the same again. (p. 9)

As Veronica watches her mother's portrayal of grief, she rages against the unjust role she plays, and she is angered by the duties she has already performed, stating that she "will die of unfairness" (p. 10).

Following in a non-linear pattern of Kübler-Ross's model, Veronica seems to have passed into the second stage of grief, where anger takes over denial (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 44). The first phase seamlessly flows into the second, where Veronica's denial is overtaken by her anger due to the circumstances in which she finds herself. In this phase, Veronica resents that she is

> the one who has to drive over to Mammy's and ring the doorbell and put myself in a convenient hitting position (p. 10)

while her siblings escaped the chore. She is even angered at her dead siblings:

> I am in a rage with every single one of my brothers and sister, including Stevie, long dead, and Midge, recently dead, and I am boiling mad with Liam for being dead too. (p. 10)

The anger experienced at the time of grief need not be logical or even relevant to the current circumstance. Kübler-Ross explains that anger is a necessary stage which helps in keeping other feelings at bay, until one is ready to deal with them (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 12). She advises that anger can re-appear during later stages of grief, but rarely to the extent of its initial appearance. Anger, following a loss, becomes more diluted with time and appears in many forms (*ibid*., p. 12). While society views anger as a fearful emotion, Kübler-Ross suggests that, in times of grief, anger should be honoured and people should let it out to enable "temporary structure to the nothingness of grief" (*ibid*., p. 15).

Veronica's anger may stem from the details associated with identifying Liam's body, from afar, from which she spares her mother. Veronica recalls how she accessed the required dental records, details of height, hair colour and a tattoo marking, about which their mother would not necessarily have known. Veronica believes that she is "the one who loved him most" and that her mother would "cry no matter what son he was" unlike the pain she, herself, feels as "the one who has lost something that cannot be replaced. She has plenty more" (p. 11). Here, the reader learns of the distinct bond between Veronica and Liam who were born "eleven months apart" (p. 11) and

> came out of each other's tails; one after another […] we overlapped in there, he just left early, to wait outside." (p. 11)

However, as she watches the pain escaping from her mother's face with "saliva falling from [her] bottom lip now, in gobs and strings" (p. 11), Veronica realises that the bond between siblings could not be compared to a mother's grief:

> it comes down on me like a curse. Who am I to touch, to handle and discard, the stuff of a mother's love?" (p. 11)

Veronica's anger eases as she realises her own grief must be set aside momentarily, to perform an act of tradition:

> I must go over and touch her. I must take her by the shoulders and lift her gently up and away. I will squeeze her arms back down by her sides as I push and guide her to a chair, and put sugar in her cup of tea, though she does not take sugar. I will do all this in deference to a grief that is biological, idiot, timeless (p. 11).

This act of kindness, of performing a ritual of offering sweet tea to those who have had a shock, demonstrates how some practices, even in such trying times, can comfort people. In setting her anger aside, Veronica allows her mother's grief to become the focus and she has given way to

the idea of maternal priority, with a mother placing their child – or children – at the "centre of their universe" (Takseva, 2016, p. 156).

Veronica is held with responsibilities, on behalf of the Hegarty family, such as the formal identification of Liam's body and his repatriation which propels her into the liminal world of the formalities and bureaucracy that surround death. Veronica's first contact is with 'the bereavement people' in Brighton and Hove Council who refer her to a local page. She decides on a coffin style without consulting with her family, as she believes it is her decision: "because I am the one who loved him most" (p. 23). Once in Dublin, Veronica sets the family 'news-chain' in action, considering how each conversation must be phrased, and that no one could be left out (p. 23). Moreover, she is aware that she will end up being the one to receive return calls from each person, with requests for "times and reasons and gory details" (p. 24). She informs her mother about her travel to attend to the formal identification of Liam's remains. As she departs the house, she takes a road that turns out to be her literal liminal space:

> Instead of turning left outside Mammy's, I turn right […] I don't think about where I am going […] I think about nothing – there is nothing to think about." (pp. 25–26)

Veronica's senses are completely held by grief, which snatches her away from her daily routine, expelling all thoughts of usual performances and expectations. She begins to embrace the idea of the liminal space offered by the preparations involved in planning Liam's funeral when she notices that her husband has taken charge of managing their children and their home:

> There is something wonderful about a death, how everything shuts down, and all the ways you thought you were vital are not even vaguely important […] most of the stuff you do is just stupid, really stupid, most of the stuff you do is just nagging and whining and picking up for people who are too lazy even to love you." (p. 27)

This brief respite from responsibility is also a way for Veronica to slip back into stage one of the grieving process, which is denial and isolation. Kübler-Ross theorises that denial or "partial-denial" can be found creeping into all stage of grief, to be replaced with "partial acceptance" (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, pp. 35–36).

Veronica exploits her liminal space further by isolating herself when she learns of Liam's death. This space comforts her in such a way that instead of acknowledging the death, it allows her to partially deny it, as she is encompassed in the liminality of it all. In this context, English explains that: "In her liminal state Veronica can order and make sense of her life and Liam's" (English, 2017, p. 178). She is removed from her deteriorating marriage and the demands of motherhood. Without this isolation, Veronica may not have been offered the time or opportunity to attempt the close recollection of the past as much as she does in these solitary moments. Throughout the novel, Veronica uses these isolated periods to examine the past and

to write down an account of her grandmother's life based on her imagination. The airport road is often her destination when she drives alone. Later in the novel, London's Gatwick airport pulls her into its environs. This suggests a yearning for escape and for leaving the past behind, which is the very opposite of what she is attempting to do in the chronicling of her grandmother's life. Enright is challenging the sympathies by complicating Veronica's aborted attempts to flee the past, in what Meaney calls a "new form of denial" (Meaney, 2011, p. 159). Veronica marvels at the fleeting moments of travel that brought her to Brighton where she begins the process of repatriation. She ponders whether her journey to Brighton was a journey after all, as it seemed anti-climactic with the process of bringing back Liam (p. 41). Hence, the movement of the train seems to contradict the stillness of death. During this train journey, the author alludes to Irish funeral traditions when Veronica shows discomfort with the idea of a wake in the family home, followed by her contempt for the dingy atmosphere of her childhood house (p. 42). She reminisces the front room and tells her sister Bea that the carpet in their house compliments the corpse with its dark, gloomy colours. Sensing Veronica's reluctance to have a traditional wake, Bea yields to guilt trip: "It's how Daddy would have wanted it" (p. 42). This statement causes Veronica to acknowledge that this tradition is one which means a lot to the Irish, especially her father who had a rather traditional outlook to such practices. She thinks she would rather "eat shit" than sit in the front room with neighbours, with Liam's coffin in the corner, saying "One less. One less" and listening to anecdotes of her brother's life: "Oh! He was desperate – that is what we will say" and how he was "sensitive" and "not able for this world" (p. 44). Veronica sees these interactions as the foibles of traditional Irish funerals and not a ritual in which she wants to partake. She remembers her grandfather's wake, when she was eight years old, and how she was forced to view his corpse, reposed in his bed. She had refused to touch the body but nine-year-old Liam was aware of the rituals that were meant to be followed (p. 63). Veronica seems to think Liam surrendered to the expectations from the older people who were part of their lives. She realises this fact, of how Liam fulfilled such norms, only once he is dead.

Veronica's acknowledgement of Liam's practices of rituals demonstrates the first symbolic entrance into the third stage of grief: bargaining. Invoking the 'what if…?' or 'if only' thread, allows one to perceive an alternate story, often accompanied by guilt (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 17). This stage sees the mourner rooted in the past and struggling to "negotiate their way out of the hurt" (*ibid*., p. 15). It is often a key phase which can see the bereaved "holding a piece of the alternative future" where the death never occurred (*ibid*., p. 19). Veronica begins to question herself: If she had shared details of Liam's sexual abuse that

she had witnessed, would his life have been any different? She knew he was troubled, even at the age of seven, and is yielding to the reality of this fact. Her immersion into this stage of grief thus propels her back to their childhood to reflect on these questions. Past traumas are examined as Veronica passes through the different stages of grief and, as Harte elaborates, this as a free-flowing narration which was "formerly unspeakable" (Harte, 2010, p. 188). Furthermore, Costello-Sullivan concurs with Harte's thesis that *The Gathering* grants an immersive experience, allowing the reader their own conscious reading of Veronica and Liam's trauma:

> Veronica's self-conscious narration highlights the act of telling while representing the ways in which narrativizing trauma can be both empowering and subversive at once." (Costello-Sullivan, 2018, p. 54)

In this phase, Veronica has allowed the trauma to enter the liminal space of grief, thus allowing a deeper understanding of her own role in her brother's death, and in turn, her own grief.

This profound moment of grief is overshadowed by a gloomy aura with the introduction of Lamb Nugent. Nugent, a friend of her grandparents and landlord, kneels in prayer, rosary beads in hand and Veronica claims that she never believed men who worshipped (p. 65). He is a constant, dark presence in Veronica's memories and prominently features in her chronicles of her grandmother Ada's life. He appears to have a large part to play in the unfolding story of Liam's life and death, perhaps holding her back from processing her grief through its expected stages. Her associated memories of her first attendance at a wake are ones of forced grief and claustrophobic rituals. She allows a gentler memory of Ada's affectionate lingering over her husband's body to briefly break the darker themes but soon retreats to the 'what if?' thread, associated with the denial/bargaining stage of grief: "Nugent was there all along" (p. 66). Nugent's role interplays between her memories of her grandfather's death and her present with Liam's death. This memory seems to drag her feet through grief itself as she processes her loss in different frames due to the responsibilities that she is held as an adult.

In Brighton, Veronica identifies her brother's corpse and his belongings. She focuses on the second-hand pyjamas in which her brother is reposed, on a mortuary table. This image helps her acknowledge his death and she compares his appearance to Mantegna's Christ (p. 64). This reference to the renaissance artist Andrea Mantegna's work may symbolise how Liam's life has been cut short and he, like the image of Christ, is laid on a slab, in a morgue (Web Gallery of Art, 1996). The sight of a corpse seems to aide in the acceptance of death. Toolis suggests that this sight, especially of a loved one, is a surreal experience which serves as "a visible, tactile, irrefutable statement of [their] present and eternal deadness" (Toolis, 2017,

p. 203). This specific act helps a mourner on their path to acceptance, even if this acts as a temporary stage. Clare puts forward that

> One of the more attractive aspects of life in Ireland is how as a culture we accept and acknowledge death. (Clare in Keane, 1995, p. 15)

Irish funerals carry their own specific traditions and, despite a move toward a more secular society, funeral traditions remain largely the same: a wake, a removal, a mass, a burial, a post-funeral gathering and often the month's mind (remembrance mass). Each of these rituals brings its own traditions and each carries the mourners through phases of liminality. This is evident in Veronica's non-linear journey through grief. Repatriation of Liam's body, the funeral and wake clearly depict how she encounters grief and lapses back and forth through liminal spaces as she traverses through the different stages.

Veronica's disdain for the Irish traditional wake once again surfaces when she is informed about the time required for the repatriation of the body; this will not bode well with "all the cronies who will flock" to the family home, where they can "feast on Liam's poor corpse" (p. 74). The use of the word "feast" is a play on the tradition of the food and drink offered to the mourners who visit the wake and of the idea that such gatherings are fodder for those who enjoy the macabre elements of a funeral, under the guise of *communitas*. Once again, at the Brighton funeral home, Veronica enters a liminal space, unaware and unintentional. She refers to it as a 'hinterland' which is decorated in pastels, with office furniture and housing a "laminated catalogue of coffins" (p. 74). As she flicks through the brochure, she is performing a role, as she already knows what coffin she will choose. She feels the need to express interest in the options. She turns the pages and sees "hideous silk linings, ruchings and slubbings, like being buried in a cinema curtain" (p. 74), alluding to the expected mis-èn-scene associated with funerals. She appreciates the relaxed attitude of the young page and the fact that he "does not pretend", instead describing details about coffins in his 'what-ever' sort of way (p. 75). His gentle touch on her arm moves her, as he leads Veronica away from Liam's body:

> He is the person who comes after you have seen the worst thing. He is the rest of my life." (p. 75)

The funeral director plays an important role in the grieving process. They are often the first person, other than the family members, one approaches after the loss of a loved one. Sligo undertaker, David McGowan, says that it is the role of a funeral director to ease the load of the bereaved:

> to go in and take [the] responsibility off her or him, and allow them to get into that grieving process. (RTÉ, 2019, 02:58)

Indeed, this is the case for Veronica and as she departs from the funeral home, she allows herself to contemplate the circumstances that envelope Liam's death:

> I should play this the way it happened – I should start at the place where Liam walked into the sea – because there is an order to these things that has to be obeyed." (p. 76)

This statement refers to how she projects Liam's death in a linear form, following the sight of his body. Until this point in the story, she restrained from considering his suicide as the anti-climactic end of his life. In the liminal surrounding of Brighton's prom, in the neighbourhood where her brother's body was discovered, she feels that "Liam is in the air" and notes the presence of people, walking along the seaside paths: "The living, with all their smells and holes" (p. 76). She feels overcome with nausea when she thinks of Liam's body; its odour and eventual decay (p. 76). As she gasps, she smells the fresh air from the Brighton beach, at the same time: "the open tang, the calling, the smell of the sea. Such a miracle" (p. 76). These diverse scents reflect the extreme emotions one is subjected to when grieving. Standing across the sea, where Liam breathed his last, Veronica considers the depth of both, Liam's life and compares it with hers, "a smaller life, alive" than Liam had "walking out in the darkness; blood and whiskey into salt sea" (p. 78). She sees his suicide as "more heroic than not to be" (p. 74). Here, the reader observes how she enters the fourth stage of grief: depression, the stage grief hits the hardest.

On her return to Ireland, she examines the aspects in which she failed to help Liam. She observes a certain pattern in the manner in which he left behind his life. She recalls many occasions where she turned her back on him: "In his later, drinking years, I left him every time he arrived" (p. 124). She admits it was not just in the latter years that she left him, but it was long before his addiction became obvious, where she just glared and "walked away" (p. 124). Veronica tries to balance her feelings of guilt with ones of reason. She recalls memories of how Liam behaved when either, drunk or sober; she reasons that he was equally difficult in both states. Although she is aware of the reasons for his behaviour, it still does not ease her conscience (p. 125). This phase is also where liminality of grief is most clearly observable. The intense sadness withdraws people from their lives as they are consumed by the loss. The daily chores one automatically performs become irrelevant and, at times "life seems pointless" (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 21). Initially, when she rings home to check on her children, Veronica is upset that her husband has not continued with their afterschool activities. She accepts that this lapse is not important, that these activities were her own construct and created to give meaning to her role as a mother. Mid-way through the novel, Enright skips forward in time, allowing momentum to this stage of grief. Veronica's depression hits its peak, shortly

after the funeral, when she admits she is "in the horrors" (p. 133). She has left the liminal space where her daily chores were suspended and is "back to school runs and hoovering and ringing other-mothers for other-mother things", but underneath it all "everything was sad" (p. 133). By yielding to feel this sadness and experience depression, Kübler-Ross asserts it will leave "as soon as it has served its purpose" (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 22). She admits that sometimes intervention is required for those who struggle to handle their depression but that, mostly, one must "accept our sadness as an appropriate, natural stage of loss" that allows people to slow down and process their loss (*ibid*., p. 24).

Veronica finally allows herself to cry when she thinks of the logistics surrounding Liam's death. She ponders over the three facts that she learned about her brother's death: that he was wearing a hi-vis jacket, that he had weighed his trousers down by placing stones in their pockets and that he was not wearing any underwear or socks (p. 141). The absence of underwear triggers feelings that finally allow her to deal with and accept the past (p. 142). This is where the final stage of grief, acceptance, comes into play. Kübler-Ross advises that this stage is

> not to be viewed as forgetting your loss, or diminishing your grief, but as an acceptance of reality and understanding that this is now a perpetual reality. (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 25)

Acceptance allows the bereaved to identify and navigate through grief: "a world without our loved one and adjust our lives accordingly" (*ibid*., p. 25). Enright, however, undermines the manner in which Veronica demonstrates her acceptance, as she rewinds back to the past. The non-linear narrative of the novel articulates how the characters traverse through the stages of grief, switching back and forth in time. The funeral and wake are events that might last a couple of hours, but the preparations for the event, succeeded by the period that follows are elements in the novel that help in gauging the grief that has engulfed the Hegarty family.

Liam's wake opens with the comparison drawn between the Irish and British attitudes to funerals. Yet again, the reader is reminded of the liminal space which the Hegarty family now occupies on account of the event that outlines the beginning of the very end:

> The British, I decide, only bury people when they are so dead, you need another word for it. The British wait so long for a funeral that people gather not so much to mourn, as to complain that the corpse is still hanging around […] They do not gather until the emotion is gone. (p. 182)

The delay in Liam's funeral infuriates and upsets Veronica. She resents the British system and deals with the dull staff involved with the process; she realises she needs to be prompt and must "get on with things" (p. 182). The gloomy aura of death, the delay in the repatriation of the

body and the fact that Veronica had to manage the procedures all by herself, leaves her in a state of void. Although she tries to manage the circumstances, the void seems to pull her to a state of uncertainty with various things (p. 182). Dell'Amico suggests that these small moments of uncertainty represent Veronica's heightened awareness of a "serious matter left unattended" (Dell'Amico, 2010, p. 65). The state of uncertainty yet again represents how Veronica has entered her liminal space, where she dutifully returns to the family home to sit with her mother, and occasionally a female sibling. The female Hegartys "sit in a formal kind of way" and Veronica feels the siblings "look diminished, overgrown" and that, despite being middle-aged, they are now "being treated like children again", not necessarily by their mother, but "by death itself" (p. 183). Death has enforced a regressive atmosphere where the Hegartys are forced to cede their hitherto independent-adult roles.

The atmosphere in the Hegarty house is "sombre, empty and tatty". Veronica anticipates the family reunion and the drama that will inevitably ensue: "They are waking up. They are coming back […] A hosting of the Hegartys. God help us" (p. 187). Enright's use of "God help us" could be seen as a flippant phrase, which is often used as a humorous, colloquial term to lighten the mood, but it also suggests a more genuine call to God to offer spiritual assistance at the time of need. Veronica admits to praying in private so this may be a genuine request which is part of the bargaining stage of her grief; praying to God to ease her grief (p. 184).

On the day of the wake, Veronica reluctantly prepares to partake in the rituals associated with the viewing, feasting and storytelling: "I am expecting the house to be crammed" (p. 192). When she learns that there is only a handful of neighbours, she thinks to herself that this should not be surprising:

> Who's going to come and look at a dead body in your living room, when there isn't even a decent glass of wine in the house?" (p. 192)

As she enters the house, she seems to detach herself by thinking about re-carpeting her own house. She then comes to her senses and realises she is looking at Liam, reposed in his coffin:

> The room is almost empty. There is no one here I can talk to about […] carpet[s]. Dead or alive. Liam does not care about these things." (p. 193)

She has pivoted, in one moment, from denial to acceptance, from thinking about redecorating her house, to accepting that her brother is laid out before her. She notices that Liam is dressed in a navy suit and blue shirt ("like a Garda") and realises that this must have been supplied by the Brighton undertaker as it was not her brother's style (p. 193). The layout of the room is not as she had expected, she finds fault with how the coffin is placed, forgetting that the room is

not big enough to accommodate her preferred mis-en-scène. When her sister, Kitty, asks Veronica if she will take over the duty of sitting with Liam ("in case a mourner should be left indecently alone with the corpse"), Veronica refuses: "The whole business is finished for me now, it is beyond finished. I just want to get the damn thing buried and out of the way" (pp. 193–194). It is only when she notices the complete silence in the room that she realises she has been left alone with Liam, "tied […] to this piece of garbage in the front room" (p. 194). Despite her earlier insistence on not wanting to remain in the room, she now prefers this in contrast to greeting the people who come to pay their respects. She chooses to stay with her brother. She accepts that her liminal space is diminishing, as she finds herself within the confines of the wake room.

Veronica comments on the appearance of her mother when she enters the kitchen, responding to mourners paying their respect (p. 197). In due course, her mother has accepted Liam's death and, after the prolonged wait for the return of her son's body, Veronica sees how it has "as they say, 'hit her'. Like a truck" and she notes that this acceptance has afforded "a peacefulness to her" (p. 197). As neighbours offer their condolences, with their short anecdotes and "ritual words", her mother repeats the mantra of the grieved, who must acknowledge the words offered to them: "'Yes', says Mammy, again. 'Thank you. Yes'" (p. 197). Veronica greets her mother and is surprised to be granted with a kiss to her cheek and a "hazy kind of love in her voice – for me, the table set with food, for everyone here" (p. 197). This shows how the rituals and traditions which surround the wake and funeral are a great comfort to the bereaved. Toolis believes that attending an Irish wake is a good way to "rediscover the oldest lessons in humanity" which are the lessons of loving another, how to live through losing them and how to "face your own death with the aid of your community." (Toolis, 2017, p. 262). He suggests that a handshake accompanied by a simple condolence to the bereaved is gratefully received (*ibid*.).

The Hegarty gathering not only allows a space for the family to grieve, but also for the wider community. The rituals and traditions of the Merry Wake have been diluted over time but have not completely disappeared. According to Hourihane:

> There is no strict definition of the Irish wake – it can refer to almost any social interaction associated with a death. But, the classic image – open coffin in the middle of the room, mourners mirthfully toasting the dead – has deep roots in Irish culture (Hourihane 2020, p. 55).

There is plenty of food at Liam's wake and Veronica observes the feast prepared for those visiting. She notes the staple foods of "yet another family gathering", foods of their past,

prepared by family members before returning to the family home. Veronica also notes the absence of alcohol: "There is no wine" (p. 201). She corrects this statement to note that there are, indeed, two bottles of wine on the table, which she thinks are "perhaps in honour of Liam's prodigious drinking" (p. 201). More chairs are added to the room, to enable the feast to commence. The rituals of eating and drinking at a wake are a way of accepting the "ordinariness of it all" and that death is the end, whether climactic or anti-climactic (Toolis, 2017, p. 263). Veronica prefers to stand instead of sitting and watches her family "scoffing the funeral meats" (p. 192). She is slightly repulsed as she observes the way people are feasting. She thinks her uncle Ernest "is particularly terrible to watch", "[e]ven my mother eats with a sudden greed" and her neighbours "forget themselves so much as to scoff the lot" (p. 202). Veronica's uncle Val is briefly introduced, allowing for her brother's suicide to be acknowledged. At the wake she observes him "helping himself" to the "array of little treats, concerned to get a decent amount of food into himself" and this allows the author to insert additional anecdotes, relating to the efforts made to assist Liam in his troubled life and addresses both the past and present:

> Uncle Val loved endings. He was especially fond of suicides. He used to talk us through the neighbour's houses, and tell us who shot himself and who used the rope […] It occurs to me that I wasn't the only one who tried to save Liam – this man tried too, and […] will always feel guilty that he did not succeed. The word 'suicide' is in the air for the first time – the way we all failed (pp. 202–203).

Sometimes grief can alter memories of the deceased. Bleaker times are often airbrushed out of memory, but the presence of mourners can result in the less-edited memories and stories of the deceased. The above extract aids in explaining Val's role in Liam's life may not have been recognised if it were not for these memories which would not have been stirred without the wake.

Veronica realises she needs some alcoholic escape:

> I want to get drunk. Suddenly. This is a calamitous thing to want, but it cannot be denied […] 'We need a bottle of something. Is there a bottle, for after?'" (p. 204)

When the mourners have departed, the family produce some alcohol and proceed to conform to the tradition of raising a glass to the dead:

> Ita comes in from the corpse room and plonks a bottle of peculiar whiskey in the middle of the table […] This ritual is strange for us because, although the Hegartys all drink, we never drink together." (p. 208)

This, in turn, leads to loosened tongues and the revealing of secrets from the home. Without the liminal space of the wake, this opportunity to discuss family issues would not have arrived. Equally, without the alcohol, the conversations may have been more censored. Veronica

considers how she would disclose about Liam's abuse to her family: "*I never told any of them the truth*" (p. 207). Enright's use of italics not only shows her internal dialogue but displays the importance of this declaration. Suddenly, Veronica feels guilty about the situation. Nevertheless, she nudges away the idea of unravelling the truth aside, as she considered that it was not the right moment: "There are other things, surely, to talk about. There are other things to be revealed" (p. 207). There is a shift in the emotion as tensions release when the visitors leave. Voices are raised, a plate and knife held aloft, "like it is dripping in blood" (p. 208). Her brother Jem is dispatched to the off-licence to purchase wine. The siblings surrender to their need to unwind and prepare to break their family tradition of never drinking together. Kübler-Ross suggests that the "numbness or stoicism" associated with the early stages of grief are often replaced with "anger and rage" but eventually will settle as a feeling of loss (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 75). The sombre atmosphere in the house reflects the mood of the siblings. Veronica feels "like we are all dead. And that's just fine" (p. 209). When the wine arrives, the siblings "do not toast the dead but merely drink and chat, as ordinary people might do" (p. 209). English suggests that the ordinariness of the chatting over wine is "separating the siblings from the facts of death" and allows them to compartmentalise their grief and set it aside, even for a brief time (English, 2017, p. 174). As the night progresses, the siblings continue the gathering in the Hegarty kitchen, with a continuing rota of sitting with the corpse. They talk of things which would normally be forbidden topics: money, sexuality, each other's appearances, and Veronica notices this fact: "Something has happened to this family. The knot has come loose" (p. 210). When Veronica returns to her own home, she relinquishes the responsibility of sitting with the corpse to her siblings. The reader learns that she had "made a bit of a fuss in the front room" and had been given "a pill" to help her relax. She hears that there had been a game of cards in the wake room, which is a nod to the Merry Wake, where games were traditionally played in the presence of the corpse (O'Connell, 2009). Veronica is drained by her grief and by the gathering of the Hegarty clan. Her resurfaced memories have shifted her stoic response to grief into one of utter exhaustion.

The novel's constant switching between the past and the present allows for a non-linear reading of Veronica's grief and her examination of past traumas. Five months down the line, Veronica still struggles to accept Liam's death. She battles with her memories and their unreliability but knows she must face the truth: "I owe it to Liam to make things clear" (p. 223). Veronica needs to process Liam's death at her own pace, although she has admitted his fate as it was. She drives the airport road again, allowing her car to "go where it wants, which is North, as always" (p. 237). With aircraft flying overhead, Veronica ignores the road home:

"I go to the airport instead and, after a little while, I get on a plane" (p. 239). She needs some isolation that can be accessed by entering the liminal space. Kübler-Ross suggests that the journey to finding acceptance affords the chance to "live again, but we cannot do so until we have given grief its time" (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 28). Veronica is giving her grief the time by boarding a flight and escaping her daily norms. This liminal space is something Veronica needs to help her process her grief, at her own pace.

Again, the novel switches back to the day of Liam's funeral and Veronica notes the large attendance, ironically commenting that "[s]uicides always pull a good crowd" (p. 240). She believes they have turned up "on principle" due to the nature of Liam's death (p. 240). She finds herself embracing the Irish way with death:

> And suddenly I feel very Irish as I reach out to take her hand in both my hands, to thank her for making the journey, to welcome her in and allow her to grieve. (p. 241)

Veronica moves down the church aisle, with the remaining Hegartys, and feels "drowned in the emotion, whether love or sadness, that floods my chest" (p. 243). She finds that she cannot cry but is aware that she is expected to show some form of grief, she readies her face:

> My face sets into the mask of a woman weeping, one half pulled into a wail that the other half will not allow. There are no tears. My head twists away from whichever side of the church is most interested in my grief, only to show it to the other side (p. 243).

Once again, Enright uses the face as a way of displaying grief, whether genuine or not. Veronica's lack of tears troubles her, as she feels she is disappointing the mourners who expect outward signs of emotion. A metaphorical mask is used to appease the congregation.

Following the funeral mass, as per tradition, the family accept condolences from mourners, at the church entrance. Veronica describes "shaking five hundred people's hands" half of whom she does not know (p. 245). The usual apologies are uttered:

> 'I'm very sorry for your trouble.' […] 'I'm very sorry' and 'It's a great loss.' All of them apologising for the fact that someone you love is dead." (p. 245)

Toolis describes this as a typical aspect of the Irish funeral, where people come "in great numbers" and are "under a moral obligation to shake the hands of the principal bereaved" and to apologise for your loss (Many Rivers, 2018, 03:45). He suggests this is a way of "countering death in Ireland" as it is not just the process of shaking hands, but a way of saying "'they're dead, they're dead, they're dead', they're dead, they're dead'" which allows for the bereaved to accept that their loved one is not coming back (*ibid*., 04:14). In Ireland, this is a cultural experience that shows no sign of waning. Many mourners attend the after-supper in a local hotel, like the wake, there is a feast: "two hundred people I sort of know are sitting down to

soup or melon, followed by salmon or beef" (p. 247). The presence of young children is noted, speeches are performed, and songs are sung. When a small child shouts "'Shut up'", the room fills with laughter and Veronica declares that she has "never been to a happier funeral" (p. 248). The Irish funeral rites and traditions, in many ways, allow for a space to process grief. Veronica embraces the laughter as it offers a break from the darkness of the day.

The novel approaches its end with Veronica's stay in a London Gatwick airport hotel, which she describes as an indeterminate, in-between space: "not England. This is the flying city. This is extra time" (p. 255). After five months of insomnia, in this particular phase of liminality, she is able to sleep and is loath to leave. As she wanders through the shops in the boarding area, preparing for her return to Dublin, she feels tempted to return to the bland hotel but knows she must return home. She knows "this time the plane will land properly" and recalls that when she flew home with Liam's body "it didn't land properly" (p. 259). She recalls the moment of landing in Dublin, five months ago, and how it

> wasn't the place I used to know. Perhaps none of it was real. I feel like I have spent the last five months up in the air." (p. 259)

This shows how she is willing to leave the liminal space and return to her normal life. Her journey through the Five Stages of Grief has come to a natural end. When the previous four stages have been processed, the fifth stage of grief can be the most difficult to enter. Kübler-Ross proposes that this acceptance is "not a resigned and hopeless" one, but rather "a monumental task which is required to achieve this stage" (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, pp. 99, 105). The reader is not offered any resolution to Liam's narrative, instead, his death has caused a shift in Veronica's personal life. This is her journey to accept the past and the future without her closest sibling.

In conclusion, Enright demonstrates the five stages of grief in a non-linear narrative, which (unintentionally) compliments the theory postulated by Kübler-Ross. In *The Gathering*, the author has allowed for the liminal space to become a tangible rationale, rather than merely a theory within a theory. Veronica uses the liminal space afforded to her, in grief, to literally escape from her daily norms and thus allows for her own personal progression through her stages of grief. Breffni McGuinness, a National Bereavement Development Specialist working with Irish Hospice Foundation, suggests that grief cannot be treated as a rigid, structural theory:

> [W]hile death is an event, grieving itself is a process, and that process, it isn't linear…[a bit like] a rollercoaster, it kind of goes up and down." (Irish Hospice, 2021, 09.40)

Each member of the Hegarty family process their grief in their own way, with Veronica choosing to blend the past with the present to facilitate her personal journey through her non-

linear stages of grief. The rituals and traditions associated with Liam's wake provided her the liminal space to process her grief, with its reliance on hidden memory and her analysis of their shared past. English suggests that Enright's novel deals with the trauma that repression of grief can cause on a family and that "the past must be re-examined, the pain exposed, before grief can be overcome" (English, 2013, p. 204). However, grief needs to be allowed time and space to settle into the mourner's new life, without the deceased. The stages of grief can assist the transition from liminal to post-liminal and allow for flexibility in dealing with memory, trauma, and depression. Kübler-Ross's model may have caused critical debate, but it opened a narrative which still resounds today, albeit in a more fluid representation of how people deal with grief. Enright's *The Gathering* shows how the non-linear approach to grief is vital in allowing the bereaved to accept that some narratives do not have obvious conclusions. In allowing Veronica to pass through each stage of grief, Enright has created an immersive experience for the reader, as they navigate through the liminal space offered by the Irish funeral and wake. The subtle shifts between the stages of grief broaden the narrative and increase the realities of life before and after the loss of a loved one.

Works cited

Costello-Sullivan, K. (2018) *Trauma and Recovery in the Twenty-First-Century Irish Novel*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Dell'Amico C. (2010) "Anne Enright's *The Gathering*: Trauma, Testimony, Memory." *New Hibernia Review*, 14 (3), pp. 59–74.

English, B. (2013) "'Laying Out the Bones: Death, Trauma and the Irish Family in Colm Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship* and Anne Enright's *The Gathering*'." In: Y. O'Keeffe and C. Reese (eds.) *New Voices, Inherited Lines: Literary and Cultural Representations of the Irish Family*. Bern: Peter Lang Verlag, pp. 203–223.

English, B. (2017) *Laying Out the Bones: Death and Dying in the Modern Irish Novel*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Enright, A. (2007) *The Gathering.* London: Johnathan Cape.

Harte, L. (2010) "Mourning Remains Unsolved: Trauma and Survival in Anne Enright's The Gathering." *Literature Interpretation Theory,* 21(3), pp. 187–204.

Hourihane, A.M. (2021) *Sorry for Your Trouble: The Irish Way with Death.* Dublin: Penguin Sandycove.

Irish Hospice (2021) "Understanding Grief and Loss with Breffni Mc Guinness". [online video] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SAT0i5Pu5I [Accessed 19 Feb 2023].

Keane, C. (1995) *Death and Dying*. Dublin: Mercier Press.

Kübler-Ross, E. and Kessler, D. (2005) *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Grief*. London: Simon and Schuster.

Many Rivers (2018) "My Father's Wake writer Kevin Toolis shares the secrets of the Irish Wake" [online video] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALT8zbjnjkY [Accessed 19 Feb 2023].

Meaney, G. (2011) "Waking the Dead: Antigone, Ismene and Anne Enright's Narrators in Mourning." In: Bracken, C. and Cahill, S. (eds.) *Anne Enright*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, pp. 145–164.

Ní Éigeartaigh, A. (2022) *The Graveyard in Literature: Liminality and Social Critique.* Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

O'Connell, B. (2009) "Lifting the Lid on Irish Wakes." *The Irish Times*, 25 March. [online] Available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/lifting-the-lid-on-irish-wakes-1.729881 [Accessed 19 Feb 2023].

RTÉ Player (2019) *The Funeral Director*. [documentary film] Available at: https://www.rte.ie/player/movie/the-funeral-director-s1-e1/118399528355 [Accessed 19 Feb 2023].

Takseva, T. (2016) "Mother Love, Maternal Ambivalence, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering." *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 32(1), pp. 152–168.

Toolis, K. (2017) *My Father's Wake: How the Irish Teach us to Live, Love and Die*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Van Gennep, A. (1960) *The Rites of Passage*. Translated by M.B. Vizedom and G.L. Caffee. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Web Gallery of Art. (1996) "The Lamentation over the Dead Christ" [online] Available at: https://www.wga.hu/html_m/m/mantegna/09/1deadchr.html [Accessed 19 Feb 2023].

Wheeler Centre (2017) *Family and Fiction: Anne Enright*. [online video] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDpu5B-Gntc [Accessed 19 Feb 2023].