Funerary Rituals and Traditions in Twenty-First Century Irish Literature:

Navigating Grief in a Liminal Space.

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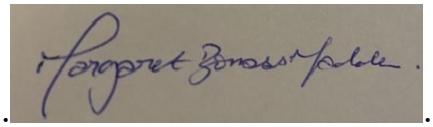
Author Signature: .....  .....

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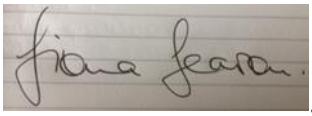
Supervisor Signature: .....  .....

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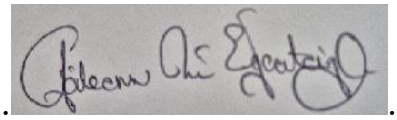
Supervisor Signature: .....  .....

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Abstract

This thesis explores how grief and funerary rituals are portrayed in twenty-first century Irish literature, focusing on the ways in which funerals and wakes function as liminal spaces that illuminate the emotional and psychological processes of mourning. Addressing a gap in research, which often overlooks the literary representation of funerary traditions in post-2000 Irish literature, this study examines works by authors such as Anne Enright, Mary Costello, Kathleen MacMahon, and Donal Ryan.

Using an interdisciplinary approach that integrates literary analysis with psychological, anthropological and medical perspectives on grief, this research argues that funerary rituals act as narrative tools for exploring the complexities of grief and the intersections of personal loss, collective identity and societal change. These rituals, deeply rooted in tradition yet reimagined for modern contexts, create transitional spaces where characters navigate transformation, healing, alienation and their reintegration into community life.

Drawing on Arnold van Gennep's theory of liminality, Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* and including contemporary grief theory, this thesis examines how Irish literature reflects broader cultural concerns, including national identity, secularisation, and the preservation of tradition. It demonstrates how funerary settings serve as spaces for personal reflection and communal negotiation, offering insights into how grief is experienced and understood in a rapidly evolving society.

This research makes an original contribution to Irish studies by bridging literary analysis with interdisciplinary perspectives, revealing how funerary traditions remain central to Irish culture while continuing to evolve in response to modernity.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to a great number of people who helped support and encourage me throughout this research. Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisors Dr Fiona Fearon and Dr Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh for the guidance, advice and support they have given me throughout this journey. I would also like to thank Dundalk Institute of Technology and Dublin College University for the fee funding that they provided throughout the course of this PhD. This research received partial funding under the DkIT Postgraduate Research Scholarship Scheme HEACovid-19 Relief for Researchers scheme.

While completing edits on this thesis, my father passed away. One moment I was writing about how the Irish place great importance on the rituals surrounding death, dying, and funerals, and the next, I found myself living through this experience in real time. I sat in a funeral director's office, writing an obituary for *The Irish Times* and choosing a willow coffin. It felt surreal, as I had been researching the Irish funeral tradition for nearly eight years. Having lost both my mother and brother in the previous decades, I was now acutely aware of the intricacies of the Irish wake and funeral. I am deeply grateful for the understanding and extra time granted to me by the external examiners to complete my edits during this difficult time.

Although this research was a solo journey, I would like to acknowledge that without the support of my husband, Declan, and our five children, Sarah, Erin, Finn, Mia and Endija, this PhD would never have been possible. They have encouraged me for over five years and, when I was losing faith, they were insistent that I continue to fulfil my dream. They are my life, my soul and my everything. I would also like to thank all the staff in the adjacent offices of Student Learning and Development Centre. They were always on hand with moral

support and were instrumental in keeping me sane. Huge thanks to Michelle, Margaret, Laura, Gerry, Moira and Orla. Your kindness will never be forgotten.

Finally, I would like to thank Donal Ryan (whose words inspired this PhD) and the wonderful Irish writing community for their fine literary work. Literature is the gift that keeps on giving. I hope that I have offered an insightful view into the importance we place on the traditional Irish funeral and wake and how, when this was taken from us during Covid19, we lost more than our loved ones. We lost our chance to say goodbye and the chance to grieve in our own, unique way.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

> the task of mourning interferes with life itself […] mourning is known to be as absorbing and fulfilling as it is painful (Freud, A., 1954, 313).

The notion of liminal space in periods of grief is fundamental to this thesis. It provides an opportunity for authors to develop narratives focused on grief, ritual, and tradition, enabling a deep exploration of these themes. As Victor Turner explains, "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 2002, 58). This thesis explores how the liminal spaces inherent in Irish funerary practices - from the wake to the funeral - are represented in twenty-first century Irish literature and how these spaces enable a complex portrayal of grief, ritual, and identity. Building on established theories of liminality and grief studies, this research examines how contemporary Irish authors reinterpret traditional practices to address modern themes. Specifically, the central research question asks: How do Irish funerary traditions and the associated liminal spaces influence the narrative treatment of grief, community and identity in contemporary Irish literature?

To address this question, the study investigates how the concept of liminality, as articulated by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, is employed in Irish literature to shape the experiences of mourning and transition. The analysis also examines how these traditions provide a framework for authors to navigate themes of trauma, memory, and collective identity. By focusing on the central role of the wake and funeral, the thesis evaluates how these rituals create narrative opportunities for exploring character development, cultural continuity and communal resilience. This research aims to analyse the depiction of grief and the role of funerary rituals in contemporary Irish literature, connecting these depictions to the broader cultural and

emotional landscape of Irish literature. This objective situates the research within a wider discourse on grief studies, offering insights into how these narratives reflect and shape collective understandings of mourning and identity in an Irish context. It also examines the cultural and narrative significance of liminal spaces in Irish mourning traditions and assesses how Irish literature uses these traditions to explore themes of community, identity, and resilience.

Furthermore, it investigates the psychological and social frameworks of grief as represented in key literary works, drawing on theories of liminality, communitas, and grief studies, while contributing to the broader field of Irish studies by offering new insights into the literary and cultural representation of death and mourning. Irish funerary traditions, including the wake and funeral, hold a central place in the cultural and communal life of Ireland. These rituals are rich in symbolism and function as liminal spaces that suspend the everyday and offer a unique period for reflection and transformation. Twenty-first century Irish literature continues to engage with these traditions, presenting them as both cultural constants and evolving practices.

This thesis contributes to Irish studies by highlighting how these customs are reimagined in literature to address contemporary issues of grief, loss, and identity. The study's originality lies in its multi-faceted approach. By integrating theoretical perspectives from anthropology, psychology, and literary studies, it provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of funerary rituals in shaping narrative structure and thematic exploration. This approach reveals how contemporary Irish literature reinterprets traditional practices to navigate the complexities of modern grief. The theoretical foundation of this thesis is grounded in Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage and Victor Turner's elaboration on liminality and communitas. These frameworks are particularly relevant to Irish funerary traditions as they offer a structured understanding of the transitional nature of grief and mourning. Van Gennep's tripartite model

provides insight into how the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation are reflected in the rituals surrounding death, while Turner's concept of communitas highlights the profound communal bonds that form during these periods, a feature deeply embedded in Irish cultural practices. Van Gennep's tripartite model - preliminal, liminal, and postliminal - offers a framework for understanding the transitional stages of mourning, while Turner's concept of communitas highlights the communal bonds forged during these liminal periods (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 2002).

Building on these theories, the research incorporates insights from grief studies, including the works of Freud, Bowlby and Kübler-Ross, to examine the psychological dimensions of mourning. By juxtaposing these frameworks with literary analysis, the thesis investigates how authors depict the disorienting, transformative and often non-linear nature of grief. The scope of the study includes a range of contemporary Irish literary works, from novels and short stories to memoirs and essays. These texts were selected based on their thematic focus on grief, ritual and community, as well as their engagement with the concept of liminal spaces. They are analysed to uncover how liminal spaces and funerary rituals are employed to explore the complexities of grief and identity, offering a representative cross-section of contemporary Irish literature that reflects diverse perspectives and contexts. Key texts include Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007), John McGahern's *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002), Donal Ryan's *The Thing About December* (2014) and Kathleen MacMahon's *Nothing but Blue Sky* (2020), among others. The thesis explores the liminal space in *The Gathering*, with a focus on how grief disrupts and redefines familial and personal identities. It examines the role of funerary rituals in rural Irish communities through works by McGahern, Trevor, and Ryan, highlighting the interplay between tradition and modernity. It investigates the concept of ambiguous loss in works such as Ryan's *From a Low and Quiet Sea* and de Waal's *The Trick to Time*, addressing the challenges of mourning without closure. It analyses the impact of funerary rituals on

children in Irish literature, considering their unique perspectives on grief and the communal aspects of mourning. Finally, it synthesises the findings and reflects on the enduring relevance of Irish funerary traditions in contemporary literature.

This thesis aims to illuminate the central role of funerary rituals and liminal spaces in shaping the narratives of grief and identity in contemporary Irish literature. By examining the interplay between tradition, community, and personal transformation, it offers a deeper understanding of how Irish writers continue to engage with the cultural and emotional dimensions of death. The findings not only contribute to the broader discourse on grief studies by deepening our understanding of the psychological and communal aspects of mourning but also enhance the field of Irish literature by revealing how these traditions are reimagined to address contemporary societal and cultural shifts.

Grieving can lead to sudden shifts in emotion and to a numbness that defies the expected feeling of loss. The role of the wake is to acknowledge the passing of someone who had been a part of one's life and to share in a remembrance of their life. It allows the recently bereaved to engage with mourners and to assist in their processing of their loss. Bridget English believes that the tradition of the Irish wake has remained enduringly popular within Irish culture, as it serves to facilitate the passage from life to death and offers the living a means to articulate their grief while also serving as a reminder of their own vitality (English, 2017, 7). The Irish wake serves as a poignant testament to the significant role of community in Irish culture. With deep roots in centuries-old traditions, a wake transcends being a mere solemn occasion for mourning; it embodies a communal event that underscores the interconnections among individuals in the broader social fabric. The gathering of friends, family and neighbours at this difficult time has a dual purpose: collectively mourning the departed and providing comfort and support to those

who remain. The exchange of stories, shared laughter, and shared tears during an Irish wake establish a communal environment where the weight of grief is collectively shouldered, and the warmth of human connection offers solace. This communal custom not only pays tribute to the life of the departed but also reinforces the notion that, in times of sorrow, the strength derived from community serves as a source of resilience and healing. The Irish wake, with its emphasis on collective grief and support, highlights the enduring truth that community bonds persist even in the face of loss.

The funerary rituals prevalent in rural Ireland hold considerable prominence within the landscape of Irish literature. In the community-based novels used in this thesis, there are examples of the oral traditions of Ireland, with narrative used as way of reliving the past and memorising the stories of the deceased. As suggested by Heather Ingman, the storytelling tradition is evident in the work of many writers who have sought to integrate the oral tradition's spoken voice into their fiction (Ingman, 2009, 3-4). The funerary tradition is a historical process passed down and evolved through a dialogic imagination across generations (Witoscek and Sheeran, 1998, 117). Twentieth-century Irish literature displays elements of the storytelling tradition. In Seumas O'Kelly's 1919 novella, *The Weaver's Grave*, the dispute between two elderly men regarding the appropriate burial site for the deceased weaver is narrated with understated simplicity, resulting in a liminal opportunity to orate the past, present and future. The importance of *communitas* can be seen in McGahern's 1992 short story, "The Country Funeral", which illustrates the effects of a funeral on a rural Irish community. The three Ryan brothers return to Glora Beg to attend their uncle Peter's funeral. This event exposes the social interactions, traditions and personal connections among the community, with emphasis on the ingrained customs and the collective emotional responses to death. Twenty-first century Irish literature continues to recognise the importance of the wake and funeral and reconstructs a culture where the transition to modernity has been extended and integrated into daily life,

portraying Ireland as a transitional space, a gateway to the modern world (Witoscek and Sheeran, 1998, 117).

The theoretical concept of the liminal space originates with French anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep's *Les Rites de Passage* (1960). Van Gennep argues that the rites associated with ceremonies which we mark (such as marriage, confirmation and funerals) enable a transition from the life one knows before the ceremony to the one experienced thereafter. He suggests that each rite can be catalogued under three separate stages: *preliminal*, *liminal* and *postliminal* and each stage contains its own micro-stages (van Gennep, 1960, 11). These rites of separation remove the person from their original status, place them in a temporary "sacred" space and then conclude with a re-incorporation into the community (van Gennep, 1960, 1). Van Gennep theorises that "degrees of kinship" play an important role during the mourning period and suspension of the mourner's social life is the norm (van Gennep, 1960, 148).

Victor Turner further extended van Gennep's theories by examining it in close association with the thresholds of rituals (Abrahams in Turner, 1995, ix). This led to his theory of *Communitas*, what Schechner calls: "the experience of ritual camaraderie" (Schechner, 2003, 70). This ritual *Communitas* can assist the journey through the tripartite processual form of liminality, helping people "deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed, or violate the norms of daily life" (Schechner, 2003, 52). The transitional nature of funerary traditions allows and supports the evolution of literary forms. Examinations of the theoretical framework within grief studies provide deeper insights into the narratives employed by authors in a diverse range of contemporary Irish literature that explores the liminal space experienced by protagonists. This analysis incorporates examples that encompass multiple generations, set across diverse contexts and time periods. A funeral is a ritual which features in

many Irish novels and, more often than not, unfolds in the tripartite structure proposed by van Gennep and Turner. This chapter will expand on these theories and will include studies from both Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud, along with contemporary theorists such as John Bowlby and Colin Murray Parks. In broadening the scope of the literature surrounding grief this approach presents an opportunity to unveil examples from Irish literature that may not have been readily apparent. This liminal space creates the opportunity for an author to introduce a narrative that may have been closed to them in the confines of daily life.

In chapter 2, an example of this transitional arena be seen in Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007), where the protagonist is plunged into the liminal space following her brother's unexpected death. *The Gathering* is afforded a stand-alone chapter as it is a novel that is grounded in the liminal arena of grief and mourning. While the significance of death and childhood trauma in *The Gathering* have been widely acknowledged, the trauma of grief has not received much attention in the critical literature (Li, 2022, 38). Enright's contributions merit further consideration in the context of research on grief, trauma and family, however, I believe that *The Gathering* demands particular attention for its adept utilisation of the liminal space encompassing the wake and funeral. In this chapter, I will delve into the predominant themes of grief, ritual, and tradition in the novel and, in employing Kübler Ross's The Five Stages of Grief theory, I aim to analyse how Enright employs a non-linear approach to Veronica's journey through each stage of grief. Although Kübler-Ross's model has generated considerable controversy[1], it set in motion a discussion that endures today, albeit in a more adaptable depiction of how individuals navigate grief. This chapter includes reference to work of Joseph Valente and Margot Gayle Bakus who address the theory of children's trauma in *The Gathering*. This broadens the understanding of Veronica's journey through her grief. narrative shows how

[1] Further discussion of the resistance to Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief theory will be provided later in the Introduction.

Liam's death resulted in the resurgence of deeply buried memories and prompted a transitional journey and an acceptance of the traumatic past and a present which requires a novel approach. Veronica uses the transitional period of grief to address not only the loss of her brother, but to process fragmented memories of trauma that she can no longer ignore. She does this through contemplation, seclusion and detachment which are facilitated through the liminal space she is granted following Liam's death.

William Trevor's *Love and Summer* (2010), John MacGahern's *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) and Donal Ryan's *The Thing About December* (2014) are examined in chapter 3. Each novel features funerals in rural Ireland and show how ritual and tradition are an essential part of the grieving process. The communities which feature in each novel are ones with distinct hierarchies relying on communal participation to function to their best ability. Drawing on key elements of Victor Turner's theory of *communitas* Each author draws attention to the cultural expression of funerary traditions, illustrating how these practices cultivate a strong sense of shared identity and community solidarity. In doing so, they underscore the profound importance that Irish culture places on death-related rituals, showcasing their role in uniting communities, honouring the deceased and reaffirming collective values and beliefs. The communities are vividly portrayed through language, setting and nuanced character development. Moreover, each novel illustrates the community adopting a role that becomes almost characteristic within the narrative; a dynamic that is further highlighted through the presence of the funeral.

Although set in different time periods, the novels examined in this chapter all highlight the importance of supporting individuals who have experienced loss, primarily through the adherence to cultural customs and traditions. *Communitas* plays a crucial role in Irish burial

practices, offering the environment and time needed to process grief. It facilitates a temporary restructuring of familial and community hierarchies, enabling the bereaved to inhabit a liminal space during their mourning. The research of scholars like Hand, Maher and Flannery has significantly contributed to the study of McGahern's work. Building on their insights, my aim is to further develop this field by analysing *That They May Face the Rising Sun* through the perspective of grief and liminal space. Similarly, considerable research has been dedicated to Ryan's work, with studies by Flannery, Thurlow, Altuna-García de Salazar et al. However, much of this research has focused primarily on the themes of Post-Celtic Tiger fiction and rural identity. Analysing *The Thing About December* within the context of grief studies introduces a fresh perspective on Ryan's work. The mid-century setting for Trevor's *Love and Summer* affords a glimpse into a rural Irish community who are greatly influenced by the Church and how this influence has shaped the lives of the protagonist.

In chapter 4, the primary theorist used is Pauline Boss, particularly in the exploration of situations where the absence of a physical body gives rise to the concept of ambiguous loss. Boss's theory explores how this ambiguous loss disrupts the grieving process and examines how it is possible to suffer complicated grief when there is no body to bury. While the literature used in this chapter each show a different type of loss, each portrays the importance of saying goodbye, following a death. In situations where there are no discernible remains available for burial or cremation, mourners are confronted with a profound disruption to the conventional grieving process, impeding their customary progression into the post-liminal space. This undefined state of liminality places a distinct set of psychological and emotional burdens on the bereaved, creating feelings of uncertainty and disorientation. The concept of ambiguous loss becomes especially significant in such situations, as those grieving grapple with the uncertain nature of their loss. Scholars like Boss have articulated this idea, highlighting the psychological and emotional challenges that arise when traditional indicators of bereavement are absent. In

cases where physical remains are lacking, individuals find themselves navigating the emotional landscape of loss without the usual reference points that typically guide the mourning process. The absence of traditional funerary rituals makes the grieving process less clear-cut, contributing to an extended and emotionally challenging period of liminality. Kathleen MacMahon's *Nothing but Blue Sky* (2020) introduces David, a widower whose wife was a passenger on a flight which crashed, following a terrorist attack; Donal Ryan's *From a Low and Quiet Sea* (2018) explores the ambiguous loss of Farouk, a Syrian refugee whose family drowned while crossing the Mediterranean Sea; and Kit de Waal's *The Trick to Time* (2018) which examines stillbirth and Ambiguous Loss. This analysis also considers Gillian Binchy's 2014 novel, *Ruby's Tuesday*, Emilie Pine's 2018 collection of essays, *Notes to Self* and Nuala O'Connor's essay "Lacrimosa/Tears", which offer a valuable opportunity to apply the theory of ambiguous loss to literary works addressing the theme of infertility.

Without the rituals and traditions of the funeral, mourners are suspended in their grief. The Covid-19 era funerals underscored the significance of Irish funeral rites and rituals, emphasising the necessity of bidding farewell to facilitate a proper transition to the subsequent stage of grief. The inability to visit the dying patient or see the remains of the deceased was a form of ambiguous loss. The traditional ways we marked our grief, and the restrictions enforced, meant that communities were prevented from rallying around mourners, as per our long-standing tradition. Since the onset of Covid-19, the importance of *communitas* has never seemed so relevant. The liminal phase was distorted and the lack of closure, through ritual and tradition, may yet delay the post-liminal phase of grief for many years to come[2].

Finally, in chapter 5, I examine the diverse reactions of children across different age groups in response to the Irish wake and funeral. A variety of age ranges are considered,

[2] Further mention of the effects of Covid-19 on the grieving process will be addressed in chapter 4.

including the bereaved children featured in Mary Costello's *Academy Street* (2015), Kevin Power's *Bad Day in Blackrock* (2008), Fiona Scarlett's *Boys Don't Cry* (2021) and Doreen Finn's *My Buried Life* (2015). Kit de Waal's *My Name is Leon* (2016) and Claire Keegan's *Foster* (2010) will show the effects of complicated loss for children who are placed in foster care, while additional readings will encompass Séamus O'Reilly's non-fiction work *Did You Hear Mammy Died?* (2021) and Sarah Crossan's verse novel *One* (2015), along with a brief analysis of the contemporary famine fiction *The Flight of the Wren* (2018) by Orla McAlinden. The psychological impact of the child's involvement is analysed, revealing potential benefits for their individual grief processes.

The reading of contemporary fiction and non-fiction provides insight into comparable reactions to the wake environment, where children display an equal fascination with elements such as food and attire, alongside the physical remains in the room. In this chapter the perspectives of theorists are juxtaposed with the reactions of fictional children, contributing to an understanding of why children assign significance to their surroundings. Furthermore, the incorporation of select memoir writings aids in visualising the perspective of children during an Irish funeral. A funeral for a child or young individual differs from that of an adult. Adults possess an understanding of death, the dying process and the diverse expectations and behaviours associated with the loss of a loved one. Irish writers have the ability to employ a child's perspective to present a more innocent outlook on death, without diminishing the impact relative to narratives featuring a more mature protagonist. Drawing from many examples from post-2000 Irish literature, I analyse how the child's eye view of the Irish funeral shows how the performative actions of the wake and funeral may affect children differently. This impact is contingent upon the child's age and the specific circumstances surrounding the death. Nonetheless, the rites and rituals play a crucial role in guiding the child through the liminal space of their grief. How children experience grief will also be examined, using examples from

various forms of literature and psychological theory used to portray the varying degrees of understanding and coping mechanism of the child and adolescent. Viewing grief from a child's eye can offer a different perspective on grief and mourning and highlights the importance of ritual and tradition, no matter the age of the bereaved. Drawing on the work of scholars like Sanders, Doka and Neimeyer offers a comprehensive analysis of children's needs during periods of grief and mourning. The ways in which children experience grief differ according to their developmental stage and this study will review a range of literature to illustrate the diverse coping strategies they use.

As suggested in this thesis, a new era of Irish writing has embraced the Irish funerary tradition and given a contemporary look at how the Irish "do death well" (Sweeney, 2021, 17). Comprehending the collective body of work concerning the history of the Irish funeral and wake grief offers deeper insight into contemporary attitudes to grief and mourning, as well as into twenty-first-century literature that addresses these themes.

The concept of the liminal space originates with French anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep's *Les rites de passage*. Originally published in 1909, it was not until the 1960 English translation was published - becoming more accessible to Western academics - that van Gennep's hypothesis on liminality had an impact on the scholarly world (Kertzer, 2019, vii). In his 2019 introduction to *The Rites of Passage*, David I. Kertzer notes that Solon Kimbell's suggestion to translate van Gennep's book had "a major influence on disciplines well beyond anthropology" (Kertzer, 2019, xxv). Furthermore, he suggests that van Gennep was a major influence in the works of theorists such as Victor Turner and Mary Douglas (Kertzer, 2019, xxvii). Turner built upon van Gennep's concepts, particularly through his focus on liminality and the role of rituals in facilitating social transitions. His work on the liminal space became

essential in understanding how individuals and communities navigate periods of uncertainty and change, such as those experienced during grief. Similarly, Douglas extended van Gennep's ideas, applying them to her anthropological research on cultural rites, social structures and the creation of boundaries related to purity and danger. Both Turner and Douglas drew on van Gennep's framework to examine how rituals and cultural practices, like funerals, help maintain social order and guide transitions in human life. Therefore, van Gennep's theories offer a crucial foundation for understanding how cultural practices manage life transitions, particularly in relation to grief and mourning.

In *The Rites of Passage* (1960), van Gennep introduced the idea of life as a series of passages which we pass through - and mark - with rituals and traditions. He suggested that these rites of passage could be broken down into three distinct phases: "rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation", also referred to as the *preliminal, liminal* and *post-liminal* (van Gennep, 1960, 11). The *preliminal* phase is where one has existed before a ritual or change, the *liminal* is the space occupied during transition to the next stage, and the *postliminal* is where one finds oneself after the ritual – or change – occurs (van Gennep, 1960, 11). While there are rituals surrounding many life events, for the purpose of this thesis it is the rites surrounding the funeral which will be examined. Through a blending of concepts rooted in the domains of liminality and *communitas*, in conjunction with contemporary grief analysis and prevailing psychological hypotheses, this thesis will establish a coherent and substantiated connection between these theoretical frameworks and the context of twentieth- first century Irish literature.

As suggested by van Gennep, while one would expect the rites surrounding the preliminal separation or death of a loved one to be most prominent component it is, in fact, the transitional rites, funeral, burial and mourning which have the greatest longevity and complexity. The funeral rituals that integrate the recently departed into the realm of the deceased are extensively developed and accorded the highest significance (van Gennep, 1960,

146). It is within this liminal space that a distinct literary prospect emerges, one that clearly articulates van Gennep's, and later Turner's theory of liminality. Fictional funerals are ideal scenarios to introduce character complexity and atmospheric settings. An author can expand on the cultural aspects of the funeral and burial, weaving narrative threads that intricately interlace with the rites and customs affiliated with mortality. The transitional nature of grief grants the opportunity to experiment with literary form and non-linear narratives may be employed by authors, incorporating flashbacks, stream-of-consciousness, or fragmented sequences to capture the disorienting and repetitive nature of mourning. This approach enables a more sophisticated exploration of time and memory, as characters move between past and present, and navigate the boundaries between life and death.

In 1969, Victor Turner conducted a more intricate analysis of *The Rites of Passage*, expanding upon van Gennep's theoretical framework by examining it in close association with the thresholds of rituals. He classified liminality as being a state of ambiguity: "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 1969, 95). He links this ambiguous state to a necessity for the establishment of rituals during social and cultural transitions. Turner was interested in how the "liminal phenomena" resulted in a "generalized social bond" or "communion of equal individuals who submit together" to partake in rituals and traditions during liminal periods (Turner, 1969, 96). He chose the Latin term *communitas* to differentiate this social mode from the idea of "community" as a distinct group of people from a common area (Turner, 1969, 96). This ritual *communitas* can assist the journey through the tripartite processual form of liminality, allowing for the release from responsibility, rules and restrictions of a person's daily life (Turner, 1969, 274). Turner suggests that individuals have a duty to fulfil each other's basic requirements, such as clothing, food and drink and to provide "careful teaching of material and social techniques" (Turner, 1969, 139). These obligations involve the

careful organisation of human connections and the way people comprehend the natural world (Turner, 1969, 139). Instances of this phenomenon are evident in numerous novels examined in this thesis, where conventional roles are redefined during the mourning period, and the community collectively provides for the fundamental necessities. (Turner, 1969, 139). This is especially prevalent following the death of a loved one when the community rallies around the recently bereaved.

The Irish funeral, frequently depicted in Irish literature, often incorporates aspects that align with the theories of van Gennep and Turner, including the transitions through the three-phases of liminality and the gathering of mourners, creating *communitas* within these phases: before, during and after the funeral ritual. David Richie suggests that prevailing medical and clinical models of the twentieth century have operated under the assumption that grief would be considered "resolved" once those left behind could emotionally distance themselves from the deceased individual (Richie, 2003). He considers this problematic in the twenty first century due to a shift towards more active engagement with grief: “Perhaps it is time to re-learn ways of creatively expressing grief rather than detaching from the experience” (Richie, 2003). However, Richie notes the difference in the Irish approach to grief and mourning in Ireland, where the liminal space is of great importance and: “can be seen as the site for the beginnings of the creation of future self-identity narratives” (Richie, 2003). He suggests that within this phase, the interruption of normal life, such as in the context of the Irish wake plays a significant role in ritually fostering both continuity and the shaping of new life narratives (Richie, 2003). In the context of Irish funerary traditions, people today continue to engage in practices that honour and remember the deceased by sharing stories, recounting memories and preserving images, much like the storytelling and communal grieving seen in traditional wakes. All this helps to maintain a connection with those who have passed, echoing the deep-rooted cultural emphasis on remembrance and the communal aspect of mourning in Irish culture. These actions

emphasise the significance of relationships and our own mortality in the broader context of life, encompassing past, present, and future connections (Richie, 2003).

Richie suggests that the funeral is a vital part of the liminal journey through grief: "[a]t funerals, we celebrate the importance of lost lives by expressing connectedness through the performance of eulogies, anecdotes, and music. Through participation at the home, graveside or crematorium in the preparation or disposal and memorialisation of the dead, ritual "closure" and reflection are enabled" (Richie, 2003). David A. Hogue attests to our need for ritual in times of grief: "Rites of Passage, including funerals, are ways we human beings navigate radical changes in life and activities by which we mark our journeys with God and with each other" (Hogue, 2006, 3). Hogue suggests that funerals serve as a means for both the living and the departed to come to terms with their shared past, including the experience of loss. They facilitate a transition into a new future where fresh connections are forged between the living and the deceased (Hogue, 2006, 3). The pre-liminal phase is where we find ourselves on a daily basis, moving through our lives with no perceptible change. When given news of a life-threatening illness – or an unexpected death – we move into the liminal space. This space is where one finds oneself when removed from the norms of daily life.

Robert Fulton alludes to the importance of the liminal space afforded, following a death, where the funeral is not only "a rite of incorporation" but also "a rite of separation and integration" (Fulton, R. 1995, 199). When we lose someone close to us - be it family or friend - we find ourselves thrust into the world of grief, ritual and tradition. This is often in confined areas to which we are unaccustomed. In the event of a funeral, the mourners are cocooned within the liminal space of their grief. There are rituals to perform, ceremonies to partake in and stages of grief to process. Richard Schechner suggests that a mourner's daily life is suspended and instead they find themselves removed from their identities, sometimes thrown into old or new roles; not part of their former life, yet not ready to move on to the next stage

(Schechner, 2002, 57). According to Turner, when individuals are forced to enter these transitional spaces, such as after a death, it can lead to heightened tensions and conflicts that surpass the usual norms:

> [Many] of those rites that we call 'life-crisis ceremonies,' particularly those of puberty, marriage, and death, themselves indicate a major, if not altogether unexpected breach in the orderly, customary running of group life, after which many relationships among its members must change drastically, involving much potential and even actual conflict and competition (for rights of inheritance and succession to office…over clan or lineage allegiance) (Turner, 1997, 11).

There are numerous examples where this "conflict" paradigm is represented in Irish literature and subsequent chapters will examine various instances within Irish literature where the themes of social upheaval and transformation, as described by Victor Turner, are prominently depicted. These chapters will analyse how the narratives surrounding funerals and mourning rituals in Irish literary works vividly illustrate the conflicts and changes that occur during transitional phases, particularly those associated with death.

Once the grieving individual progresses through their mourning process, and the loss becomes integrated into their everyday life, they enter the post-liminal phase characterised by a process of "release" or "relinquishing". As proposed by Ní Éigeartaigh, the liminal phase primarily serves a restorative purpose, enabling a return to regular life following a temporary period of upheaval and transformation (Ní Éigeartaigh, 2022, xi). Anna Freud addresses the liminal space surrounding death in her 1954 essay 'About Losing and Being Lost'. She suggests that it is commonly assumed that the mourning process for a loved one persists as long as the mourner's emotions are centred on the grief and the need to detach their feelings from the internal image of the deceased: "So far as this means withdrawing from the external world, the task of mourning interferes with life itself" (Freud, A., 1954, 313). The process of grieving is an absorbing one, which becomes a priority for the recently bereaved. The liminal space allows

for the detachment from society and routine and this in turn can aid the process of detaching from the person one has lost.

The psychological theories of “healthy grieving,” built on the work of Sigmund Freud, require the bereaved psychologically to release themselves from their dead. According to Freud's theory of “Mourning and Melancholia”, the process of mourning culminates with disengaging emotional ties from the departed entity and frees the mourner to return to their “free and uninhibited state” (Freud, 1917, 245). He suggests that the process of mourning is a gradual and slow effort of letting go, such that by the time it is complete, the energy required for it has already been depleted (Freud, 1917, 255). However, John E. Baker points out that many analysts acknowledge that Freud’s detachment theory does not completely or precisely represent the way their patients experience mourning (Baker, 2001, 56). Likewise, Richie believes that Freudian psychoanalysis, which regards mourning as essential for survival and involves the need for the bereaved to detach psychologically from the deceased, may now be seen as outdated. He implies that is necessary to reconsider this view in light of the idea that psychological well-being might actually depend on maintaining a connection with the deceased rather than seeking detachment. (Richie, 2003). Therese A. Rando suggests that Erich Lindemann made a substantial contribution to the comprehension of mourning in his 1944 article “Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief”, by clarifying the notion of "grief work." He formulated the idea of three essential tasks in grief, which involve breaking free from emotional ties to the departed, adapting to a world without the presence of the deceased and establishing new relationships (Rando, 1995, 211).

Lindemann argues that for individuals grieving the loss of a loved one, it is essential to reflect on their relationship with the deceased and recognise changes in their own emotional responses. He believes that they need to seek out supportive people in their lives who can help them learn and adopt new behaviours and ways of coping. (Lindemann, 1944, 147). Grieving

is a complex process that requires more than just experiencing sadness over a loss; it involves significant psychological and social adjustments. Lindemann expands upon Freud's work, proposing that the process of grieving requires the bereaved individual's adaptation to the altered circumstances and their social role. This could be seen as a pre-curser to Turner's theory of *communitas*, insofar as it suggests a submission to "elders" and allowing for acceptance of help from "primers", during the transition from one liminal stage to the next. Similarly, in his 1965 essay "Social Uses of Funeral Rites", David G. Mandelbaum suggests that the bereaved, who experience both personal shock and social disorientation, need assistance in regaining their sense of direction. The entire community must follow an established process to readjust after the loss of one of its members (Mandelbaum, 1965, 189). Much like Turner, Mandelbaum underscores the notion that the bereaved person must adjust to a new social role within their community, as their previous way of life is no longer possible (Mandelbaum, 1965, 189). The importance of death rituals frequently revolves around key themes specific to a culture, and their performance typically serves to strengthen the unity of the social collective (Mandelbaum, 165, 189).

In Volume One of *Attachment and Loss*: *Attachment* (1971), John Bowlby asserts that the legacy of Freud's work, marked by contradictions and uncertainties, had generated discomfort and prompted efforts to clarify his ideas. He suggests that some of Freud's theories have been chosen and expanded upon, while others have been set aside and ignored. Bowlby states that while "some of my ideas are alien to the theoretical traditions that have become established […] a great number of the central concepts of my schema are to be found plainly stated by Freud" (Bowlby, 1971, 16). Rando proposes that Bowlby is the primary designer of attachment theory and his contributions expanded the traditionally narrow psychoanalytic perspective in the way grief and mourning were understood (Rando, 1995, 214). In volume three of *Attachment and Loss: Loss* (1998) Bowlby's theory of attachment suggests that

individuals move through four phases of mourning, though: “not clear cut, and any one individual may oscillate for a time back and forth between and two of them” (Bowlby, 1998, 85). Bowlby’s four phases include numbing, yearning and searching, disorganisation and despair and reorganisation (Bowlby, 1998, 85).

Colin Murray Parkes furthers Bowlby’s work in *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* (1972) and examines the characteristics of the primary elements involved in responding to loss and analyses the variables believed to influence the progression of the grieving process. Interestingly, Parkes also addresses the concept of bereavement as being just one of several significant life transitions, each representing a phase of adjustment and difficulty, mirroring van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* (Parkes, 1972, xii). Parkes also expands on Turner’s theory of *communitas*, focusing attention on the concept of psychological transitions and how the bereaved acclimatised into their world following the loss of a loved one, which he refers to as “the change of identity”, following a bereavement (Parkes, 1972, 90). He suggests that a significant life upheaval, like the loss of a loved one, not only shifts our habitual actions but also reshapes our broader life plans and roles in which these actions were relevant. Apart from adopting a new identity, relinquishing the old one is equally essential (Parke, 1972, 93). The rites and rituals surrounding the funeral are seen as key elements in supporting the bereaved and, with the help of family, friends and the community, they can be protected from external influence and interference.

Michael C. Kearl suggests that every field of study dissects the concept of death into its individual components. For instance, philosophers delve into the unique anxieties related to a lack of purpose and the feeling of being unfinished. Psychologists, on the other hand, have deconstructed the process of dying into elements like the sensation of pain, apprehensions about the unknown, feelings of regret and, of course, the emotional stages of mourning. They have also divided the experience of losing someone into distinct phases of grief processing (Kearl,

1995, 3). The liminal phases surrounding death and mourning vary greatly in time, and often in practice, but the theory remains constant. In Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's renowned 1970 work, *On Death and Dying*, the theory of the Five Stages of Grief was introduced[3]. It's important to highlight that in her early research, Kübler-Ross portrayed the experience of individuals nearing the end of life, not those who are grieving, as a seamless journey rather than a series of separate stages. Kübler-Ross later introduced an updated version of The Five Stages of Grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, at the end-of-life to an updated model which allows for a more inclusive approach to grief and the idea that "Our grief is as individual as our lives" (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 7).

In the 2005 book, *On Grief and Grieving*, her concepts were reinterpreted as stages to comprehend and address the process of grieving. She suggested a five-part framework for the transition through grief. Stage one is Denial and Isolation. This is where the idea of death is met with resistance, but she advises that this stage is usually short-lived: "Denial is usually a temporary defence and will soon be replaced by partial acceptance" (Kübler-Ross, 2001, 35-36). The second stage is Anger and this stage is often seen as the most difficult to analyse due to its varying origins. An elderly person may not become angry with their imminent approach to death, whereas the terminal diagnosis of a child may invoke extreme anger and pain. Kübler-Ross states that when the first stage has passed and the reality of the news has sunk in: "[denial] is replaced by feelings of anger, rage [and often] envy" (Kübler-Ross, 2001, 44). Envy is often seen as the hidden part of grief and can be where the recently bereaved feels envious of the lives of others who have not lost a loved one. In her 2005 book, *Surviving Miscarriage*, Stacey McLaughlin explains her rage and envy following a miscarriage: "I felt the pain of watching friends nurturing their healthy children, wracked by the envy and anguish of knowing that mine

[3] A deeper analysis of Kübler-Ross' Five Stages of Grief theory will be discussed in chapter 2.

had not survived" (Mcloughlin, 2005, 6). Stage three is Bargaining and is the lesser known of all five stages and alludes to the idea of a patient or family member offering up a prayer or "special wish" in return for "the extension of a life" (Kübler-Ross, 2001, 72). Bargaining is a dynamic process that evolves with time. Following a loss, the focus of bargaining often shifts from the past to the future. Kübler-Ross suggests that it might involve making promises like reuniting with the departed in heaven or ensuring that no more tragedies occur to loved ones (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 20). As the bargaining process unfolds, one's thoughts may reevaluate past occurrences, considering various "what if" and "if only" scenarios. Regrettably, this cognitive journey ultimately leads to the same painful realisation: the undeniable fact that the loved one is genuinely no longer with us (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 20).

Stage four is Depression and can be linked to the aftermath following the delivery of a terminal diagnosis or upon receipt of the news of a sudden death. Kübler-Ross suggests people eventually accept that people "cannot smile it off anymore" and enter the stage of depression: "His numbness or stoicism, his anger and rage will soon be replaced with a sense of great loss" (Kübler-Ross, 2001, 75). The fifth and final phase is Acceptance and implies that when the previous four stages have been processed, the fifth stage of grief can be the most difficult to enter. Often seen as "letting go" or "giving up", this negative vocabulary has its roots in the theories of Freud which suggested that the best approach for liberating an individual from their sorrow was to disengage from emotional attachments (Freud, 1917, 258). Kübler-Ross proposes that this acceptance is "not a resigned and hopeless" one (Kübler-Ross, 2001, 99) but rather "a monumental task which is required to achieve this stage" (Kübler-Ross, 2001, 105). Applying Kübler-Ross's theories to the liminal elements of death and its aftermath offers a broad understanding of the experience of grief. However, counterarguments challenging the

notion of five stages have emerged, advocating for a more condensed framework of two or three stages[4].

The liminal space plays a significant role within the context of funerary customs and the concepts put forth by van Gennep and Turner continue to be relevant. This stands in contrast to the Freudian theories mentioned earlier, which now appear outdated and restrictive in nature. Thomas Attig suggests that contemporary writers and speakers often describe the grieving process as a series of stages or phases that unfold sequentially. Various experts in social science and clinical fields have proposed different models for these stages, ranging from three to six phases. These stages typically involve initial shock and disbelief, followed by intense mourning, and eventually, a resolution or reorganisation phase. Many different models exist and there is a wide array of ideas about the stages of grief in accessible literature on the subject (Attig, 1996, 42). Baker points to the work of Melanie Klein whose "emphasis is not on the detaching" from the past shared with the deceased but embracing and "preserving" the memories of the relationship and all that had entailed (Baker, 2001, 61). The liminal stages of grief allow for the processing of loss, and the *communitas* within these phases are considered an essential part of the Irish funerary tradition, aiding the bereaved through these difficult transitional phases.

Turner's theory of *communitas* holds significant importance within Irish literature that incorporates themes of death, wakes or funerals. Turner suggests that, within the liminal phase, an idea emerges depicting society as a somewhat disorganised or loosely structured community, where individuals adopt relatively uniform roles. In this context, they form a kind of communion characterised by equality, collectively submitting to the overall authority of the ritual elders (Turner, 1969, 96). Community, and its hierarchies, play a vital role in the Irish

[4] Further analysis of the resistance to Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief will be explored further in Chapter 2.

funeral tradition, where the liminal space is shared by not only the immediate family, but by the larger circle of persons who have been part of the lives of the deceased and the mourner. During times of grief, the social structures, within which one is normally placed are dismantled and the ceremony of grief becomes the temporary norm. The liminal space allows for "the suspension of ordinary life" and according to David Richie the Irish wake is an "important" process "which can ritually contribute to continuity and new biography", allowing for an easier transition into the post-liminal phase (Richie, 2003). Anthony 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, 1995, 15), while Ian Kilroy suggests that "[t]he funeral has always been a central social ritual in Irish society, outranking even marriage and baptism as a community rite" (Kilroy, 2000).

The traditional wake can see the queuing of hundreds of locals awaiting their turn to shake the hand of the chief mourner, before viewing the body of the deceased in the open coffin. Whole communities can turn up to the funeral mass, walking behind the hearse as the coffin is taken for burial and gathering en-masse at the local pub or community centre for tea and sandwiches, post-burial. Schools, businesses and residents down their tools and join in their mutual respect for the deceased. *Irish Times* journalist Niamh Tohey explains that whilst funerals can be "uncomfortable" experiences: "they are something […] we do quite well in Ireland. There is something soothing about the ritual of the wake, funeral home, service and burial" (Tohey, 2017). Family, friends and communities are present through each liminal phase, beginning to surround the chief mourners as soon as word of the death has spread. In allowing a shift in the hierarchies of the community, the bereaved are afforded the time and space required to process their grief. Parkes suggests that the individual in mourning may find it necessary to seek assistance even for basic decision-making, and they might benefit from

safeguarding against the well-intentioned support of neighbours and friends (Parkes, 1972, 154).

This *communitas* is continuous until the cessation of the post-liminal phase, peaking in the liminal phase, where attendance at the wake and funeral are considered essential. In Ireland, death "commands curiosity, interest" (Clare, 1995, 15). Edith Turner believes that we should view *communitas* as a gift. She states that: "*Communitas* is togetherness itself. Why people like to be together is because of the bubbling up of *communitas* that comes with it. *Communitas* has given them this gift…*Communitas* is exciting; it makes people able to organize and work together" (Turner, 2012, 4). For some, the funeral is one of the only occasions where they can socialise with their peers, both past and present. Frequently, the commemoration linked to customary rites of passage serves as a communal gathering, featuring elements like refreshments, storytelling and a mixture of tears and laughter. Ronan suggests that these gatherings are a way to honour the life of the deceased. The presence of the deceased in an open coffin aids in the adjustment to the experience of loss (Ronan, 2021, 237).

The enduring significance of Van Gennep's theory of liminality as articulated in *The Rites of Passage*, and in Victor Turner's *communitas*, persist into the twenty-first century. Society uses celebratory symbols and occasions to mark the birth of a child, the passage to adulthood, marriage and the birth of the next-generation offspring, thus completing the circle of life. While van Gennep's theory of liminality within the rites of passage included death and funerals, and Turner's theory of *communitas* suggests that humans thrive on being surrounded by community in times of grief, the reality of death and dying is one which we do not "celebrate" or discuss as frequently as one would expect. Edith Turner submits that *communitas* "often comes in the direst moments of the life of a person and society" (Turner, 2012, 2). Religious rituals often incorporate elements of penance or atonement, known as "piacular elements," which can help individuals and communities cope with the emotional and

psychological challenges associated with these profound life events. In his 1965 essay, "Grief and Religion", Edgar N. Jackson states that: "The ritualized expression of unworthiness and the asking for forgiveness and a chance for a new beginning fulfil the deep inner needs of the individual struggling with ambivalence and self-judgement" (Jackson, 1965, 224). In essence, these ceremonies serve as a means of finding solace and support when faced with the reality of death and dying, emphasising the importance of communal bonds during times of grief. Jackson suggests that as the process of grieving profoundly affects an individual's emotional makeup, it is crucial that the actions and engagements they undertake during their bereavement encourage a solid connection with reality, rather than leading them into a realm of fantasy (Jackson, 1965, 220). Jackson notes how the gathering of family, friends and rituals of the community, to view the remains, facilitates an acceptance of death and make it difficult for fantasies or illusions to develop (Jackson, 1965, 220). Schechner concurs and suggests that rituals are liberating in times of grief, not least in aiding the cultivation of *communitas*: "Rituals are more than structures and functions; they are also among the most powerful experiences life has to offer. While in a liminal state, people are freed from the demands of daily life. They feel at one with their comrades; personal and social differences are set aside. People are uplifted, swept away, taken over" (Schechner, 2013, 70).

Kübler-Ross suggests that: "The void and emptiness is felt after the funeral, after the departure of the relatives. It is at this time that family members feel most grateful to have someone to talk to" (Kübler-Ross, 2001, 156-157). The liminal space is one that we depend on: one which allows us to escape from the every-day-ness of life, as we adjust to the fractured un-known-ness of the future without a loved one. It allows for someone else to take control and alleviate the tensions associated with grief. It encourages a feeling of togetherness in a moment of solitary pain and opens pathways for friendships – old and new- to be formed or created.

Edith Turner succinctly paraphrases the words of Victor Turner when describing the effect of communitas:

> Communitas is […] a gift from liminality, the state of being betwixt and between. During this time, people find each other to be just ordinary people after all, not the anxious prestige-seeking holders of jobs and positions they often seem to be […] Thus, liminality and the state of people in the midst of change gives a framing for communitas, a kind of flowerbed ready, waiting for it" (Turner, 2012, 4).

If *communitas* is a "gift from liminality", then liminality is a gift to the community. Ní Éigeartaigh proposes that the key significance of liminality lies in its capacity to enable the defiance of conventional societal norms and regulations, creating an environment where established narratives can be questioned and disrupted, thus allowing for the inclusion of alternative viewpoints (Ní Éigeartaigh, 2022, xii).

We need time to adjust to each phase of our life and as van Gennep suggests, throughout our lives there are instances when we transition from one stage to another, marked by rites of passage. These rites involve ritual and ceremony and each should be afforded consideration and time to process. As suggested by Sanders: "Rituals and rites of passage are traditionally among the most powerful sanctioned methods available to offer symbolic guidance to the human spirit" (Sanders, 1999, 249). Examples of non-linear stages of grief will be examined in subsequent chapters, where contemporary literature addresses the Irish approach to bereavement and mourning.

As suggested by Ronan, the integration of community, loss, mourning, interpersonal bonds, and mutual regard resonates throughout the dimensions of both life and death (Ronan, 2021, 237). The liminal space is an arena which grants a temporary status to those in mourning and Irish literature continues to feature the funeral and wake, even in the context of a more secular Ireland. In the examination of a wide selection of Irish literature, the enduring presence

of the wake and funeral can be seen as an almost cathartic element of Irish culture, which Salvador Ryan suggests plays a "significant part in normalising death as an integral part of life" (Ryan, 2016, 618). Understanding why the Irish are regarded as handling death well requires exploring the deep connection that they have with distinct customs surrounding death (Sweeney, 2021, 17). The recurring themes of grief and funerary traditions can be traced back to the earliest instances of Irish literature, and they persist in literary works to this day, serving as a means of providing structure within the transitional realm connected to Irish funerals. English suggests that the theme of death in the Irish novel is not only a significant subject for study but also offers valuable insights into broader cultural transformations (English, 2017, 22). When examining the role of the wake and the funeral in Irish literature it is important to not only consider novels which include death, grief and trauma, but to also include the works of lament-poets, essayists, travel chroniclers and the short story form. The expansive reading of both fictional and non-fictional accounts of death, grief and the funeral allows for a thorough and inclusive examination of how funerals are depicted and explored in Irish literature, considering a wide range of factors and perspectives. This provides a more profound understanding of how the Irish demonstrate respect for the deceased and the rituals enacted to commemorate their passing.

Pre-seventeenth century documents comprise mainly of writings from the privileged few who had been formally educated, the religious orders and visiting tourists. Evans explains that: "about eighty per cent of modern historical writing on medieval Ireland is based on Norman and English sources" and rarely from the peasant Gaelic-speaking areas (Evans, 1992, 76). With this void in the peasant history of Irish funerals and wakes, we depend on secondary sources to provide us with insights relating to the traditions and rituals of the time. Written records signal a colossal change in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the Tudor conquest of Ireland resulting in a major shift in the political landscape, enforcing social and

cultural changes as land was redistributed following protracted wars. Historian Clodagh Tait suggests that the "often violent and violently contested expansion of the English Crown's control" had a massive impact on the Irish, who were formally governed by "semi-automatous" lordships, with minimal interest in religious activity (Tait, 2002, 2). The Tudor conquest heralded the arrival of the English Protestant elite. New Plantations and settlements resulted in dispossession, displacement and an attempt to extend the Protestant Reformation throughout Ireland.

Irish religious practices are described in many written accounts from the sixteenth and seventeenth century, especially activities at the Irish wake. Seán Ó Súilleabháin describes writings from many of the English travelling gentleman in *Irish Wake Amusements* (1997) including accounts from Sir Henry Piers (1682), J.G. Kilkenny (1638), Thomas Campbell (1778) and T. Crofton Croker (1824). The authors reveal details of the Irish wake and how "the wake of a corpse is a scene of merriment rather than of mourning" (Croker in Ó Súilleabháin, 1997, 17-18). The writings seem to disregard the importance of the lament and keening to the Irish wake, instead focusing on the traditional games performed, along with the feast provided for the visiting mourners. Patricia Lysaght alludes to the possibility of inaccuracy or exaggeration in the records, as they were provided by official bodies, such as Protestant landowners and clergymen, who were writing about the Catholic majority. This could be seen as an attempt in "othering" the Catholic population (Lysaght, 2003, 404). Therefore, the accounts recorded are from the perspective of writers who could not fully comprehend the relevance and intricacies of the practices and rituals of Irish death customs.

Records from the Catholic Church indicate that while it did not condone the funerary practices of its congregation, the Reformation prevented enforcement of its views on its members (Lysaght, 2003, 404). The arrival of the Counter-Reformation Church brought more restrictions and funeral masses were moved to the home of the deceased to ensure the delivery of a complete

Requiem mass, including the liturgy for the dead. Historians note that the wake worried the Counter–Reformation Church and, in an attempt to "extend parochial dominance", it ventured to supress the "wild wake" (Taylor, 1989, 179). This resulted in the placing of bans on wake activities throughout the seventeenth century. Brian Mac Cuarta argues that 1617 deposition documents show how Irish funerary traditions were alive and well in the 1600s despite a policy against recusants which had been issued by Viscount Grandison, who was Lord Deputy from 1616-1622 (Mac Cuarta, 2006, 320). It is noted that the Catholic community, having no permanent place of worship, continued their funerary traditions outdoors. The depositions describe the first half of a funeral being performed at the roadside, with keening women playing a large role in the ceremony. Despite the lack of official premises, rituals were adhered to, with the coffin carried by four men to the centre of the marketplace, where prayers were then recited before being carried for burial. Mac Cuarta notes that, for the displaced Catholic: "burial represented one last link with the place of worship of their ancestors" (Mac Cuarta, 2006, 322). The Irish people were reluctant to conform. While the Catholic Church continued to object to the "merry wake" during the seventeenth century, it was to little effect. For example, 1660 records show an order from the Synod of Tuam to cease "immoderate drinking and feasting and wakes" (Lysaght, 2003, 405). Lysaght argues that the "merry wake" contained emblematic elements of feasting and joyous celebration of the life that had ended, indicative of van Gennep's theory on the rites of passage.

During the seventeenth century, the lavish wake - often leaving families financially burdened - was the norm. Anglo-Irish scholar, Sir Henry Bourgchier, states in his 1623 writings that: "'three or four hundred horse and double as many on foot' sometimes come 'to feast and riot it out for three or four days together at the charge of the dead'" (Bourgchier in Lysaght, 2003, 405). The threat of ex-communication was very real, with the Church frowning on the music, games and hospitality associated with the Irish funeral. There was a particular distaste

for a wake game where a "mock-marriage" was seen not only as a mocking of the sacrament of marriage and the rituals of the Church, but a threat to the virtue of young men and women. In fact, Gearóid Ó Crualaoich says there was a "solemn prohibition from the wakehouse" of such merriment and "of sexual gratification in the festive access of young women and men to each other" which was still in place throughout the nineteenth century (Ó Crualaoich, 1998, 175). These include bouts of nudity and cross-dressing. Antiquarian John Prim's 1852 writings describe some of the wake games which infuriated the Catholic Church. Considered to contain elements of the mourner's pagan past, these wake games were seen as "anti-Christian" and Prim's writings suggest that these "orgies" require "total suppression" due to their "obscene and demoralising" content (Prim in Ó Crualaoich, 1998, 194). The writings of lay writers also cast light on the differences between Catholic and Protestant funerals and wakes. English Protestant, Thomas Dineley, toured Ireland in 1681 and states that Protestant funerals were handled "according to the Church of England, & without any unusual ceremony", while the Catholic funerals were lively affairs with the corpse in-situ (Shirley in Lysaght, 2003, 406).

The concept of the "wild wake" seems to originate with the games and feasting of the early Christian wakes, where *na cluiche caointe* ("games of lamentation") were performed to honour the passing of a fellow tribesman (Hourichane, 2021, 57). The term "Merry Wake" is widely linked to (but not solely accredited to) the writings of Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, who coined the phrase in reference to his research into the Irish wake. In Ó Crualaoich's 1998 essay, "The Merry Wake", he suggests that: "the wake was in fact a central social mechanism for the articulation of resistance", with the peasantry of Ireland claiming their right to retain their funerary traditions (Ó Crualaoich, 1998, 175). Elements of merriment while in the presence of a corpse was a trope repeated in many travel journals and in Anglo-Irish Literature and in Irish peasant writings. Sinead Gleeson suggests that we can garner great insight into the past by reading the works of deceased writers, allowing for a "time capsule, poking one's head through

the curtains of history to see what events, social concerns and politics were at play in the past" (Gleeson, 2020, IX). An example of this can be found in William Carlton's 1812 short story, "Larry M'Farland's Wake". Following a dramatic death, Larry is afforded a splendid wake with plenty of song, drinking, smoking of tobacco and of recollections of the deceased's life (Carlton, 1990,105). The narrator recounts elements of merriment and declares his appreciation for the experience:

> the merry folk would rise up, begin to pelt their hands together, and cry along with him […] That once over, they'd be down again at the songs, and divarsion, and devilment […] the other would then shake hands with the friends of the corpses, get a glass or two, and a pipe, and in a few minutes be as merry as the best of them (Carlton, 1990, 105).

The traditional wake had been one where mourners had celebrated the life of the deceased, in the presence of the corpse, with what Taylor describes as "liminal sexuality, drunkeness, and possibly violence." The Catholic Church began to change this to one where "liminality was both tamed and extended - purgatory for the deceased and mourning and prayers for those who remained" (Taylor, 1989, 182). However, lay writings from the mid nineteenth century suggest that the "merry wake" was far from banished.

An 1853 correspondence from Prim describes the wake games as being apparently "obscure", yet states: "the peasantry had no idea of outraging propriety or religion in their performances [at wakes]" (Prim in Grainger, 1998, 132). Furthermore, he admits that these performances are ones from which people would normally "shrink with horror from such indelicate exhibitions" (Grainger, 1998, 132). Prim describes the *Borekeen* - a mourner who performs the role of "The Priest" – and how he acts out an objection to wake rituals, finding himself banished from the room. Also described is the gender cross-dressing where female mourners dressed as males and "proceeded to conduct themselves in a very strange manner" (Grainger, 1998, 132). It seems the wake was a highly sexualised event, with many games

involving nudity. Wake games also saw rough treatment of the corpse and violence used as entertainment. Ó Crualaoich tells of one such game, from County Galway folklore:

> It is known for the corpse to be secretly roped by tricksters during the wake so that it can be hoisted into an upright position in the middle of the night, striking terror and panic into the assembly…Sometimes the people of the house are extremely angry and there is very nearly a "real fight"… There is generally some old man in each district who is well known for organising and directing such "devilment" at wakes, and the "prime boys" will send up to five miles for such a person to come to a local wake so as to indulge in sport and tricks (Ó Crualaoich, 1998, 185).

Grainger notes how some historians have attributed these episodes of violence to the "effect of over-lavish hospitality", and he offers an alternative perspective (Grainger, 1998, 137). He suggests that violence and rowdiness were linked to the reality of living in a time of "conflict, confusion and violence" and allowed for free expression in a safe place (Grainger, 1998, 137). Clodagh Tait suggests that there was "a significant degree of ingenuity" involved in avoiding the religious restrictions and communities continued to mark the passing of one of their members in the traditional way (Tait, 2002, 5).

The theme of resistance is one which can be found in an array of Irish literature featuring wakes and funerals. The traditions and rituals associated with the Irish funeral are inherently a part of Irish culture. The wake allowed for a gathering of families and communities, in an uncensored setting, and provided an "outlet for repressed feelings" (Grainger, 1998, 135). This is in stark contrast to the Anglo-Irish funeral of the nineteenth century, which was a more controlled and mundane affair. In her 1889 letter to her literary partner, Violet Martin, Edith Somerville recounts the events surrounding the death of her mother, in County Cork. She tells of how her father was "spared all the sights or rather the *sounds*" of his wife's demise and how he was "ordered" to avoid the funeral and "never knew when they took the coffin up" (Somerville in Flanagan, 1999, 136). Somerville and her servants sedated her Papa with sulphonal, in an attempt to prevent the onset of grief, stating that he was better to remember her

as he had last seen her: “in all her smart clothes, going off to [a wedding], that is a better memory than the pale serene severe presence that had nothing of her own gay self about it” (Somerville in Flanagan, 1999, 138). The remains of Somerville’s mother were interred in the family vault the morning after her death, when tenants and workers participated in the “burial”, as a way of showing their respect for both the dead and her family:

> [They] opened the vault, cleaned and set everything in it in order, and then both lined and covered it all with moss and white chrysanthemums…They carried her, in relays of six men, our tenants for the most part, and some of the coastguards, and Jack Buckley and other farmers, who don’t belong to us, but wish to do honour to her memory (Somerville in Flanagan, 1999, 138-139).

This serves as an illustration of how Irish communities employ funeral and burial customs to come together and express their respect for both the departed and those who have recently experienced a loss. Although the farmers may not have had a personal acquaintance with Sommerville's mother, they actively participate in the burial ceremonies, nevertheless.

In comparison to the subdued burials of the Anglo-Irish, the Irish Catholic funeral was theatrical, allowing for the outpouring of grief. Angela Bourke suggests that laments and *caoineadh* - which were chanted or sung - were a “central theatre of women’s expression in the Irish language”, with records of vocal laments found “as far back as the eighth-century *Poems of Blathmac*” (Bourke, 2002, 1365). The *caoineadh* afforded the chance to rebuke authorities’ restrictions, under the guise of lament poetry with artistic expression. The *bean chaointe*, or keening women, gave emotional performances “crazed with grief” with themes of “anger and invective”, offering the performer “a license to speak loudly and without inhibition” (Bourke, 2002, 1365-6). The “lamenters” were a staple at the wake and as early as 1630 appear to have angered the Church of Ireland. The distaste of keening is a recurring theme in the Synod of Tuam where “statute censure was expressed against those females who engaged in excessive keening and lamentation at wakes” (Ó Crualaoich,1998, 174). Tait suggests that the

condemnation of the keener was a form of othering the Irish people and their culture. The (largely Catholic) Irish mourner allowed for a display of grief with poetic emotion, displaying their respect for the deceased, while the Protestant (or Reformed) mourner saw the keen as disrespectful to both God and the deceased (Tait, 2002, 37).

"Keen" is the Anglicized word in place of the original Irish word *caoine* or *caoineadh* which describes the raw, wailing cry of the recently bereaved. Mary McLaughlin tells us that this lamenting cry was a "sacred improvised chant that evolved over many centuries" and was "intrinsic to the ritual of the wake and funeral" (McLaughlin, 2019, 235). McLaughlin proposes a link between the keener and a "cathartic environment" which supported the transitional journey of grief. She explains that the keener accompanied not only the deceased, but also the family who had been subjected to a great loss. Their own "spontaneous family reaction" was now afforded a soundtrack at deathbed, wake and graveside (McLaughlin, 2019, 235). This soundtrack was afforded a professional status, with women who would perform at funerals for a nominal fee and receipt of hospitality:

> [They] would take up positions, somewhere in the room near the body, and cry, or wail, or keen for the duration of the wake…not only to create an atmosphere, so to speak, but to I suppose provide kind of a sonic backdrop to the fact that there is the remains of somebody who is gone (Athena Media, 2008).

Ní Éigeartaigh suggests that the "imposition of colonial rule on Irish society" resulted in the "suppression of the Irish language and culture", which included funerary rites, the wake and the *caoineadh* (Ní Éigeartaigh, 2022, 220). Irish women, traditionally integral to the Irish wake and funeral proceedings, were intentionally muted and reduced to the role of passive spectators, thereby unable to openly express their grief as they once did (Ní Éigeartaigh, 2022, 220). The restrictions on keening and displays of oral personal grief was a loss to Irish culture. There are limited records of original keening and laments, but what does remain affords insight into the grief and anger expressed by women who were mourning.

One of the most famous examples of Irish lament-poetry is “The Lament for Art O' Laoghaire”", composed by Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, on the occasion of her young husband’s death, in 1773 (Marren, 1993, 49). The intensely personal lament has been widely accepted as a powerful example of grief and the role of the keener in Irish culture (Kiberd, 2001, 163-4). Kiberd acknowledges the importance of the *caoineadh* in its representation of an era:

> The lament has about it a quality of passionate utterance that bears the stamp of personal suffering: its enduring fascination, for illiterate as well as literate audiences, lies less in the aristocratic glamour of the speaker than in the compelling tone of her voice (Kiberd, 2001, 164)

When Art’s widow is refused permission from the authorities to bury her husband, as she chooses, this prolongs her progression through the stages of grief. Kiberd suggests that the delay: “effectively prolonged his wake to six months, keeping him liminal” (Kiberd, 2001, 181). The delay in burial would also contribute to the reluctance to accept death as being complete. Ní Éigeartaigh notes that “The Lament for Art O' Laoghaire” is more than a love lament and that Eibhlín Dubh delves much deeper than merely conveying sorrow (Ní Éigeartaigh, 2022, 221). The lament is shaped in a tripartite manner, with recollections of her life before, during and after the loss of her husband. It is more than a lament of a death. It is a personal tale of new beginnings, violent endings and a record of a woman’s profound grief. The lament is in direct resistance to the enforced silencing of the Irish woman.

One of the oldest elements of waking the dead was the preparation of the body and, like the “keener”, there were local women who specialised in such services. The women, usually elders of the village or town, would come to the house to prepare the corpse for their wake. During the nineteenth century, these women were responsible for the practice of laying out the body, which involved washing, clothing, and presenting the deceased, typically dressing them in special burial attire. These customs endured into the twentieth century but became intertwined with the professional embalming process, which shifted the responsibility for preparing the deceased away from the family home and the women who traditionally conducted these tasks

(McCarthy et al, 2019, 124-125). The corpse was usually laid out in his or her own bed, or on a table, dressed in a habit, surrounded by candles and crucifix, with rosary beads entwined between fingers. Only then would the community begin their vigil, which could last for three nights (O'Gorman, 1998, 106). An example of laying out the body can be found in John McGahern's 2002 novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, and shall be discussed in Chapter 3.

As we move through the history of the Irish Funeral and how it is reflected in Irish literature, Lisa Marie Griffith and Ciarán Wallace remind us that: "From the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century, there was also an increase in the number of people dying in hospitals and state institutions, rather than in their own home" (Griffith and Wallace, 2016, 209). While the blending of pagan and Christian customs continued after the nineteenth century, undertaker, Charlie McCarthy states:

> Whereas now undertakers play a unique role in the community and are primarily concerned with the care of the deceased and the immediate family, the nineteenth-century undertaker in Dublin supplied only a coffin and the basic transport from the place of death to the church and cemetery or graveyard. The family collected the coffin and carried it home to place their loved ones inside (McCarthy et al, 2019, 12).

English also suggests that the nineteenth-century onward saw a shift in "the culture surrounding death and dying in Ireland" and this "has been distinguished by the influence of the Catholic Church" (English, 1997, 6-7). Catholic authorities began to take control of religious practice, and this eventually led to the tradition of the removal of the body from the deceased's home, where it would be brought to the church for safekeeping. The twentieth century saw a rise in the popularity of the funeral home. The innovation of embalming meant that the preparation of the deceased transitioned away from the family home and the women responsible for laying out the deceased.

According to Grainger: “The funeral reveals death as more important and powerful than any kind of social structure” which allows for an acceptance of the inevitability of death and “our search for new life” (Grainger, 1998, 129). In contemporary Ireland, while we continue the rituals and traditions surrounding the wake and funeral, we now entrust the deceased to professional industries including hospitals, hospice care and funeral directors. This is far removed from the hands-on approach to death and burial of the past. This shift was driven by advancements in medical technology and treatments, which made hospitals the primary sites for managing terminal illnesses. Scholars such as Philippe Ariès and Ernest Becker imply that the public, influenced by the manipulations of modern medicine and the pharmaceutical industry, have become disempowered and increasingly accept the diagnoses and interventions of medical professionals, sometimes to their own disadvantage (Biley, 2010, 9). Becker’s 1973 seminal work, *The Denial of Death* argues that the cultural shift toward veiling death was greatly altered from times where death was: “accompanied by rejoicing and festivities; that death seemed to be an occasion for celebration rather than fear – much like the Irish wake” (Becker, 2023, 27). The transition from moving the wake to the funeral home was not simply a deference to the Church, but also a complex societal shift where death had become less visible and was frequently viewed as something that should be handled by professionals, resulting in a greater reliance on institutional care.

This change also eased the responsibilities of the primary mourners concerning the continuous twenty-four-hour vigils and provision of entertainment (McCarthy *et al*, 2019, 147). As Dublin and larger cities increased in population, space was at a premium and a wake could not always be facilitated in the home. With the lifting of the ban on cremation for Catholics in 1963, Ireland began a full circle return to its pagan past, albeit with a more Christian approach. The 1983 Catholic Code of Law suggests that Christian cremations were permitted, yet not afforded the same value as burial: “The church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of

burying the bodies of the dead be observed; it does not, however, forbid cremation unless it has been chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching" (Rutherford, 2012, 293). The blending of Roman Catholic ceremony with a less ceremonial burial afforded more control to the increasingly secular society that was forming toward the end of the twentieth century. In urban areas, the funeral home became increasingly popular as a place to repose the deceased and the tradition of removal to the church, the night before the funeral, was widely practised (McCarthy *et al*, 2019, 242). While most rural communities continued to wake the dead in the home of the deceased, the "merriness" of the wake was becoming more reserved. However, in contrast to the declining popularity of party games and previously rowdy conduct, English contends that traditions such as opening windows at the moment of death, covering mirrors in the house, stopping clocks, and keeping vigil overnight with the body remained common well into the twentieth century, with some traditions still observed today. (English, 2017, 8).

By the beginning of the twenty-first-century, McCarthy suggests that the practice of "removal" to the church, the night before a funeral, had all but disappeared, with less than fifteen percent of funerals in Dublin city and county having evening removals to the church: "Instead, people now choose to keep the deceased at home or in a funeral home, with a viewing often taking place the night before the funeral" (McCarthy *et al*, 2019, 242). The gradual loosening of the grip of the Catholic Church has seen a change in the perception of "ownership" of the remains of the dead: "In the past, the parish priest was often the first person the family contacted when arranging a funeral. This has changed and now it is the funeral director who is usually the first contact" (McCarthy *et al*, 2019, 243). As we move into another decade, the history of the Irish funeral is continually evolving. Nonetheless, the spirit of the wake remains with the idea of the gathering of family and community considered a respectful way to mark the passing of a life. When contemplating contemporary Irish wakes, it becomes evident that each village, town and county may adhere to its own distinct set of traditions and rituals.

Localised differences can be seen to define and shape these poignant ceremonies, offering profound insights into the multifaceted dimensions of grief, remembrance and community solidarity.

A fictional death can be used to expand on the themes of loss and trauma, while also facilitating the opportunity to expand the narrative to become more open and disjointed than it would be without the character's grief. Gleeson suggests that the themes of grief and mourning the dead "intersect easily" and argues that the short story, "as a form", is especially conducive to transcending genre, facilitating representations of the supernatural with a structure and narrative style that can be experimental and surreal (Gleeson, 2020, X). This thesis is supported by Nina Witoszek and Pat Sheeran, who suggest that the short stories of Elizabeth Bowen allowed for the author's expression of a supernatural element, which she did not include in her novels due to her opinion that it felt "unethical" to do so (Witoszek and Sheeran, 1998, 127). The short story form, similar to poetry, grants license for the inclusion of the spiritual and mythical at variance with the public and social deference associated with the novel (Witoszek and Sheeran, 1998, 129). In Bowen's 1945 story "The Demon Lover", the protagonist receives a letter from her fiancée, who had been killed in WWI over twenty years previously. She refuses to allow for the possibility of a spiritual connection: "On the supernatural side of the letter's entrance she was not permitting her mind to dwell" (Bowen, 1947, 84). The mention of the supernatural frees the narrative to become one of experimentation, unlike Bowen's novels.

Despite Elizabeth Bowen's aversion to incorporating mystical elements into her novels, many novelists exhibit no hesitation in featuring the undead in their literary works. Anne Griffin situates her 2021 novel, *Listening Still*, in a funeral home where protagonist Jeannie works for the family undertaking business. The novel examines the day-to-day operations involved in the industry, where corpses are transported directly from the home or hospital and then prepared for viewing by the Masterson family and staff. The presence of the undead is a theme in

Griffin's novel, as Jeannie and her father both have the ability to speak to the recently deceased and are entrusted with passing on their final words. Jeannie recalls her childhood and how she would sit "under the one embalming table we had back then" while her aunt "washed the dead" (Griffin, 2021, 15). Jeannie cannot speak to every dead person, only ones who choose to speak to her for specific reasons. Her father had never discouraged her from speaking to the dead: "[He] taught me that the dead and their needs were ours to bear. They were with us everywhere" (Griffin, 2021, 19). Jeannie admits that as an atheist she struggles with the fact that she works "in a business where faith mattered" and where she sees so many mourners depending on their own faith: "Where the dead went to after they spoke, I did not know" (Griffin, 2021, 53). Jeannie's succinct statement seems to summarise the contemporary, more secular approach to death and the afterlife. The religious beliefs, felt so certainly by our ancestors, are now open to personal interpretation.

The short story, as discussed, has experienced somewhat of a revival in recent times. (Gleeson, 2020, XII). Despite the cultural shift in religious and burial rites, the Irish funeral and wake are afforded continued respect from mourners and communities. Funerals can also provide an ideal situational narrative opportunity to explore the changes in Irish society. Ronán Hession's 2020 story, "The Translator's Funeral", uses the funerary theme to describe a community's reaction to the unexpected death of a same- sex couple in their small Irish town. When the postman discovers the bodies, he begins the duty of relaying the message throughout the locality, leading to misrepresented facts and – often humorous – suggestions of how the funerals and burials become a huge concern of the whole community:

> the hairdresser, the tyre fitter, the man walking for exercise, and the lollipop lady, [the] civil servant, the stenographer and the guide dog trainer, [the] teacher, the bricklayer, the teahouse owner and the joiner […] the antique shop owner, [the] chemist and the unemployed (Hession, 2020).

The community is depicted as exhibiting diversity in terms of various occupations and socio-economic status. Hession underscores the significance of funeral customs to all residents in the small town. The story allows Hession to paint an overall picture of how the community becomes immediately drawn together following the death of one of their own.

Also alluding to the respect afforded to Irish funerary tradition, Alan Murrin's 2021 story "The Wake" shows the lengths that Irish people will go to, to attend a wake. Izzy and her husband are surprised to hear a knock on the door, one Sunday evening, and even more so when the visitor expresses how sorry she is for Izzy's loss:

> The woman took a step forward and placed her cold palm against the back of Izzy's hand. "We used to work together at the carpet factory away years ago and I always remember he was the kindest man" […] Izzy felt something hard kneading the bones in the back of her hand and looked down to see that the woman was already clutching a pair of rosary beads (Murrin, 2021).

When Izzy tells the woman that there must be "some kind of mistake", that no one has died, the woman apologises for arriving at the wrong house and says that she had received directions from staff at the local garage. Izzy now realises what the woman and her husband were doing: "this was their pastime, listening to the deaths on the local radio and making lists of wakes and funerals to attend" (Murrin, 2021). The story acknowledges the tradition of attending the wakes of people who Irish people may have only briefly known and the need to pass on their respects to the recently bereaved. The radio and newspaper death notices have long informed the local community about the death of its members and many a household requests complete silence while the names and address are read out by the radio announcer or while the newspaper is being scrutinized. Rita Larkin suggests that: "Irish death notices are an interesting social study" (Larkin, 2016, 264). The short death notices in newspapers, on radio and on RIP.ie are "couched in inflated language", where it seems "nobody dies anymore" (Larkin, 2016, 264). Instead, we read of persons who have "passed peacefully", often "surrounded by family and friends" or "in

the tender loving care of X or Y nursing home or funeral" (Larkin, 2016, 265). Nonetheless, Larkin suggests that the notices are an essential part of Irish funerary tradition and: "Not turning up at a neighbour's obsequies or not sending the obligatory mass card would be a serious omission" (Larkin, 2016, 264). As noted by Colm Keane: "Death in Ireland still commands curiosity, interest, explicit reference" (Keane, 1995, 15). RIP.ie has become the popular source for all funeral information, with notes dating back to July 2006. Conveniently, the website advises that "All notices placed on RIP.ie are archived on the site and can be found by searching: surname, county, town or date range" (RIP.ie). The availability of such information makes for ease of access to the details required for planning attendance of wakes and funerals, in Ireland. In a 2017 article in *The Journal*, Nicky Ryan suggests that the decline of traditional media, and indeed the decline of religious influence, has not affected the Irish fascination with funerals and death notices (Ryan, 2017).

Recurring themes of the rites, rituals and traditions surrounding the Irish funeral are ones that can aid the author in the creation of the ambience of grief. Irish poetry is ideally placed between the laments of our past and the fiction of our present, and its examination of the themes of grief and Irish funerary tradition results in a fruitful abundance of resources. According to poet Graham Gillespie: "The poet is like one taking the temperature of his times. He is commentator and chronicler. He holds a mirror up to the world" (Gillespie, 2010, 17). Seamus Heaney is often the name associated with reference to funerals in Irish poetry, with "Mid-Term Break" (1966) and "Funeral Rites" (1975) and their depictions of Irish funerary traditions blended in with his personal stories of grief. In "Mid-Term Break", fourteen-year-old Heaney is collected from boarding school following the accidental death of his four-year-old brother and when he reaches the family home he is greeted directly by grief: "In the porch I met my father crying" (Heaney, 1990, 7). His role, as one of the principal mourners, is assigned within moments and he feels uncomfortable with the unnatural order of adults shaking his

youthful hand and offering him their condolences. When he sees his brother's body, laid out within his small coffin, he notes the link between the size of the coffin with the young age of his dead sibling: "A four-foot box, a foot for every year" (Heaney, 1990, 7). In "Funeral Rites", Heaney is now a decade older yet is still feeling uncomfortable in his assigned funerary role, this time as a coffin bearer: "I shouldered a kind of manhood" (Heaney, 1990, 52). He describes the funerals and wakes of his relatives with the corpses "laid out" with their hands "shackled in rosary beads", within their "satin cribs" (Heaney, 1990, 52). He describes women "hovering" alongside the flames of candles, adding an age-old tradition to the atmosphere (Heaney, 1990, 52). In the second part of the poem, Heaney addresses Irish funerary tradition even further when he describes how, as a nation, we treat the news of a recent death: "as news comes in […] we pine for ceremony" and "customary rhythms" (Heaney, 1990,53).

In "Funeral Rites", Heaney presents the funerary procession as the norm, comparing the gathering of cars: "Out of side streets and by-roads/purring family cars/nose into line" to the ancient processions along the river Boyne toward the "megalithic doorway" of Newgrange burial mound (Heaney, 1990, 53-4).

The funeral cortège is also mentioned in Gillespie's poem, "Tailback" (2010), where he relays the frustrations of a commuter trapped behind a funeral cortege: "He learned as he sat seething in traffic/That a man had died" (Gillespie, 2010, 60).

> Funerals would be held
>
> Rituals observed
>
> Eulogies spoken (Gillespie, 2010, 60).

The commuter notes that the delay in traffic was representative of the journey of the deceased with "a dead man's soul" also waiting in a line of traffic: "Waiting for heaven's green light" (Gillespie, 2010, 60). With these words, the poet shows an acceptance of the idea of an afterlife. Witoszek and Sheeran suggest that poetry "readily accommodates the intersection of time and

timelessness, the personal and the transpersonal", perhaps more effectively than other literary genres (Witoszek and Sheeran, 1998, 117). This perspective suggests that poetry has a unique ability to capture fleeting moments while simultaneously exploring universal truths that go beyond the constraints of time. Unlike other literary forms, which often depend on linear storytelling or structured reasoning, poetry relies on elements like ambiguity, metaphor, and symbolism. These features allow it to convey deep emotions, spiritual reflections, and existential ideas in a concentrated form that speaks to both individual and collective experiences.

Irish wakes are an almost immediate affair, enabling the commencement of the transitional journey through grief shortly after the bereavement. In *My Buried Life* (2015), Doreen Finn emphasises the cultural differences surrounding funerals, when Eva realises how an Irish funeral is so unlike the services in New York:

> Irish people love death, though, and its offshoots: removals, wakes, Masses, flowers and cards, not to mention the funerals themselves. Nowhere else would people travel great distances, take time off work, rearrange entire days because someone has died. In New York, invitations are issued to funerals. There is no question of merely turning up to the church. Americans aren't interested in death the way Irish people are […] Funerals are bigger than Christmas here, and they last almost as long (Finn, 2015, 194).

Grainger suggests that the "standard British funeral" is a "low-key" affair, seen as being in the domain of officials: doctors, counsellors, funeral directors and clergy rather than family or community (Grainger, 1998, 138). Unlike the Irish way with death, the body of the deceased is "stored" for a number of weeks before the funeral, allowing for a well-organised gathering of fragmented families, often spread over thousands of miles. Cremation is often the preferred choice of funeral, which entails a church ceremony followed by "20 minutes at a crematorium conducted by an unknown clergyman" (O'Gorman, 1998, 138-139). Father Bernard Cotter explains the Irish bewilderment regarding British funerals, which often take place more than two weeks after the death, by which time the primary mourners have already returned to their

regular routines (Cotter, 2016, 232). In *The Gathering* (2007), Enright alludes to locational variants in funereal practices when she describes the wait involved in releasing the protagonist's brother's body for repatriation from the UK. She notes that British customs involve such a prolonged delay in arranging funerals that people assemble not primarily for mourning, but more to express their annoyance that the deceased is still present (Enright, 2007, 182).

In contrast, the Irish wake allows for a closeness to the deceased and accepts the reality of death, allowing for a release of emotion and time to grieve before returning to "normality". As English states: "The most basic reason that the Irish wake has become interchangeable with the 'good funeral' is that it offers a celebratory alternative to sombre rituals" (English, 2017, 187). When reflecting on the Irish way with death and funerals, Cotter believes the Irish are gazing back to Famine times, when the dead were "handled in an undignified manner", often buried in re-used coffins, in mass graves. He suggests that perhaps we place such an importance on our funerals out of "survivor's guilt":

> [The guilt] makes us want to ensure that nobody shares that fate, that everyone who dies is honoured in their passing. Even those with no one left to mourn them are assured of a handful at their funeral, so that no echo of those mass internments of Famine times persists (Cotter, 2016, 231).

The emigrants who fled Ireland during famine times - and beyond - brought the traditions of the Irish funeral and wake along with them, and as Irish communities became established in the UK, America, Canada, Australasia etc. the immigrants' toast "to die in Ireland" encompassed both the personal and the political (Taylor, 1989, 184). According to Anthropologist, Lawrence Taylor, the immigrant vision of "re-unification" with both the land and the politics of Ireland was the result of "a martyr's death among one's own and burial in the soil of a United Ireland" (Taylor, 1989, 184). However, Taylor also reminds us that this was not the case with all the diaspora:

> Such an end was [not] in the mind of everyone, or even most, who lifted their glasses in such a toast, but rather it was another articulation of a myth which contributes to the overall sense of death in Ireland (Taylor, 1989, 184).

O'Gorman implies that among all the cultural customs Irish immigrants brought to America, the Irish wake stands out as the most cherished. It embodies the paradox of the Irish inclination to celebrate amidst death and its nod to the ancient era of tribal existence (O'Gorman, 1998, 105). In America, the social aspect of the Irish wake was - and still is – a vital element for the diaspora. It has played a significant role in preserving the ties of kinship and political affiliations with their homeland. Simultaneously, it has facilitated critical connections that have contributed to the strengthening of the Irish community overseas. Often there is a level of expectation among the diaspora to experience a "merry wake". Bridget English suggests that the Irish wake is so deeply integrated into North American culture that it is often viewed as nearly synonymous with the idea of a meaningful funeral. (English, 2017, 187).

English credits some of the cultural shift in the attitudes to death to the author, Nuala O'Faolain, who was interviewed on RTÉ radio, just before her death in 2008. In a brutal and honest interview, she addressed her approaching death and "[forced] listeners to confront radically antagonistic conceptions of death and to attempt to reconcile the Catholic promise of heaven with a liberal-humanist emphasis on human life and personal fulfilment" (English, 2017, 4-5). O'Faolain's well-publicised interview opened a discourse into the approach to death in the twenty-first century. The author was candid about her cancer diagnosis and how she had refused further treatment in an effort to make the most of her final few weeks:

> Well I am sick, but I am trying to say goodbye. So much has happened and it seems such a waste of creation that with each death all that knowledge dies.
>
> I think there's a wonderful rule of life that means that we do not consider our own mortality. I know we seem to, and remember, "man thou art but dust", but I don't believe we do (O'Faolain, 2020).

Such was the effect on the nation of the author's candid thoughts on her impending death, *The Irish Independent* printed a full transcript of the interview. In 2011, the discourse continued, with the RTÉ television documentary, *Way to Go: Death and the Irish*, where broadcaster Norah Casey, who had recently lost her husband, Richard, explored the death industry and interviewed a broad range of people who are (or have been) affected by death, including healthcare professionals, undertakers and those who were dying at the time of filming. This was a profound and honest look at how we, as a nation, deal with death and grief (*Irish Hospice*, 2014). Casey suggests that:

> While we feel good about giving someone a decent send-off, a good wake, a fine funeral, maybe it's time that we face up to our own mortality. Death may well be the final taboo, but it doesn't have to be (Casey, 2014, 51:40).

It is worth noting that the arrival of Covid-19 had a massive impact on the funerary traditions of Ireland and it seemed that the lack of a wake, or a proper funeral affected the bereaved more than they had anticipated. Government guidelines initially saw restrictions which forbade more than ten mourners at a funeral and so the wake was an impossible event. Vincent McDarby suggests that Irish culture has always placed a large emphasis on our funeral traditions:

> People will drive two or three hours across the country, even just to shake hands for two seconds and say "sorry for your loss" […] It's one thing we do well in Ireland, we support people in the times of bereavement...When that stopped it was a huge issue (McDarby in Power, 2021).

The restrictions on attendance at funerals changed the traditions and ritual of centuries. Author and playwright, Michael Harding, states that to have lost someone in "the cloud of coronavirus" was "unbearable":

> [A]ll the stories and love songs of a lifetime [being] taken in a body bag to the graveyard without the full pomp of a warm, Irish funeral. A lonely coffin before the altar, without ritual or ceremony […] No throng of mourners crushing toward the front pews to shake the family's hands and no heaving in the graveyard under a hundred umbrellas (Harding, 2021, 48).

Already, we see mention of funerals in the time of Covid-19 in Irish Literature. Roddy Doyle's *Life Without Children* (2021) is a collection of short stories, all set during lockdown and "The Funerals" introduces Bob, who has recently lost his mother. He lies awake and seems to be struggling with the fact that he was forbidden to attend her (restricted attendance) funeral. The day is not yet over and he is stuck in a liminal space: "His mother was dead. It wasn't a new day yet. He was stuck in her death" (Doyle, 2021, 118). The change in the rituals surrounding the funeral had begun when Bob received a call from his brother:

> Mam died. Last night.
>
> Last night?
>
> Yeah.
>
> You're telling me now?
>
> I'm doing up a list of people who can attend the funeral. We're limited to ten.
>
> When's the funeral?
>
> I'll text you.
>
> He knew he wouldn't be going […] There'd be ten names ahead of him. His sisters, some grandkids, the surviving uncle (Doyle, 2021, 126).

Doyle has tapped into the overall sadness surrounding the loss of the traditional Irish funeral, in unprecedented circumstances (Bonass Madden, 2022). Bob ponders how the restrictions are against the cultural grain: "The Irish do funerals well, they say. Death doesn't frighten the Irish" (Doyle, 2021, 115).

In an interview at Dublin Book Festival 2021, Doyle confirmed that the inspiration behind his collection of short stories was the idea of "using the feeling, using the anxiety, using the observations" of Ireland's lockdown (Doyle, 2021, 09:26). Doyle also revealed how the story "Nurse" was directly inspired by the 2020 RTÉ Investigates documentary *Inside Ireland's Covid Battle*, where a nurse described the distinctive sound of a body bag being zipped up over the corpse of a patient who had died as a result of Covid-19. He began the story by imagining: "how that's what she'd be hearing when she closed her eyes that night" (Doyle, 2021, 11:42).

The documentary was aired in June 2020. It highlighted the realities that faced frontline workers in St James's Hospital, Dublin and offered a brief glimpse into the changes surrounding death and grief in Ireland during the pandemic. With no visitors permitted in the ICU department, many patients died alone and were not afforded the traditional wake or funeral. Instead, their remains were placed in two body bags before being placed in a closed coffin, which could not be opened: "No wakes…no open coffins. Sisters and Brothers not being able to hug each other in their time of grief" (RTÉ, 2021, 16.00). Pauline Boss suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in "skyrocketing" levels of ambiguous losses and it "left some lasting effects for us to deal with for years to come, as individuals and as a collective" (Boss, 2022, xix).

In her 2021 essay, "Lacrimosa/Tearful", author and poet, Nuala O'Connor, describes the experience of losing her father during the pandemic. When she hears that her father has contracted Covid-19, when in hospital, she realises that the traditional Irish goodbye will not be possible:

> Today I cry because my father – a complex, sociable, loving man – may die alone because of the pandemic. If he dies, there will be no large, cordial Irish funeral. We will stand six feet apart, ten of us, and we will not drown our sorrows in a pub, with songs and stories, as we might have. Our weeping will happen as we drive away, not together, not in each other's arms (O'Connor, 2021, 53).

O'Connor's grief is compounded by the inability to engage in the customary rites and rituals traditionally associated with the mourning process and her tearfulness serves as a poignant reflection of the collective grief and frustration pervasive among those who have lost loved ones during the pandemic. Neuroscientist and psychologist Mary-Francis O'Connor believes these circumstances are similar to the "ambiguous loss" that one feels when their loved one has disappeared during a political campaign or is missing and presumed dead following a tragedy:

> [This] complicates the grieving process. One reason may be that part of our brain is wired to believe that our loved one is never really gone, and without the overwhelming evidence from

> our memories of their decline or death, rewiring our understanding may take longer or cause greater distress (O'Connor, 2022, 53).

Boss suggests that the widespread uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 pandemic triggered a substantial rise in ambiguous losses, leading to lasting effects that we will need to confront for many years ahead (Boss, 2022, xix). She notes that the "ultimate paradox" regarding the absence of grief rituals was that, at a time when millions of mourners most needed the solace of others, they were unable to gather in person. (Boss. 2022, 51).

Author and journalist, Ed O'Loughlin addresses the lack of traditional funeral rituals during Covid19 in *The Last Good Funeral of the Year* (2022). In February 2020, O'Loughlin receives the unexpected news of the death of a former girlfriend. He attends her funeral and remembers how afterwards; "everyone agreed that the eulogy had been as uplifting a talk as you could possibly hear at the funeral of a mother taken so young" (O'Loughlin, 2020, 16). When the lockdown is announced, O'Loughlin immediately thinks of how this will affect the funeral traditions of Ireland: "People would die alone in isolation wards, with no one there to hold their hands, and be buried alone, without any proper ceremony" (O'Loughlin, 2022, 16). He is grateful that his friend was granted the funeral she deserved and that the rituals were observed:

> Irish people go to funerals. They circle the wagons, count the survivors. Everyone could still hug and kiss, wipe away the tears and snot, shake hands with her husband, her family, her kids. Nobody knew it then, but this would be the last good funeral of the year (O'Loughlin, 2022, 17).

Silvia Romio suggests that restrictions during Covid-19 profoundly disrupted the everyday connection between the living and the dead. The lack of traditional funeral rites, the isolation experienced by millions of dying individuals, the improper methods used to handle and transport coffins and the media's exploitation of images showing coffins piled up all contributed to a widespread feeling of collective grief and suffering (Romio, 2023, 92). Community became the vital component of the Covid Funeral, with social media and WhatsApp enabling the rallying calls to line the streets (with six feet distance being observed), as the hearses made their

way to their respective graveyards. In an article written in the midst of the pandemic, Maria Ronan suggests that: "The evident consolation which community-based funerary practices afford bereaved families gives hope that that this defining rite of Irish culture will long outlive coronavirus" (Ronan, 2021, 239). Boss suggests that the ambiguous losses experienced during the pandemic were heightened by the "loss of security", along with the absence of company and physical touch (Boss, 2022, 113). She hypotheses that the changes in routines and rituals that people were experiencing were adding to the stress they were feeling regarding the virus (Boss, 2022, 108).

Since the return to "normal", with unrestricted attendance at gatherings and ceremonies, we can once again practise the traditions and rituals of the wake and funeral. The opportunity to celebrate the lives of the ones who have passed has been reinstated and mourners may now share in the grief of the bereaved, while telling them they are sorry for their troubles. The liminal space is now re-instated as an area afforded to those who are grieving. The dismantling of hierarchies, during the liminal stages of grief, are available to assist through the transitions from pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal phases associated with the funeral. Turner's theories surrounding *communitas* are perhaps now more obvious than ever before, as the pandemic erased the opportunity to engage in transference of duties and roles, during the mourning period.

The research surrounding the themes of grief and funerary traditions in Irish literature has resulted in the desire to delve further into contemporary literature - post-2000 - to examine how the authors have used the liminal period and spaces, around death and mourning, to structure their novels. Using works by authors including Donal Ryan, Anne Enright, John McGahern, William Trevor, Kathleen MacMahon, Doreen Finn, Alan McMonagle, Anne Griffin, Kit de Waal, Mary Costello, among others, it is my intention to contribute to the world of knowledge surrounding death, funerals and grief in twenty-first century Irish literature. By approaching the research from many angles, including the use of the theories of van Gennep

and Turner, along with popular psychologists Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, Pauline Boss, Atle Dyregrove et al, I aim to highlight how this liminal space also affords the opportunity to examine how we not only grieve the loss of our immediate family or close friends, but also members of our community, who are mourned with the rituals and traditions of our ancestors. Kathleen Costello-Sullivan suggests that twenty-first century Irish literature goes beyond storytelling by reflecting and critiquing the present condition of Irish society. Through its themes, characters, and narratives, it offers insights into the cultural, political, and social issues of modern Ireland, engaging in a wider conversation about these matters (Costello-Sullivan, 2018, 26-27). As a form of social discourse, it influences and contributes to discussions on identity, values, and the challenges that Ireland faces today. Examining post-2000 novels through the lenses of literary theory, contemporary psychological insights, and modern analysis offers a fresh perspective for literary research. This approach facilitates the initiation of a fresh discourse concerning themes of grief, ritual, and tradition within the context of Irish literature offering fresh insights into how these themes are portrayed and understood in recent works.

While there is no shortage of examples of death, dying and funerals in contemporary Irish literature, the challenge for Irish writers of the twenty-first century is how to use the rituals and traditions of the Irish "way" with death in a way that is still relevant today. In researching this thesis, it became apparent that writers continue to use the liminal space surrounding the funeral and wake to facilitate and enable innovations of literary form. Whether the novels are written in historical settings or in contemporary times, the mourning and grief patterns are intricately woven through the transitional space the bereaved occupy. As English suggests, it is the combination of the structural and ritualistic elements of Catholicism with the pagan and partially secularized mourning customs that define Irish funerary traditions. (English, 2017, 187).

Adopting a comprehensive methodology in the examination of diverse literary genres facilitated a well-rounded exploration of Irish literature that contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the Irish perspectives on death. Through the comparative analysis of fictional funerals, spanning different geographical locations, historical timeframes and socio-economic contexts, a diverse array of primary and secondary sources was examined, thereby enriching the scope of this research. The initial use of the theories of liminality and communitas was expanded to include theories from popular grief psychologists and allowed for a deeper knowledge of how we process grief and our liminal journey. The inclusion of non-fiction and memoir in the literary analysis significantly expanded the comprehension of grief literature, often resulting in links between the factual accounts and fictional narratives. In each of the following chapters various Irish literary works that highlight the significance of Irish funerary practices while also incorporating theories of liminality and contemporary grief research. These texts frequently employ the concept of liminality, as theorised by Turner and van Gennep, to portray the transitional phases and experiences through which characters process their grief. This theoretical approach facilitates a deeper understanding of how Irish funerary rituals function not just as ceremonies to celebrate the life of the deceased, but also as crucial processes for the living to navigate their emotional experiences.

The theories of Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner are expanded to include studies from both Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud, along with contemporary theorists such as John Bowlby and Colin Murray Parks. In broadening the scope of the literature surrounding grief this approach presents an opportunity to unveil instances that might not have been readily apparent. Within this study, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross emerges as a pivotal source. Despite considerable academic resistance to her original theory concerning the Five Stages of Grief, my research findings suggest that a significant portion of the opposition to the theory can be attributed to a misunderstanding of its original intent (Bonass Madden, 2023, 7). The theory

had been initially crafted for individuals nearing the end of life rather than those undergoing the experience of bereavement. Contemporary research suggests that the grieving process is nonlinear; nevertheless, individuals in mourning commonly traverse various stages of grief at some point. The theories and research on grief and the liminal space can be used to illuminate and analyse the literary texts.

I provide a short conclusion wherein I reaffirm the significant role of the funeral in contemporary Irish fiction. Additionally, I argue that there is an opportunity for additional research in the realm of current literature addressing themes of grief, mourning, and the Irish funeral. As suggested by English: "the topic of death, funerals, and the wake continues to be of great interest in Irish popular culture" and therefore could benefit from further research into its representation in twenty-first century literature (English, 2017, 186). Furthermore, I suggest that there is a deserving need for extended research on ambiguous loss, potentially leading to a re-evaluation of literature that may have been previously overlooked.

This thesis aims to illuminate the central role of funerary rituals and liminal spaces in shaping the narratives of grief and identity in contemporary Irish literature. By examining the interplay between tradition, community, and personal transformation, it offers a deeper understanding of how Irish writers continue to engage with the cultural and emotional dimensions of death. In doing so, it contributes to the broader discourse on grief studies and the cultural significance of mourning practices in literature.

Chapter 2
The Five Stages of Grief in Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007).

Grief, ritual and tradition are prominent themes in Anne Enright's *The Gathering (2007)* and it is these elements that I shall explore in this chapter, using Kübler Ross's theory of The Five Stages of Grief to examine the author's use of the liminal space surrounding grief. Enright's Booker Prize-winning novel focuses on the aftermath of the death of Liam Hegarty and the subsequent gathering of the Flaherty family for his wake and funeral. Narrated by Liam's sister, Veronica, the story focuses on how her grief revives long suppressed memories and causes her to re-evaluate her life. In particular, Liam's death has unearthed memories of sexual abuse which he had suffered as a young boy and how she failed to acknowledge that she was aware of the abuse or offer any guidance to help him process his feelings about this childhood trauma. Liam Harte proposes that Veronica's story illustrates how the unaddressed trauma she carried, until her brother's passing, prompts her to examine the source and depth of her fractured sense of self (Harte, 2010, 189). Valente and Backus suggest that the: "dissociation of her childhood memories, enjoined by their traumatic force, serves as the novel's double synecdoche for the larger cultural amnesia concerning child sexual abuse in Ireland" (Valente and Backhus, 2020, 199). Veronica's arduous path to recovery involves her attempt to unearth and reveal this hidden narrative, amidst overwhelming grief and anger. Furthermore, she seeks to "piece together and give voice to her dead brother's story" (Harte, 2010, 189).

Veronica's knowledge of the abuse suffered by her brother, its role in his life-long struggle with alcohol and his lack of stability means that her approach to mourning his death is different to that of her siblings. Dell'Amico suggests that "the instance of child sexual abuse that lies at the heart of this book acknowledges the nation's saddest instance of forgetting"

(Dell'Amico, 2010, 63). She is consumed by an overwhelming need to delve into the past in the form of a fictional re-writing of her grandmother's history, thus allowing her to pivot through the stages of grief at her own pace. Applying Kübler-Ross's theory of The Five Stages of Grief to a reading of Enright's novel, we can trace her journey through grief and observe how it is a flexible entity that affords different reactions and experiences. Kübler- Ross and Kessler suggest that many individuals tend to perceive these stages as enduring for extended periods, such as weeks or months. However, they tend to overlook that these stages are reactions to emotions that can persist for brief periods, ranging from minutes to hours, as we transition between them. It is important to note that we do not experience these stages sequentially; rather, we may move from one to another and then return to the initial stage, often in a non-linear fashion (Kübler Ross and Kessler, 2005, 18). The mourning process is therefore an individual one which can vary in its results. In a literary context, an author can employ The Five Stages of Grief as a framework to navigate the reader through the protagonist's experience of loss, effectively encapsulating the diverse array of emotions that can be generated by the grieving process. The narrative follows Veronica's stages of grief and observe how she chooses, for the most part, to cope in isolation. Enright's unreliable protagonist is creating a fictional past whilst dealing with a stark present. Within the liminal realm, a writer gains the freedom to extend their narrative boundaries to the threshold of societal acceptability and even transcend conventional belief. Grief is a personal journey and closure is not always inevitable. English suggests that the novel's plot is more concerned with Veronica's journey toward a new life, rather than with Liam's death. (English, 2017, 156). By travelling through the stages of grief, she learns to acknowledge the forgotten past and chooses to move forward.

Kübler-Ross acknowledges the historical doubts and criticism from academics regarding her theory. She argues that the stages were not meant to serve as fixed milestones along a linear trajectory of grief but were instead conceived to help individuals better

understand and identify their emotional responses (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 7). Consultant Psychiatrist Anthony O'Flaherty presents a different viewpoint by proposing the existence of either two or three distinct phases within the grieving process. Initially, he outlines these stages, starting with the phase of recognition and psychological acceptance, followed by the phase of psychological healing, which facilitates the restoration of emotional equilibrium and the return to what is considered "normal" life (O'Flaherty, 1995, 87). Paradoxically, O'Flaherty later refines his theory by suggesting the presence of three stages within the grieving process: the stage of numbness, the stage of suffering, and the stage of recovery (O'Flaherty, 1995, 87-88).

Kübler Ross acknowledges that there has always been academic resistance to her theory. She suggests that these stages were not designed to be "stops on some linear timeline in grief" but were designed to help people "frame and identify" their feelings (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 7). She re-visits the theory from the perspective of the bereaved, rather than the person who is approaching the end of life, as had been the original focus of *On Death and Dying*. She implies that for the bereaved, it is a more symbolic loss than a literal one. Grief is a personal journey, and each mourner grieves in their own way. Liminality experienced during these phases of grief, regardless of how many one goes through, provides an opportunity to temporarily step away from reality. It creates a sheltered space where one can engage in unconventional behaviour and deviate from the usual routines, often without regard for the constraints of time. Time does not conform to or apply to the stages of grief in this liminal context. As O'Flaherty submits: "'How long do we grieve for?' There is no simple answer…there is no specific time for grieving; people do it in their own time and in their own way. Many writers talk about stages, or phases, of grief as if we go blithely from one stage to another. We do not" (O'Flaherty, 1995, 87).

In the denial stage of grief, it is not that fact that the person who has lost a loved one is denying the death, but that they are struggling to believe it has actually happened, because "it is too much for his or her psyche" (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 8). Kübler-Ross's theory allows for the idea that shock and numbness help the grieving to "pace our feelings" and adjust to the loss (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 10). She implies that our psyche cannot cope with an overload of emotion and denial is a way of editing the feelings we allow in. (Kübler Ross and Kessler, 2005, 10). We see this clearly in the opening of *The Gathering* where Veronica's first enters the liminal realm within the stages of grief. Liam has committed suicide in Brighton, England and Veronica is tasked with delivering the news of his death to their mother. She reluctantly enters the Hegarty house and is immediately repulsed by its very fabric. She notices the size "Always smaller than it should be", the layout "The place is all extension and no house" and the smell "It makes me gag a little […] It is the smell of us" (Enright, 2007, 4-5). Her attitude toward the house is perhaps due the fact that this was where she unwittingly carried the knowledge of Liam's abuse and where she experienced a difficult childhood and adolescence. Her gagging reflex is a bodily reaction to the resurfaced memories and succinctly illustrates her reaction to the hidden trauma.

Enright believes that the senses of smell, touch and taste are ones of which can be heightened in the female, maternal experience: "It's the problem of the body as it is experienced rather than as seen" (Bracken and Cahill, 2011, 22). Hedwig Schwall suggests that: "Enright sides with feminists like Irigaray, Rosi Braidotti, Judith Butler, Bracha Ettinger and others who invert the paternalistic hierarchy of the senses. Whereas seeing and hearing predominate, partly because of the safe distance they bring, the feminist and maternal perception pleads for more familiarity with touch, smell and taste" (Schwell, EFIAS). Veronica's senses are referenced throughout *The Gathering* and she notes her reactions to smells, touch, taste and sound. This may suggest her

heightened awareness of her trauma and the memories which are revealing themselves, during her liminal grief.

Her pessimism is also perhaps a result of a difficult childhood and adolescence, where she carried the knowledge of her brother's abuse and her own feelings towards her mother's parenting style. Rachel M. Masotta suggests that the Hegarty children were given the same amount of thought as: "ornaments on a Christmas tree; decorative but innumerable" (Masotta, 2019, 62). Veronica is internally angered by her mother having twelve children and how she now struggles to even remember her own daughter's name: "The holes in her head are not her fault. Even so, I have never forgiven her any of it" (Enright, 2007, 7). At this point we learn the identities of the Hegarty children and their disparate personalities. Enright intentionally drip-feeds details about the siblings before the gathering for Liam's wake to enable the family dynamic to form before the event (Enright, Wheeler Centre, 2017). In fact, the actual "gathering" only begins at page 192, which is about seventy percent into the novel, and this affords the characters' behaviours and attitudes more depth, when they do appear. The literal "gathering" of the Hegartys is the heart of the novel, rather than the funeral and burial of Liam. The family dynamic and their varied approach to grief is the story. The funeral assembly also incorporates Van Gennep's concept of liminality, facilitating a more profound comprehension of the transitional state experienced by the recently bereaved within a restricted environment. Turner's theory of *communitas* is also evident as Veronica has been designated as the "elder," disrupting the established order and creating a transitional space where conventional narratives can be questioned and upended, thus making room for alternative viewpoints and voices that were previously marginalised (Ní Éigeartaigh, 2022, xii).

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" (Enright, 2007, 6). Falling back on ritualistic words and expected facial masks is mentioned at many stages in the novel and shows the

importance of ritual during times of grief. When she hears the news, Veronica's mother, uncharacteristically, hits her. Here we see the grief of a mother who has lost her child. She seems in denial about the accuracy of the news and lashes out at the messenger. Initially she is silent but "then a terrible sound comes out of her. Quite soft. It seems to lift up off her back" (Enright, 2007, 9) Enright, again, uses the senses to emphasise Veronica's reaction to her mother's grief. She is acknowledging the guttural maternal instinct to howl with pain when faced with such a revelation. Janice Bell Meisenhelder suggests that bereaved mothers "commonly feel such acute pain that they are compelled to verbalise it loudly. The primal scream and the wailing sob demand expression" (Meisenhelder, 2021, 101). Veronica's mother's denial of her son's death has subsided. Again, Enright uses the face as a way of displaying grief, when her mother turns to face Veronica: "so that I can witness her face; the look on it, now, and the way it will never be the same again" (Enright, 2007, 9). As Veronica watches her mother's display of grief, she rages against the unfairness of her role: "my mind surges, almost bursts, with the unfairness of it all" and she appears to resent the effort she has placed into the duties she has already performed, stating that she "will die of unfairness" (Enright, 2007, 10). However, the grieving mother's ability to function is significantly impaired as grief affects every aspect of her life, including cognitive disruption, physical ailments, and ongoing emotional distress. While physical symptoms like insomnia, nausea, and fatigue are common in many forms of loss, these symptoms tend to be more frequent, severe, and prolonged in the case of maternal grief (Meisenhelder, 2021, 101-102). Veronica's resentment could be seen as a blending of both her the pain and anger associated with her loss. Meisenhelder that emotions are exaggerated when one is grieving: "The extensive degree of pain results in huge amounts of anger that get diffusely expressed: from road rage to family bickering". Nevertheless, as a form of grief, anger is more culturally acceptable and easier to express than sadness.

According to Kübler-Ross's model, Veronica seems to have passed into the Second Stage of Grief: Anger, where denial "is replaced by feelings of anger, rage [and often] envy" (Kübler-Ross, 2001, 44). Veronica resents that she was "the one who has to drive over to Mammy's and ring the doorbell and put myself in a convenient hitting position", while her siblings escaped the chore (Enright, 2007, 10). 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" (Enright, 2007, 10). The anger experienced during times of grief need not be logical, or even relevant to the current situation. Kübler Ross implies that anger is "a necessary stage" which helps keep other feelings at bay, until we are ready to deal with them (Kübler Ross and Kessler, 2005, 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" (Kübler Ross and Kessler, 2005, 12). While society views anger as a fearful emotion, Kübler Ross suggests that in times of grief, anger should be honoured and we should let it out to enable "temporary structure to the nothingness of grief" (Kübler Ross and Kessler, 2005, 15). George A. Bonanno asserts that emotional flexibility is essential during the grieving process. He argues that "flexibility is adaptive" and that it is beneficial for individuals to think and act in ways that might typically be considered inappropriate or unhealthy, as these responses can aid in the healing process. (Bonanno, 2010, 112).

Veronica's anger may also stem from the details associated with identifying Liam's body, from afar, from which she has spared her mother. A visit from a "very nice bean garda who called to the door" (Enright, 2007, 11) to deliver the news of her brother's passing mirrors a recurring theme within families affected by suicide, where the deceased had previously become detached from the "core of family existence." This is exemplified in the case of Liam, who had departed from Ireland during his early adulthood (Kelleher, 1995, 104). Often the

announcement of their passing comes from a complete stranger. Veronica recalls how she sourced the dental records required, 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". Her mother "has plenty more" (Enright, 2007, 11). Here we learn of the distinctive bond between Veronica and Liam who were born "eleven months apart" and "came out of each other's tails; one after another […] we overlapped in there, he just left early, to wait outside" (Enright, 2007, 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", the sibling's closeness, Veronica realises, cannot compare 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?" (Enright, 2007, 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 (Enright, 2007, 11).

This act of gentle kindness, of performing a ritual of providing sweet tea to those who have had a shock, shows the importance of small rituals in times of grief and not just the larger religious and ceremonial traditions. In setting her anger aside, Veronica has allowed her mother's grief to come to the foreground and she has given way to western society's idea of maternal priority, with a mother placing their child, or children, at the "centre of their universe" (Takseva, 2016, 156).

Veronica has entered the liminal space, which she must manage on behalf of the Hegarty family. She has been charged with the formal identification of Liam's body and his repatriation, thus propelling 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 undertaker. She ironically notes they "very nicely" take her credit card details. She decides on a coffin style without conferring with her mother, or other siblings, as she believes the decision is hers: "because I am the one who loved him most" (Enright, 2007, 23). When a neighbour comes to offer condolences to her mother, Veronica moves on from her short-lived role as chief-mourner and leaves the kitchen to start "ringing the lot of them" - her siblings - "in Clontarf, and Phibsboro, in Tucson, Arizona, to say, 'Bad news, about Liam" (Enright, 2007, 23). She sets the family news-chain in action, knowing just how each call should be worded and that no one can be left out. She also knows that she will end up being the one to receive return calls from each person, with requests for "times and reasons and gory details" (Enright, 2007, 24). When Veronica returns to the kitchen, she notices that her mother has "aged five, maybe ten years in the time it took me to make the calls" (Enright, 2007, 25). She tells her that she is "going over there, to sort things out" and leaves her mother, to attend to the formal identification of Liam's remains. As she leaves the house, she literally enters the 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" (Enright, 2007, 25-26). Grief has taken full hold of Veronica's senses and has taken away her daily routine, removing all thoughts of usual performances and expectations. She travels a different road and ponders the reason she is afforded the luxury of doing so. She begins to embrace the idea of the liminal space afforded by the preparations involved in planning Liam's funeral when she notices that her husband has taken control of their children and the running of 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" (Enright, 2007, 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, 2001, 35-36). Veronica briefly sees her brother's death as a pivotal point of perspective and one which allows for her to appreciate the temporary relinquishing of her normal duties. Although she does not deny the reality of her brother's death, she is embracing the solitude inherent in the first stage of grief.

Veronica isolates herself almost immediately after hearing of her brother's death. She partly copes with her grief by suppressing thoughts of his passing, effectively taking advantage of this transitional period. English explains that: "In her liminal state Veronica can order and make sense of her life and Liam's" (English, 2017, 178). She is removed from her deteriorating marriage and the demands of motherhood. Without this isolation, Veronica may not have been afforded the time or opportunity to attempt the close reading 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 imagined account of her grandmother's life. Karen Ann McCarthy suggests that Enright's narrative approach openly contests the established "realities" through complex temporal manoeuvres and is, therefore, the most effective way to portray Veronica's traumatic situation (McCarthy, 2019, 214). The airport road is often her destination when she drives alone. Later in the novel London's Gatwick airport pulls her into its environs, with its inherent status as a liminal space. This suggests a yearning for escapism and the idea of 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 our sympathies by complicating Veronica's aborted attempts to flee the past, in what Meaney calls a "new form of denial" (Meaney, 2011, 159).

As Veronica travels to Brighton to begin the process of the repatriation of Liam's body, she muses what this activity should be called. Is it collecting, viewing, saying hello or saying goodbye? She settles on the traditional phrase of "*Pay your respects*" (Enright, 2007, 41). As she watches the landscape from the train window, she even doubts she is on a literal journey: "travel is a contrary kind of thing, because moving towards a dead man is not moving at all" (Enright, 2007, 41). The movement of the train is in direct contradiction to the stillness of the dead. During this train journey, Irish funeral traditions are alluded to when Veronica shows discomfort with the idea of a wake in the family home: "Some ancient impulse of my mother's means that she wants the coffin brought back to the house before the removal, so Liam can lie in state in our ghastly front room" (Enright, 2007, 42). As she thinks of the front room, she tells her sister, Bea, that she "can't think of a better carpet for a corpse", with its dark, gloomy colours. Sensing Veronica's reluctance to have a traditional wake, Bea uses guilt tactics: "It's how Daddy would have wanted it" (Enright, 2017, 42). This statement causes Veronica to acknowledge that this tradition is one which means a lot to Irish people, especially her father who had a habit of ritualising things, none more so than a funeral: "[T]he whole human business had to be ritualised. 'I'm sorry for your trouble'…It bored me to tears, actually" (Enright, 2007, 42). She recalls his own funeral and how the mourners commented on the large family he had produced "Sitting in a row, like steps and stairs" (Enright, 2007, 43). 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" (Enright, 2007, 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: "massive and still under

Ada's rose-pink eiderdown" (Enright, 2007, 59). She recalls being aware, even as a young child, that "saying goodbye" to a corpse was a futile exercise as "they're not going to say anything back" and how she resisted entering the room. Liam had brought her up "past the neighbours reciting the rosary on the stairs" and her memory has these women "bundled in shawls" - surely a false memory, as it was 1968 and in a Dublin suburb, which would not be the usual location for such wake rituals - and more mourners kneeling and praying on the return and landing. As she approaches the wake room, the first thing she sees is the "still, uneven lump" of her grandfather's feet, the "horrible little peaks of his knees" and his hands "tied together with rosary beads" (Enright, 2007, 61). She notices the beads are too tight around his fingers and they appear to be "digging into his flesh" (Enright, 2007, 61). These memories carry somewhat unfavourable religious symbolism and persist in her mind, even many years later. They might contribute to her hesitation in witnessing her brother's funeral arranged in the Catholic tradition, as she has since lost her faith in the Catholic Church.

Veronica's narrative is set during a time of new awareness of child abuse. Noel Howard suggests that there was a growing societal awareness of child sexual abuse occurring within families, schools, and institutional settings: "Disbelief, horror, rage and in some cases denial greeted these revelations and at the centre of much of it was the Catholic Church" (Howard, 2010, 14). Rosary beads were known to be produced by children in the care of religious orders in Ireland, up to (and including) the late twentieth-century. Evidence of this can be seen in The Commission to Enquire into Child Abuse (also known as The Ryan Report) which was established in May 2000. Part of the inquiry's remit was to: "afford to persons who have suffered such abuse in institutions during the relevant period an opportunity to recount in full the abuse suffered by them" (CICA). The testimonies include reference to the "business" run by nuns at St. Vincents Industrial School, Goldenbridge, Dublin: "[The] bead-making industry in Goldenbridge was introduced into the daily routine of the pupils, and it continued until the

mid-1960s" (CICA Report, 2009, 2, 264). The children strung rosary beads for several hours after school from Monday to Friday, often working late to meet quotas. Additionally, they were expected to dedicate several hours to this task on Saturdays (CICA Report, 2009, 2, 45). Children were beaten for specific 'offenses,' such as not working quickly enough while making rosary beads. The report suggests that: "the children who had been singled out for punishment were lined up and beaten with a stick. This usually took place late at night, on a landing outside the nuns' rooms or cells" (CICA Report, 2009, 2, 269). In fact, the report contains "accounts of witnesses being hit with large Rosary beads and crucifixes that nuns wore at their waist" (CICA Report, 2009, 3, 136). Veronica is not only traumatised by the death of her sibling, but she is also aware of the sexual abuse he had suffered and how his "flesh" had been violated. The association between the tightly held rosary beads and the abuse endured by children, who may have been involved in the creation of these religious items, could be perceived as interconnected from her perspective.

However, when Veronica sets aside the religious aspects of the viewing, she realises that as a child, she was not repulsed, but rather moved by the ritual: "I suppose it is amazing. The viewing moment. When they have left but are not yet gone. When you are not quite sure what it is you see" (Enright, 2007, 62). She had stared at him (or "it" as she saw him as, at that time) and when his moustache refused to move of its own accord, she realised he was gone, finally releasing her pent-up sadness at her loss. She pondered that the blood, or lack thereof, in his body was now "seeking gravity" and how as they stood beside him, it was growing "infinitesimally lighter". She also reflects that it is partially the same blood that flowed through her body and the body of her brother, referring to their inherited bloodline (Enright, 2007, 63). However, this may also allude to her scepticism regarding the notion of the body and blood of Christ, rather than being interpreted as grim observations made by a child. She refused to touch the body but nine-year-old Liam "knew what the proper thing was to do", stepping forward to

take his grandfather's hand (Enright, 2007, 63). Veronica seems to think this was a sign of Liam's surrendering to what was expected of him, from adults. She sees this as a turning point which she ignored. She seems to realise that her brother was prepared to do whatever he was asked to do by adults, and this eventually included his sexual abuse.

Her recognition of her early awareness of Liam's traumatic childhood is the first symbolic entrance into the third stage of grief: Bargaining. The ideas of "What if…?" and "If only…?" and the idea of how things could have gone differently are often accompanied by guilt (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 17). This stage sees the mourner rooted in the past and struggling to "negotiate our way out of the hurt" (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 15). It is often a key phase which can see the bereaved "holding a piece of the alternative future" where the death never occurred (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 19). Veronica begins to question herself, asking whether she should have recognised Liam's pain and whether his life would have been different if she had told someone about the abuse she had seen, in her Grandparents' house, all those years ago. She had known he was troubled, even at the age of seven, and is yielding to the reality of this fact. This struggle reflects the dilemma of traumatic witnessing, where the inability to intervene or change events leads to a deep sense of self-worthlessness (Valente and Backus, 2020, 210). Her immersion in this liminal stage of grief draws her back to their shared childhood, forcing her to confront these unresolved questions. As Dell'Amico suggests, Veronica's recollection of the summer she and Liam spent with Ada represents both an attempt to trace the events that led to Liam's tragic end and her effort to come to terms with her own trauma as a co-victim and witness to the abuse (Dell' Amico, 2010, 62). Rudolf Freiburg and Gerd Bayer draw on research within trauma studies, noting that literature frequently engages with the concept of 'testimony' and the tendency of trauma survivors to repeatedly revisit the traumatic event in search of meaning. They argue, however, that narratives focused on grief, suffering and trauma often depend on the testimony of witnesses, largely because the victim is

no longer able to recount their own story (Freiburg and Bayer, 2021, 4). Veronica's attempts at reimagining the outcome of Liam's life, had she addressed his abuse, are dependent on her personal witness testimonies. She is aware that her memories are unreliable and therefore cannot be seen as useful bargaining tools, within this liminal phase of her grief.

In Brighton, Veronica identifies her brother's remains and she focuses on the second-hand pyjamas in which her brother is now reposing, on a mortuary table, and how this is how she knows he is dead: "If you ask me what my brother looked like, after he was dead, I can tell you that he looked like Mantegna's fore-shortened Christ in paisley pyjamas" (Enright, 2007, 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, awaiting anointment and to be shrouded (Eisler, 2006, 13). She accepts that this may be her imagination as she is traumatised by viewing her brother "too high off the ground", the table "too hard and flat" for it to seem right: "because the dead are never uncomfortable" (Enright, 2007, 64). Kevin Toolis suggests that viewing the corpse of a loved one is a surreal experience which serves as "a visible, tactile, irrefutable statement of [their] present and eternal deadness" (Toolis, 2017, 2013). Veronica expresses her anger towards her grandmother for forcing them to see their grandfather's body. She considers it entirely possible that she also had known Liam would die young: "Ada had seen this day coming. She knew all along. She wanted us prepared" (Enright, 2007, 64). She recalls her grandmother's strong insistence that Veronica should touch the deceased body and how she had firmly resisted yielding to that pressure.

She remembers how, with a background soundtrack of the mourners chanting the rosary, Liam placed his hand on her arm "already livid with decay" (Enright, 2007, 65) which perhaps suggests that his early death was pre-destined. Ada finally accepts that her granddaughter shall not be moved, and she becomes her surrogate, placing her own hand on the body. When she cups his face and appears "stuck" in grief, someone removes her hand and tells her "That's

enough now", which Veronica is surprised by: "Like it was our fault – this embarrassment of the dead flesh, and the still-breathing love that was in Ada's body, a love that did not know where to go" (Enright, 2007, 65). It is during this profoundly honest and true moment of grief that a dark atmosphere enters the narrative.

Lamb Nugent, Charlie's friend and landlord, is kneeling in prayer, rosary beads in hand and Veronica claims she has "never trusted men who pray" (Enright, 2007, 65). Nugent is a constant, dark presence throughout Veronica's memories and prominently features in her re-telling of Ada's life. Nugent's character plays a pivotal role in revealing the family's troubled history, especially regarding the abuse Liam endured. His presence acts as a trigger for Veronica's recollections, prompting her to confront her own feelings of guilt and responsibility. Through Lamb, Enright explores themes of memory, trauma, and the intricate dynamics within family relationships, emphasising the lasting impact of the past on the characters' present lives. 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 Charlie'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" (Enright, 2007, 66). Veronica's disdain for the Irish traditional wake once again surfaces when she is informed that the repatriation of Liam's body may take at least ten days. She knows this delay will not go down well with her sister, her mother and "all the cronies who will flock" to the family home, where they can "feast on Liam's poor corpse" (Enright, 200, 74).

The Brighton funeral home becomes a liminal space into which Veronica cannot remember entering. She refers to it as a "hinterland" which is decorated in pastels, with office furniture and housing a "laminated catalogue of coffins" (Enright, 2007, 74). As she flicks through the brochure, she is performing a role, as she already knows what coffin she will choose. However, 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”, alluding to the expected *mise-en-scène* associated with funerals (Enright, 2007, 74). She appreciates the relaxed attitude of the young undertaker and the fact that he “does not pretend”, instead relaying details about coffins in his “what-ever” sort of way (Enright. 2007, 75). His gentle touch on her arm as he leads Veronica away from Liam’s body is something that moves her: “He is the person who comes after you have seen the worst thing. He is the rest of my life” (Enright, 2007, 75).

The funeral director plays an important role in the grieving process. They are often the first person, outside of the family circle, with whom one has contact with after the loss of a loved one. Sligo undertaker, David McGowan, says that it is the role of the 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, when she leaves the funeral parlour, she finally allows herself to contemplate the circumstances surrounding 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” (Enright, 2007, 76). This may refer to how Veronica projects Liam’s death in a linear form, following the sight of his body. She accepts that to skim over the circumstances of his past, she is not granting him the full story of his life, in a chronological way.

She is aware that his death was a result of a traumatic past and its ending is almost a post-script to his personal narrative. Up until this point in the story, she had refrained from viewing his suicide as the unremarkable conclusion to his life (Bonass Madden, 2023, 14). In the liminal surrounding of Brighton’s prom, close to where her brother’s body was discovered, she feels “Liam is in the air” and notes the presence of people, walking along the seaside paths: “The living, with all their smells and holes” (Enright, 2007, 76). She feels overcome with nausea when she thinks of Liam’s body and how it will slowly decay and how it will smell

(Enright, 2007, 76). As she gasps for air, she notices the freshness of the air coming from Brighton beach: “the open tang, the calling, the smell of the sea. Such a miracle” (Enright, 2007, 76). The diversity of scents – the difference between life and death – shows the extremes of the emotions experienced in grief. By facing the sea, and the place where her brother took his last breath, Veronica considers its vastness and how it seems that she has “a smaller life, alive” than Liam had “walking out in the darkness; blood and whiskey into salt sea” (Enright, 2007, 78). She sees his suicide as “more heroic than not to be” (Enright, 2007, 74). She has tentatively entered stage four of the stages of grief: Depression, the stage grief hits the hardest.

Kübler-Ross alludes to the misconception that depression in grief is similar to mental illness. She states that this depressive stage is “an appropriate response to a great loss” (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 20). As she returns to Ireland, Veronica examines what she sees as her failure to help Liam. She sees a pattern in the leaving behind of her brother. She recalls many occasions where she turned her back on him: “In his later, drinking years, I left him every time he arrived” (Enright, 2007, 124). She admits it was not just in the latter years that she left him, however, it was long before his addiction became obvious, when she just rolled her eyes and “walked away” (Enright, 2007, 124). Veronica tries to balance her feelings of guilt with ones of reason. She summons memories of how Liam behaved when both drunk and sober. She reasons that he was equally difficult in both states. It does little to ease her conscience as she is aware there were reasons for his behaviour (Enright, 2007, 125). This phase is also where the liminal phase it at its peak. This is when the bereaved become withdrawn from their own lives, consumed by their loss and the intense sadness this causes. The daily chores they automatically perform become irrelevant and, at times: “life seems pointless” (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 21). When Veronica phones home to check on her children, she is initially upset that her husband has not kept up the daily routine of bringing her children to after-school activities. She accepts that “quite rightly” this lapse is not important, that these activities were her own construct and

created to give meaning to her role as a mother. In the liminal space of her mourning, these duties are now deemed redundant, and she can release her role of mothering during her transition journey through grief.

Mid-way through the novel, Enright skips forward in time, allowing momentum to this stage of grief. Veronica's depression hits its peak "sometime after the funeral" when she admits she is "in the horrors" (Enright, 2007, 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" (Enright, 2007, 133). By allowing oneself to allow this sadness in and experience depression, Kübler-Ross believes it will leave "as soon as it has served its purpose" (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 22). She admits that sometimes "intervention" is required for those who struggle to handle their depression but that, mostly, we must "accept our sadness as an appropriate, natural stage of loss" that allows us to slow down and process our loss (Kübler Ross and Kessler, 2005, 24). Veronica finally allows herself to cry when she thinks of the logistics surrounding Liam's death. She thinks of the three facts that she has learned about the way her brother died: that he was wearing a hi-vis jacket, that he had weighted his trousers down by placing stones in their pockets and that he was not wearing any underwear or socks (Enright, 2007, 141). The fact that causes her the most pain is the absence of underwear, triggering heightened emotion, and she admits that she needs to "deal with facts", "put an end to the shifting stories" and accept the past (Enright, 2007, 142).

This is where Acceptance, the final stage of grief 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 and Kessler, 2005, 25). Acceptance allows for the acknowledgment that the bereaved must navigate: "a world without our loved one and adjust our lives accordingly" (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2015, 25). Enright, however, plays down Veronica's acceptance at this point in the novel, by

moving back in time. The non-linear narrative switches back and forth with Liam's funeral and wake occupying only thirty-eight pages and the after-supper, in a local hotel, composing nine pages toward the end of the novel, facilitating an added storyline where the Hegartys meet Liam's young son, for the first time. Dell'Amico suggests that: The splintering and spreading of the novel's explorations is felt in Veronica's shifting performance as witness, failed witness, victim, PTSD sufferer, survivor, sister, granddaughter, daughter, mother, and wife" (Dell'Amico, 2010, 63). Her journey through each of these roles is narrated in an unstructured demonstration of how we address grief, memory and trauma. Constantly moving between the past and present, the central focus of Veronica's story ultimately revolves around her own journey—her crisis and her process of recovery (Dell'Amico, 2010, 64).

Veronica's comparison between Irish and British attitudes to funerals introduces us to Liam's wake and the liminal space which the Hegarty family now occupy. The delay in Liam's funeral is both infuriating and upsetting for Veronica. She is resentful of the British system and envisions the blandness of the staff who are involved with the "paperwork; the death certificates and removal orders" and how they continue with the regularity of their own lives as Liam "lies in some unspecified foreign fridge" and she must "get on with things" (Enright, 2007, 182). The delay in repatriation is leaving a void in Veronica's life and it manifests itself as a "forgotten something", like "a forgotten tampon seeping into the water of the downstairs toilet" or "half a biscuit on the arm of a chair" (Enright, 2007, 182). Enright has illustrated how Veronica is feeling disjointed by the fact that her brother's remains are not at home and are instead "forgotten" in a morgue, across the Irish sea. Dell'Amico suggest that these small moments of uncertainty represent Veronica's heightened awareness of a "serious matter left unattended" (Dell'Amico, 2010, 65). During these liminal days 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" (Enright, 2007, 183). To balance this diminished feeling, Veronica declares that they are "good children" and confirms this with noting that despite her religious apathy, she had performed the expected duty of Christening her daughters: "All the Hegarty children are baptised, because to do otherwise would be to rob this woman of what she rightfully owns, her little treasures of souls – we all traipse dutifully up to the font and hand them over" (Enright, 2007, 184). This confessional statement may symbolise her resentment at not being in the position to hand over the responsibility of Liam's wake and funeral to her mother, or to at least be in receipt of praise for her role; or as a way of addressing the idea that many Irish continued to Christen their children into the Catholic faith, despite the controversies surrounding how children were maltreated and abused by church-led institutions (Howard, 2012, 39).

The atmosphere in the Hegarty house is sombre, "empty and tatty", and Veronica, once again, mentions its fractured architecture: "a warren of partitions" which are "scuttling with the ghosts of the children we once were" (Enright, 2007, 184). She also revisits the trope of the large Catholic family and how, by having three dead siblings, they are "nearly a normal family" (Enright, 2007, 184). She ruminates on the traditions observed by large Irish families and how "we announce ourselves and then we grieve", recounting lists of the departed: "the dead first, then the lost, and then the mad" (Enright, 2007, 185). Her situational grief brings up memories of each of her siblings. The family are reunited in their childhood home, under difficult circumstances. Enright uses Veronica's somewhat morbid reflections as a way of revealing the dynamics of the Hegarty family and how, despite being reared in the same household, they have all forged their individual paths in life (and even in death). Veronica foresees their reunion and the drama that will inevitably ensue: "They are waking up. They are coming back […] A hosting of the Hegartys. God help us" (Enright, 2007, 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 a mood, but it also suggests a more genuine call to God to offer spiritual assistance during one's time of need. Veronica has admitted to praying in private so this may be a genuine request which is part of the bargaining stage of her grief (Enright, 2007, 184). She also guarantees the future good behaviour of her siblings: "We will do the Hegarty thing. We will be brave and decent and hearty, we will cry and suffer through" (Enright, 2007, 184), which may be another attempt at bargaining with God to aid their transition through their bereavement. It could also be alluding to the fact that it is a performative and expected display of grief; a performance which would appease her mother and the large community.

Even before the funeral, Veronica's grief hits her at the most unexpected times, in the most unusual of places. She begins to cry when she realises that there is nothing that she cannot afford in the top-end shop, Brown Thomas. The depression which is associated with grief is causing her to anger at the smallest things: "I want to throw [things] in the air and shout, or go over to the till and empty my bag on the counter […] My brother has just died, and I can buy anything at all" (Enright, 2007, 190). She remembers that Liam "never went into a shop" and "in honour of Liam" she leaves the shop without buying anything. In changing her behaviour, albeit in a modest way, she has offered up a small sacrifice to her dead brother (Enright, 2017, 190). These moments of unexpected releases of tears are commonplace for the bereaved when, as in Veronica's case, the frantic organisation of the funeral has eased, yet the wake or ceremony has yet to take place. The rituals and traditions which accompany an Irish funeral have yet to be experienced and she is in a sort of limbo. McGowan explains that it is "normal" to find oneself unable to shed a tear until the busy preparations have stopped: "because you're too busy. You're organising the readings, you're organising the music, you're not giving yourself time to grieve. But let me tell you something. You won't escape it. It'll hit you" (RTÉ, 2019, 02:05).

McGowan believes that the wake affords the space to undergo a psychological shift toward accepting one's loss:

> You need to sit with that person that you will never see again. You'll never kiss them, you'll never hug them, you'll never argue with them ever again. But you do get an opportunity to sit there and talk to them. It will allow you to cry. That's the body's defence to help you grieve […] every bereaved person should be given the opportunity to do that (RTÉ, 2019, 04:14).

When the day of the wake finally arrives Veronica reluctantly prepares to partake in the rituals associated with the viewing, feasting and storytelling: "I am expecting the house to be crammed" (Enright, 2007, 192). When she learns that there is only a handful of neighbours, she thinks to herself that this should not be surprising, as "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?" (Enright, 2007, 192). This statement can be seen as a reference to the traditional Irish wake and how refreshments were always offered to the visiting mourners. She seems appalled that no alcohol is on display, perhaps forgetting that this may have been an intentional omission, due to Liam's relationship with alcohol. The specific mention of wine, rather than sprits, is indicative of the Celtic Tiger era and the urban setting of the novel. Keiran Bonner suggests that, during this time, the Irish embraced habits such as drinking coffee, enjoying wine at home, and dining out, adopting lifestyles similar to those of their "continental cousins" (Bonner, 2011, 52). This shows the slight shift in the traditional beverages associated with the traditional Irish wake.

As she enters the house, she seems to disassociate 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" (Enright, 2007, 193). She has pivoted, in one moment, from denial to acceptance, from thinking about re-decorating her house, to accepting that her brother is laid out before her. She notices that Liam has been 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 definitely not her brother's style (Enright, 2007, 193). The layout of the room is not as she had expected, and she finds fault with how the coffin is placed, forgetting that the room is not big enough to accommodate her preferred *mis-en-scène*. As the top of the coffin is placed underneath the window, whose curtains have been drawn as per tradition, she cannot see his face clearly from where she is seated. The room is candle lit and this throws shadows and "the coffin angles down. Slicing across the bulge of his cheek" (Enright, 2007, 193). The macabre details enter her mind as she notices the "dip in the bone where his eyes must go" but she cannot bring herself to look closer to check if he has been prepared fully or even if his "lids are closed" (Enright, 2007, 193).

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" (Enright, 2007, 193-194). Her escape is hindered by the arrival, into the room, of her daughter. The child has never seen a dead body and Veronica tries to prepare her for the sight of the corpse: "'It's all right', I tell her. 'He's dead'" realising that this is perhaps not the "most comforting thing" she could have said (Enright, 2007, 194). Her worries that her daughter may be as traumatised by her sight of a corpse – similar to her own childhood viewing – are, however, unfounded. Her daughter leaves the room, unperturbed by the sight of her uncle's remains and is soon running upstairs with her sister. Veronica feels anger toward her husband who "can not be bothered to mind them, not even with a corpse in the house" (Enright, 2007, 194). This anger seems misplaced as children have always been part of the Irish wake tradition, as Veronica is aware. 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" (Enright, 2007, 194). Referring to Liam's remains as a "piece of garbage" shows her

disassociation from the body which once contained the life of her brother. She has reached a quasi-acceptance of his death.

Despite her earlier insistence that she did not want to remain in the room, she now chooses this as preferable to greeting the people who have come to pay their respects. She chooses to stay with her brother. She accepts that her time in the liminal space is finite, as she finds herself within the confines of the wake room, where she can spend her final moments with her sibling. Once the coffin is closed and the room is once again full of mourners, this immediate liminal space will no longer exist. She will continue her journey through her liminal journey, but it will no longer be with her brother close by.

When Veronica finally leaves the wake room and enters the kitchen, where people are gathered around her mother, awaiting their turn to pay their respects, she notices how her mother now looks "completely faded" (Enright, 2007, 197). It appears 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" (Enright, 2007, 197). As neighbours offer up 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'" (Enright, 2007, 197). Veronica greets her mother and is surprised to be granted a cheek for her to kiss and a "hazy kind of love in her voice – for me, the table set with food, for everyone here" (Enright, 2007, 197). This shows how the rituals and traditions that surround the wake and funeral are a great comfort to the bereaved. Veronica then takes over the mantra her mother has been uttering when she and her mother talk about the particular bond between the siblings, "Yes, Mammy" and the closeness they had, "Thanks, Mammy. Thanks" (Enright, 2007, 198). 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, 262). He suggests that the act of shaking the hand of the bereaved and telling them you are sorry for their "trouble" will be gratefully received (Toolis, 2017, 262).

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, 55). There is plenty of food at Liam's wake and Veronica takes in the feast which has been prepared for visiting family, friends and neighbours:

> ham sandwiches with the crusts cut off, and butter, and supermarket coleslaw and cheese and onion crisps for the side of your plate. There are cocktail sausages and squares of quiche, and fruit salad […] There are Ritz crackers with salmon pâté and a single prawn on top, others with a sprig of parsley over a smear of cream cheese […] There is houmous, in a trio of dips with guacamole and taramasalata. There is my smoked salmon, and Bea's lasagne, and fantastic packet jelly wobbling in little glass bowls (Enright, 2007, 200-201).

She implies that these are the staple foods of "yet another family gathering", foods of their past, prepared by family members before returning to the family home. The absence of alcohol is noted by Veronica: "There is no wine" (Enright, 2007, 201). The lack of alcohol at the wake may have been in consideration for Liam's dependence on liquor, and how it may have played a part in his death. 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" (Enright, 2007, 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 we will all, someday die (Toolis, 2017, 263). Veronica does not sit, instead choosing to stand and watch her family "scoffing the funeral meats" (Enright, 2007, 192). She is slightly repulsed as she observes the way people are feasting. She thinks her Uncle Ernest "is particularly terrible to

watch" and "even my mother eats with a sudden greed" and her neighbours "forget themselves so much as to scoff the lot" (Enright, 2007, 202). Enright briefly introduces Veronica's Uncle Val, 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" (Enright, 2007, 202). This allows the author to insert extra storylines, relating to the efforts made to assist Liam in his troubled life and which address both the past and present:

> Val is a bachelor farmer in his seventies […] 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 (Enright, 2007, 202-203).

Without the wake, these memories may not have been stirred and Val's role in Liam's life may not have been recognised. Often grief can alter the 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 lack of alcohol becomes an issue for many of the family. One sister is drinking gin, on the sly, while many relatives seem to be searching for hidden bottles. 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?'" (Enright, 2007, 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" (Enright, 2007, 208). This, in turn, leads to loosened tongues and the revealing of home truths. As Turner's theory of *communitas* suggests, liminal spaces such as wakes provide opportunities for hierarchical boundaries and social norms to dissolve temporarily, creating an environment for deeper, more

honest communication (Turner, 1969, 95). In this case, the combination of the wake's liminality and the effects of alcohol facilitates a rare moment of openness among the Hegarty siblings. Without the liminal space of the wake, this opportunity to discuss family issues may not have arrived. Equally, without the alcohol, the conversations may have been more censored. While Veronica considers how she will tell her family about the abuse that Liam was subjected to, decades previously: "*I never told any of them the truth*" (Enright, 2007, 207). Enright's use of italics shows not only her internal dialogue but displays the importance of this declaration. Her guilt is resurfacing. She pushes the idea of revealing the truth aside, deeming the abuse narrative as not worthy of the moment: "There are other things, surely, to talk about. There are other things to be revealed" (Enright, 2007, 207). Mills Harper suggests that the Hegarty family have been protected from the revealing of the skeletons in the family closet, insofar as Liam has taken them with him, to his grave. Veronia chooses to leave the bones of Liam's story buried and, instead, adds them to the "lifetimes of unspoken stress that have been the norm for the Hegarty family" (Mills Harper, 2015, 81). The clear-up, when all the visitors have left, results in a shift of emotion and tensions are released. Voices are raised, a plate held aloft, and knife held "like it is dripping in blood" (Enright, 2007, 208). Brother, Jem, is dispatched to the off-licence to purchase wine: "The Hegartys have had a long day" (Enright, 2007, 208). Their decision to drink together, breaking a family tradition of never sharing alcohol communally, reflects a symbolic untying of emotional repression.

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, 2001, 75). The sombre atmosphere in the house reflects the mood of the siblings finishing the clean-up and sitting "ready to uncork the wine when it arrives" (Enright, 2007, 209). Their mother has taken to her bed and Bea has "taken the first shift" with Liam's body. Even in the midst of the family discord, the ritual of never leaving the body unattended is one

from which the siblings do not deviate. Veronica feels “like we are all dead. And that’s just fine” (Enright, 2007, 209). When the wine arrives, the siblings “do not toast the dead but merely drink and chat, as ordinary people might do” (Enright, 2007, 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, 2018, 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” (Enright, 2007, 210). This image of the loosening knot suggests a breaking of the rigid emotional boundaries that have long defined the Hegarty family dynamic. Liminality, as Turner explains, disrupts social order and creates a transitional state where the usual rules and structures are suspended, allowing for transformation and renewal (Turner, 1969, 94). In *The Gathering*, the wake acts as this liminal space, enabling the Hegarty siblings to confront hidden tensions, express unspoken truths, and renegotiate their relationships with one another. Through Veronica’s reflections, Enright portrays grief not only as a process of loss but also as a moment of potential catharsis and familial reckoning, where the past is revisited and unresolved pain is given a voice.

Enright’s timeline slips, again, and Veronica finally admits to herself that she had witnessed Lambert sexually abusing Liam, in her grandparents’ house, when they were young children. She has struggled with her memories and their unreliability but knows she must face the truth: “I owe it to Liam to make things clear” (Enright, 2007, 223). Masotta suggests Liam's passing has sparked a profound awakening in Veronica's subconscious, unveiling the disturbing secret that her mind had concealed in the years leading up to his death (Masotta, 2019, 59). Despite finally facing the past and what had happened to her sibling, Veronica needs to process this information at her own pace. She drives the airport road again, allowing her car to “go

where it wants, which is North, as always" (Enright, 2007, 237). It is five months after Liam's death and her acceptance is not fully complete. 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" (Enright, 2007, 239). She needs some liminal space and the isolation that comes with it. 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 and Kessler, 2005, 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 speed.

The novel switches back to the day of Liam's funeral and Veronica notes the large attendance, ironically noting that "Suicides always pull a good crowd" (Enright, 2007, 240). She sees the mourners pushing through to claim their seats in the church pews and "gathering on the rim of the church". She believes they have turned up "on principle", due to the nature of Liam's death (Enright, 2007, 240). She notices a woman and child approaching to greet her and, while she recognises the woman, it takes a while for her to remember where they have met. She then recalls her as being an ex-girlfriend of Liam's: "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" (Enright, 2007, 241). It is at this moment that Veronica learns of the existence of Rowan, Liam's biological son. Masotta suggests that Rowan embodies a feeling of nostalgia and the prospect of a fresh start for the Hegarty family, conveying a poignant message of hope and healing for Liam and the other children who have suffered exploitation (Masotta, 2019, 64). Veronica moves down the church aisle, with the remaining Hegartys, and feels: "drowned in the emotion, whether love or sadness, that floods my chest" (Enright, 2007, 243). She finds that she cannot cry but, 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 (Enright, 2007, 243).

Once again, Enright uses the face as a way of displaying grief, whether genuine or not. Veronica's lack of tears trouble her, as she feels she is letting down 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 accepts condolences from mourners, at the church entrance. Veronica describes "shaking five hundred people's hands", half of whom she does not know (Enright, 2007, 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" (Enright, 2007, 245). Toolis says this is 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 (Toolis in 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 (Toolis in Many Rivers, 2018, 04:14). This handshake ritual has its roots in broader Irish cultural attitudes toward death and mourning. Historically, Irish wakes and funerals have functioned as communal events where the boundaries between the living and the dead are blurred, offering both a space for grief and a collective acknowledgment of mortality (Inglis, 1998, 150–152). Despite the evolution of Irish society, the tradition of communal condolences remains remarkably resilient. Diarmuid Ferriter argues that such enduring customs reflect the importance of rituals in maintaining cultural identity, despite rapid modernisation (Ferriter, 2004, 562). The ritual of shaking hands and offering condolences goes beyond mere formality. It is a deeply symbolic gesture that highlights the interdependence of community life.

This practice creates a space for shared vulnerability, allowing grief to be recognised and, to some extent, eased through the collective support and involvement of others.

The handshake ritual, therefore, reflects the uniquely Irish way of coping with death, which Toolis argues is rooted in a culture of acceptance rather than avoidance (Toolis in Many Rivers, 2018, 04.14). Unlike societies where death is often sanitised or hidden, Irish funerals embrace the inevitability of mortality, allowing for collective grieving that integrates both sorrow and resilience. This cultural practice, as Veronica's account illustrates, is as much about closure for the bereaved as it is about reinforcing the social fabric of the community. Despite changing times, the ritual continues to hold deep significance in Irish society, ensuring that death remains a communal, rather than an isolated, experience.

The novel approaches its ending 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" (Enright, 2007, 255). Margaret Mills Harper suggests that this location is the "most quintessential of no-spaces" (Mills Harper, 2015, 90). This liminal space is the place she finally sleeps, after five months of insomnia, and she 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" (Enright, 2007, 259). She recalls the moment of touching down in Dublin, back then, 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" (Enright, 2007, 259). This shows how she is willing to leave the liminal space and return to her normal life. Her journey through the Five Stage of Grief has come to a natural end and she is allowing herself to enter the post-liminal phase of her morning. We are not offered any resolution to Liam's narrative, instead, his death has caused a shift in Veronica's personal life. This is her acceptance.

In conclusion, Enright's non-linear narrative appears to align with Kübler-Ross's Stages of Grief theory, offering a refined exploration of the grieving process. In *The Gathering*, Enright extends the concept of liminal space beyond its theoretical foundations, reinterpreting it as a concrete and experiential framework within the narrative structure. 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 processes 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. Mills Harper suggests that the "aftermath of Liam's death is a trigger, or a symbol, rather than a central fact" and "nor is grief the real substance of the book" (Mills Harper, 2015, 81) but in approaching the novel from the perspective of the importance the Irish place on their rites surrounding death, one can argue that Veronica's grief is indeed a primary focus of the narrative. Sarah C. Gardham proposes the importance of Veronica's grief in the shaping of the novel. She suggests that Veronica's post-traumatic manifestations provide the novel with its profoundness and structure and that these symptoms are induced by the loss of her sibling (Gardham, 2009, 102). The rituals and traditions associated with Liam's wake provided her with the liminal space to process her grief, with its reliance on hidden memory and her analysis of their shared past. In her reading of *The Gathering*, from a psychoanalytic perspective, Garner suggests that: Veronica becomes increasingly aware of such monstrous gaps between the sudden emptiness revealed by her brother's death and the supposed full life she has been leading (Garner, 2009, 102). Without the loss of her brother, Veronica may not have processed the hidden memories of her past, nor

addressed the unhappiness in her present. The liminal space which she occupies is one of contemplation, isolation and distancing from the responsibilities and societal pressures that had previously entrapped her.

English suggests that Enright's novel deals with the trauma that repression of grief can cause in a family and that "the past must be re-examined, the pain exposed, before grief can be overcome" (English, 2013, 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.

While Dublin-born Enright's novel is located in a Dublin suburb, and is an example of the more secular approach to funerary traditions, the following chapter will examine the rural approach to the Irish funeral and wake. Although each of the novels throughout this research share certain commonalities, such as depictions of wakes and funeral preparations, the rural settings in the following chapter places significant emphasis on community support and the temporary reconfiguration of roles facilitated by *communitas*, underscoring their importance for those bereaved in rural contexts. Undertaker Gus Nichols theorises that the Irish funeral "goes some small way towards illustrating the Irish psyche" and that while the "mechanics" of the funeral may be changing, the "essence of our rituals do remain" (Nichols, 2016, 212). There

is still a communal desire to rush to the wake, reunite with old acquaintances or long-lost family members, “show your face” to the chief mourners and participate in a ceremony of farewell. Nichols suggests that the Irish funeral is similar to a wedding, in its uniqueness: “you will never have the same collection of people gathered under one roof again” and is often a time of dispute, drama and reconciliation (Nichols, 2016, 215). Contemporary Irish literature shows how these funeral gatherings provide the ideal opportunity to address the Irish approach to death. Narratives can be expanded to incorporate fresh characters, utilise memory as a plot element, or introduce a dual timeline narrative structure. The ritual of the wake, therefore, becomes more than just a cultural practice—it serves as a critical moment for the grieving process, where the collective memory of the community is invoked, and social bonds are reaffirmed. In these rural settings, the wake allows for a shared experience of vulnerability and healing that is crucial to understanding the complex relationships between community, memory, and mourning in Irish literature.

Chapter 3

Communitas in Rural Ireland: The Funeral and Wake in *Love and Summer* (2010) by William Trevor, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) by John McGahern and *The Thing About December* (2014) by Donal Ryan

> "[They] gathered […] to pick at the tragedy like crows picking at a flungaway snack box" (Ryan, 2014, 24).

As discussed in previous chapters, the concept of the liminal space - and, by extension, Victor Turner's theory of *communitas* - provides a framework for introducing a genuine sense of Irishness to narrative fiction. Authentic Irish narratives frequently engage with the country's rich history, including the impact of colonialism, emigration, famine and socio-political transitions, such as the weakening influence of the Catholic Church. These elements often ground the story in a specific time and place, offering insights into how history shapes personal and communal identities. Funerary rituals and traditions are particularly effective in illustrating the vital role of community support for the bereaved. Turner's *communitas* refers to the profound sense of shared experience and unity that arises during moments of crisis or transition, such as grief. This solidarity often dissolves social hierarchies, fostering equality and mutual support among mourners.

The Irish funeral and wake, steeped in age-old customs and practices, are emblematic of such communal bonding. Examining contemporary Irish novels highlights how writers utilize these rituals to explore the enduring significance of *communitas*. As Eamon Maher observes, many contemporary authors are writing from the context of a post-Catholic Ireland, where the Church's influence has waned considerably compared to previous generations (Maher, 2017, 4). Despite this secular shift, the traditions surrounding death - such as the wake and funeral - continue to play a prominent role in Irish cultural identity. These rituals persist as

vital cultural performances that help individuals navigate grief, offering structure, meaning, and communal support, as Catherine M. Sanders suggests (Sanders, 1999, 254).

Examples from William Trevor's *Love and Summer* (2009) and John McGahern's *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) reveal how mid-twentieth century rural Ireland grappled with critical societal transitions. These included the prevalence of emigration, the enduring influence of Church and State, and women's growing awareness of societal inequality. As Geraldine Meaney aptly notes, fiction often portrays the domestic and familial as "vortices of economic and political forces" and "allegories of the nation" (Meaney, 2011, xi). Despite their differing timeframes, the novels discussed in this chapter underscore the enduring importance of assisting the bereaved through the observance of cultural customs. *Communitas* emerges as a vital element of Irish funerary tradition, offering the bereaved a liminal space to process their loss. It temporarily reorders societal hierarchies within family and community, creating an environment for collective healing.

Trevor, widely regarded as one of the most accomplished authors in the English language, explores these themes with great nuance in *Love and Summer* (Delaney and Parker, 2013, 1). Longlisted for the 2009 Booker Prize, the novel was hailed as "miraculous" by former Irish Fiction Laureate Sebastian Barry, who praised its ability to transform ordinariness into "paradise" (Barry, 2009). Trevor's narrative blends community, location, and individuality into what Barry describes as a "timeless" Irish novel. Heidi Hansson similarly highlights Trevor's depiction of a "paralysed environment" in 1950s Ireland, where moral restrictions coexist with characters' freedom to express their personal stories (Hansson, 2013, 198). This balance between individual experience and communal identity is enriched by Trevor's use of funerary elements - a key theme in *Love and Summer*. The novel immediately underscores the centrality of Irish funerals and their rituals, with its opening paragraph focusing on the funeral of the village dowager.

> On a June evening some years after the middle of the last century Mrs Eileen Connulty passed through the town of Rathmoyne: from Number 4 The Square, to Magennis Street, into Hurley Lane, along Irish Street, across Cloughjordan Road to the church of the Most Holy Redeemer. Her night was spent there (Trevor, 2010, 1).

As the scene progresses, we are introduced to the members of Eileen Connulty's family and the locals who make up the community of Rathmoyne. Opening a novel with a funeral allows for an immediate gathering of characters and, consequentially, narrative threads. This liminal setting affords the author the liberty to explore various themes such as familial conflicts, intrigue surrounding newcomers, divisions within the community, and the inner turmoil experienced by the characters. We learn that Eileen's life had been one of "good works and resolution", yet the same sentence advises us that she held a "degree of severity in domestic and family matters" (Trevor, 2010, 1). Eileen had been "disappointed" by both her husband and her daughter, but she had idolised her fifty-year-old son. We learn that Mrs Connulty's middle-aged daughter is relieved at the passing of her mother. Their fractured relationship was bitter and unloving (Trevor, 2010, 1).

As the funeral cortège passes through the town, the rituals and traditions associated with the Irish funeral are performed. Blinds are drawn as the coffin passes, shops close their shutters and doors, caps are removed from heads and children pause their play. Trevor succinctly summarises Eileen's life and her role in the community, while also revealing the atmosphere of the county town: "Nothing happened in Rathmoye, its people said, but most of them went on living there" (Trevor, 2010, 3). Three days after the funeral mass, the community gathers outside the cemetery, and their conversation centres on how Mrs. Connulty's memory will endure. Her lifelong devotion to the Church is offered as evidence of her exemplary character:

> The women who had toiled beside her in the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer asserted that she had been an example to them all. They recalled how no task had been too menial for her to undertake, how the hours spent polishing a surfeit of brass or scraping away any old candle-grease had never been begrudged. The altar flowers had not once in sixty years gone in need of

> fresh water; the missionary leaflets were replaced when necessary. Small repairs had been effected on cassocks and surplices and robes. Washing the chancel tiles had been a sacred duty (Trevor, 2010, 3).

The language in the excerpt is measured and descriptive, reflecting the solemnity of the funeral and the rituals surrounding it. The emphasis on mundane tasks such as "scraping away any old candle-grease" highlights the societal expectations placed on women in mid-twentieth-century Ireland. These seemingly insignificant chores are elevated to acts of devotion, representing a culture that prioritises duty and self-sacrifice in women while often stifling their personal desires and independence. For Mrs Connulty, this adherence to duty is both a defining strength and the source of her harsh, controlling nature, shaped by the cultural pressures that influence and distort her actions. Through this description, Trevor presents two contrasting sides of Mrs. Connulty. On one hand, she is a pillar of society: a successful businesswoman and a devout Catholic, tirelessly devoted to her duties in the Church. On the other, she is a hard, unforgiving woman who subjected her daughter to decades of cruelty. This harsh treatment stems from her daughter's out-of-wedlock pregnancy and subsequent termination, a scandal buried in secrecy and shame. Through the description of Mrs. Connulty's actions and their effects on her daughter, Trevor paints a layered portrait of a complex character. She is both admirable and flawed, embodying the moral ambiguities of her societal role. The language subtly conveys the dual nature of Mrs. Connulty's character. While she is celebrated for her diligence and faith, the same meticulousness is mirrored in her relentless control over her daughter. This duality is implicit in how her virtues of self-sacrifice and rigidity are both commendable and oppressive.

In twentieth-century Irish literature, the figure of the "unmarried mother" is often marked by harsh consequences, as defying the expected role of women was seen as a serious transgression. Paul David Garrett argues that the Catholic Church, with figures like Archbishop Charles McQuaid at the helm, had a powerful influence on social policies, particularly those

governing sexual conduct (Garrett, 2016, 716). Sexual misconduct was especially condemned, and the societal backlash, combined with the severe penalties imposed, played a key role in shaping the way unmarried mothers were controlled and perceived (Garrett, 2016, 711). For Miss Connulty, the fallout from her unplanned pregnancy led to her isolation and her mother's anger. The effects of the pregnancy lingered throughout her life, extending even to the day of her mother's death. During the liminal space of her mother's removal and funeral, Miss Connulty is able to reflect on her position in life, with Trevor hinting at the scandal that shifted her identity: "Miss Connulty was known in Rathnoye no more intimately than that – a formality imposed upon her by either of the saint's names she had been given at birth" (Trevor, 2010, 8). In accordance with their mother's wishes, her brother stopped addressing her by her given name, further reinforcing her isolation within the family. After her father's death, she "became nameless in the house" (Trevor, 2010, 8). Stripped of her birthname, and without her father's support, the shame of her pregnancy relegated her to a lower status, marking her as a permanent outsider.

The funeral scene in *Love and Summer* is more than just a moment of mourning; it becomes a site of complex social dynamics and individual reflection. As the coffin is carried through Rathmoye, Trevor subtly introduces an unsettling moment when a young man is "surreptitiously photographing the scene" (Trevor, 2010, 3). His actions, unnoticed by Mrs. Connulty's children, suggest an intrusion into a sacred space, further underscoring the sense of voyeurism that pervades the town's collective grief. The fact that this man, with his camera, is capturing the funeral without the mourners' awareness highlights the distance between the private sorrow of the bereaved and the public spectacle of the event. His discreet photography draws attention to the way funerals, as communal rites, inevitably become both personal and performative. In this way, Trevor uses the funeral to examine the boundaries between the public and private dimensions of grief. Moreover, the arrival of Orphen Wren, the "old Protestant"

who carries with him the town's secrets, reinforces this blending of private lives with communal narratives. Wren's cryptic belief that Mrs. Connulty's coffin contains the remains of an "old kitchen maid" taps into the way local myths and histories shape the social fabric of Rathmoye (Trevor, 2010, 4). In this community, the dead are not simply mourned for their personal relationships but are intertwined with the collective memory of the town. This act of secret-keeping elevates the funeral from an individual loss to a communal performance that ties together both past and present. Wren, as a character who is both outsider and insider, becomes a symbol of the town's complicated relationship with its history, where the past is never fully buried but constantly unearthed through whispers and stories.

The narrative then shifts to Miss Connulty, who, now distanced from her mother's death, begins to examine her mother's belongings; a moment that goes beyond mere personal mourning. Her indulgence in the jewellery she finds, particularly the garnet necklace, is a profound act of defiance against both the social expectations of grief and her mother's controlling influence. Her dismissal of the rosary beads, items symbolising her mother's devout Catholicism, could be read as an explicit rejection of the religious and moral authority that once governed her life. In her tender handling of the jewellery, she momentarily reclaims agency over the material remnants of her mother's life, a personal rebellion against both the expectation of somberness in mourning and the oppressive control her mother held over her.

When Miss Connulty and her brother discuss the gravestone details, it becomes clear that the funeral, and by extension the burial, is not only a ritual of closure but also one of negotiation over identity and social status. Mrs. Connulty's desire for her own gravestone, separate from her husband's, underscores her desire for individual recognition, despite her rigidly conventional life. The debate over whether she should have a shared gravestone or a "garden of remembrance" echoes larger societal concerns about how the dead are remembered, as much for their role within the community as for their personal lives (Trevor, 2010, 13). The

choice of the garden, suggested by her son, signifies a collective remembrance that transcends personal grievances, reinforcing the town's need to maintain unity even in death. However, the final decision to honour Mrs. Connulty's wishes, as determined by her son, reveals the continued dominance of family and community hierarchy, where individual desires are often shaped or overshadowed by communal expectations.

In this way, the funeral becomes a stage for the intricate dance between personal rebellion and societal norms. Trevor's exploration of funerary practices thus reveals how rituals surrounding death serve not only to mark the passing of an individual but also to maintain and reinforce the social fabric of the community. Through the funeral, Trevor opens up a space where both individual and collective identities are contested, where grief is both a personal journey and a shared experience. The funeral, with its rituals and characters, becomes a microcosm of the tensions between the private and the public, the personal and the communal, that define much of Irish society in the twentieth century.

The funeral of Mrs. Connulty provides an ideal opening for a novel that captures the essence of Trevor's skill in documenting the traditions, customs, and deeply ingrained societal habits of his homeland, as well as the subtle interactions between its people and the landscapes they inhabit (Maher, 2018, 175). Maher contends that Trevor had a keen understanding of the "religious mindset of Ireland," and there is no more fitting setting for such an exploration than the Irish funeral, an event which encapsulates the nation's complex relationship with death, faith, and tradition (Maher, 2018, 180). Through this opening, Trevor sets the tone for a story that is deeply rooted in the cultural and social fabric of Ireland, providing a window into the way personal lives are shaped and constrained by the rituals and expectations of the community.

Unlike Trevor's narrative, which begins with a funeral and burial, John McGahern's 2002 novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun* concludes with a death, wake and burial.

McGahern reverses Trevor's approach to character formation by introducing the community long before the death of the visiting emigré, Johnny. In McGahern's modest border town, the inhabitants are spread across the rural lakeside terrain, and their interactions reflect the significance of community within the Irish psyche. McGahern himself once humorously described Ireland as a country made up of numerous "self-governing anarchist communes," commonly known as "families" (Kiberd, in Hand and Maher, 2019, 11). The novel focuses on Joe and Kate Ruttledge, a couple who have recently relocated to the village from England. Through their everyday life, interactions with the locals, and efforts to integrate into the rhythms of rural Irish life, the narrative explores the dynamics of this close-knit community. As Joe and Kate become more embedded in village life, the novel highlights the central role of communal rituals, traditions, and relationships. Eoin Flannery observes that one of the key aspects of the novel is the depiction of local sociability and the rituals that underpin such communities (Flannery, 2020, 69).

The passing of Johnny results in a communal gathering which includes the preparation of the body, the laying out of the remains, the wake, funeral and burial. McGahern refrains from indulging in excessive, overly sentimental emotions. However, he preserves the narrative's emotional resonances, particularly those rooted in the tightly connected and interdependent local community life (Flannery, 2020, 70). The placement of the funeral toward the end of the novel affords the reader an earlier glimpse into the existence and setting of the rural townland, thereby illustrating the significance attributed to their rituals and traditions. In his introduction to *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002), Brian Lynch explains the relevance of the novel's title. The character, Joe Ruttledge, is told that a man should be buried with his head at the west end of the grave, "so that when he rose with all the faithful he may face the rising sun" (McGahern, 2002, 297). Lynch suggests that the subtle difference in the title is significant and that the change from "he" to "they" perhaps implies that all of us should be prepared to face the

rising sun (Lynch in McGahern, 2002). McGahern's choice of title also indicates a hint of Celtic mysticism associated with the arrangement of the deceased's body and the burial ceremony (Maher, 2003, 28). In his 2002 interview with *The Observer*, McGahern stated that the title "goes back to the origin of paganism in Ireland" and explains that he was part of Ireland's middle class who were reared under the influence of the Catholic church. He confirms that the characters in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* "are from a more pagan and practical world in which the Christianity is just a veneer" (McGahern in McCrum, 2002). The transitional phase that ensues after a loss provides an optimal occasion for communities to adopt both ancestral customs and modern Irish wake and funeral practices, without fear of repercussion of clergy or state. Social and religious boundaries are often crossed, in favour of a communal show of solidarity and support.

In *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, McGahern presents death as a communal event, where the boundaries between individuals and social roles temporarily dissolve. Using *communitas* as a lens, we can see how rituals surrounding death bring people together in a shared experience of liminality, where traditional hierarchies are suspended. The narrative of Johnny's death and the subsequent wake rituals acts as a focal point for these communal bonds, illustrating how the act of preparing a body for its final journey serves as both a spiritual and emotional process for the living as much as it does for the deceased. When Johnny unexpectedly dies, the absence of the undertaker leads to a disruption of the established social order and it is Joe, not the professional undertaker, who must assume the role of preparing the body. McGahern's decision to break from the typical hierarchy of the village is significant, allowing for a more egalitarian space where roles are redefined. The use of tactile imagery in Joe's experience, particularly when McGahern writes of his holding Johnny's "still warm flesh" (McGahern, 2002, 272), underscores the intimacy of the ritual. This language has the effect of humanising death. It is not just a mechanical process of laying out a body but an act of connection and remembrance.

The choice of "warm" here implies a sharp contrast between the life that has gone and the coldness that death brings, capturing the fleetingness of life in a single phrase. The community's gathering to accompany the hearse on its removal journey underscores the role of communal rituals in McGahern's exploration of life, death and belonging. The sight of numerous cars lining the route, with Kate remarking that she has "never seen such a gathering," hints at the depth of communal solidarity, with Joe noting that it is more about the community's respect for Jamesie and Mary than Johnny himself (McGahern, 2002, 282). This observation marks the first indication that the rituals surrounding death in the novel transcend personal grief, highlighting instead the ways in which death serves as a communal marker, a collective rite of passage that binds people together.

Upon the arrival of the coffin at the house, the ritualistic nature of the event becomes more apparent. People respectfully exit, and the door is closed, creating a sense of separation between the living and the deceased, allowing the sacredness of the ritual to unfold. McGahern writes: "A woman started to call out the Our Father, and the Hail Mary was taken up by the thronged street until it swelled out to the people standing as far back as the cars parked in the fields" (McGahern, 2002, 286). Here, the communal nature of the prayer is emphasised, as it moves outward and envelops the gathered mourners, turning the ordinary street into a sacred space. The prayers function as both an invocation of the divine and a collective act of solidarity, binding the community together through shared belief and ritual.

Interestingly, the description of the men carrying the coffin to the hearse is notable for its lack of overt emotion. There are no tears of "grief or anger," and only Johnny's sister-in-law appears to be "visibly upset" (McGahern, 2002, 286). This restrained emotional display underscores McGahern's depiction of the Irish community's relationship with death, where mourning is often subdued in favour of ritual and tradition. The emphasis here is on the performance of the ritual, rather than on individual expressions of grief. This idea is further reinforced when the

mourners follow the hearse, walking in silence until they reach their cars, where the hearse pauses beside the lake where Johnny spent much of his youth. McGahern's decision to not focus on Johnny's funeral itself is significant; instead, the narrative recommences several days later. This choice may suggest that McGahern places less importance on the religious aspects of the funeral, opting instead to focus on the rituals surrounding the laying out of the body, the wake and the burial. It is almost as if the religious observances surrounding death, while not irrelevant, are secondary to the communal rituals that define the community's response to loss.

The absence of religious formalities in the narrative, at least in the traditional sense, reflects McGahern's nuanced approach to spirituality. Hand and Maher argue that McGahern's characters represent a shift in Irish society, where "communal religious observance is usurped by an individual response to potential nodes of spirituality" (Hand and Maher, 2003, 16). This tension between communal ritual and individual spirituality is key to understanding McGahern's characters. While the community adheres to certain rituals out of respect for tradition, each person's relationship with faith is more personal and complex. This is reflected in the different attitudes towards the formal religious observances - what is important is not so much the act of prayer or ritual itself but the connection to something larger, be it a sense of community, a shared history, or a more individualistic spiritual response to death.

Sampson also hints at the fictional community's comprehensive approach to spirituality, noting how McGahern depicts a local and rural society that is in tune with the fundamental needs and rhythms of human life. This small community derives its significance from the natural world and the unceasing flow of time (Sampson, 2005,144-145). The patterns of individuals and communities that ultimately influence the fiction are marked by the recurring cycles of seasons and their related activities and celebrations. The rural community is attuned to the natural workings of life and death (of both animal and human) and how the end of life does not represent a definitive end. Instead, as the title implies, the rising sun each morning signifies

redemption and renewal, offering the hope of resurrection (Sampson, 2005, 141). Death, as a recurring theme, is intricately woven into the fabric of the community's life. This is reflected in the Ruttledges' new house, which they find already steeped in death's presence - when they view the dilapidated house, they spot a calendar marked with an “X” until the 22nd of October, the day before the previous owner died. The house, once used for a wake, seems to have its own legacy of death, yet it also embraces the future as the Ruttledges offer “tea or whisky” to visitors (McGahern, 2002, 27). This shift in the house's function - from wake house to home -symbolises the cyclical nature of life and death, with the house becoming a space for new life and new beginnings. As the Ruttledges experience the land's renewal in the birth of a calf, McGahern writes: “as if it was her first calf all over again, the beginning of the world” (McGahern, 2002, 58). This imagery of renewal further reinforces the cyclical theme in McGahern’s novel, illustrating the seamless transition between life and death, death and life, where the passing of one form of life enables the beginning of another.

Even though McGahern’s world is predominantly secular and the church plays a minimal role in the narrative, its influence is subtly present. Joe Ruttledge’s decision to “leave the Church” and the local priest’s detached visit to pass on a request from the Bishop demonstrates a shift away from religious formalities towards a more personal spirituality (McGahern, 2002, 71). McGahern does not deny the presence of the Church but rather shows how its role has diminished within the community's day-to-day life. The Ruttledges, while aware of the Church's existence, seem content with their own practices and rituals, which exist outside the framework of institutional religion. This aligns with Hand and Maher’s view that McGahern’s characters navigate their spirituality in more individualistic ways, finding meaning in the rituals of the community rather than in prescribed religious observances. The novel thus reflects the shifting attitudes towards the Church and its influence, presenting a world where spirituality is deeply rooted in tradition and personal belief, rather than institutional authority

The scene where Joe and Tom prepare Johnny's body is infused with ritualistic language that elevates the physical act to something sacred. McGahern's description of Tom's "quick firm professional strokes" (McGahern, 2002, 273) when shaving Johnny not only draws attention to the precision with which the ritual is being carried out but also highlights the shift in roles. Tom's professional detachment is tempered by the intimacy of the moment, where each action, no matter how technical, becomes an act of care and respect. This is reinforced by the tactile nature of their work: "washing and drying" the body, "trimming" the hair, "adjusting" the hands into position (McGahern, 2002, 273-4). These verbs convey a sense of meticulous attention to detail, emphasising that each movement is infused with meaning. Furthermore, McGahern's use of Johnny's personal rosary beads suggests a deep respect for the individual's faith. The act of choosing these beads over those provided by the undertaker creates a connection between the deceased and the mourners, demonstrating the significance of the individual's spiritual journey even after death. The beads, a longstanding symbol of Catholic devotion in Ireland, are described with reverence. Their use signals that the ritual is not simply about preparing a body but about honouring a life. The symbolism of the habit, too, cannot be overlooked. When the "glowing white" habit is placed on Johnny, McGahern uses the colour white - often associated with purity and the afterlife - to create a stark contrast between life and death. The "embroidered gold thread" further elevates the ritual, imbuing it with a sense of sacredness (McGahern, 2002, 273). Through this, McGahern frames the physical preparation of Johnny's body as both an earthly act and a spiritual one. It is through these rituals, so rooted in the everyday, that the community affirms its collective connection to the deceased and to each other.

The final moments of the ritual, when Mary and Jamesie are invited to view the body, underline the emotional and spiritual significance of the event. Mary's declaration that Johnny looks "beautiful" serves as both an acknowledgment of the men's care and an expression of the solace

that ritual can provide (McGahern, 2002, 275). The tenderness with which the body is treated and the satisfaction Mary finds in seeing Johnny presented with dignity speaks to the healing function of the ritual. McGahern's portrayal of death is not just about the physical act of preparing the body; it is about the emotional and spiritual process of coming to terms with loss. This aligns with David G. Mandelbaum's assertion that rituals for the dead often "have important effects for the living" (Mandelbaum, 1965, 189).

Through these meticulous descriptions, McGahern invites the reader to understand the profound significance of communal rites and the bonds they foster. The entire sequence, from the arrival of the mourners to the final viewing, emphasises the central role of ritual in both maintaining community cohesion and offering a space for mourning. Death is not just an individual experience in this novel; it is an event that draws people together, forging new connections and reaffirming old ones. The language McGahern uses is rich with detail, sensory imagery and emotional weight which frames this communal ritual as a sacred, transformative process. By focusing on the small but significant acts of care, McGahern illustrates how death, rather than being a moment of isolation, becomes an opportunity for connection, understanding and mutual support.

The wake room becomes a liminal space, where the physical surroundings are restructured to facilitate a transitional moment for both the body and the community. McGahern captures this with the image of the mourners gathering: "Old men and women sat on the chairs along the wall. The rosary was said, a woman leading the prayers, the swelling responses given back as one voice" (McGahern, 2002, 275). The language used here conveys a sense of collective participation. The "swelling responses" and "one voice" highlight the unification of the community in its ritualistic response to death. The prayer, traditionally a religious act, becomes a communal experience where the mourning process itself takes on a social significance beyond individual grief. It is not merely a religious duty but also a collective act

of closure for the community, underscoring the ritual's role in maintaining bonds among its members. The act of prayer here is not just about the deceased, but about the shared experience of loss and the comfort found in performing the ritual together. The space of the wake, marked by this communal activity, serves as a transitional area, enabling the mourners to navigate between the living and the dead. McGahern's depiction of the wake is devoid of pomp; it is a quiet, dignified space where the focus is on the process of communal grieving rather than formal religious observance. The wake itself becomes a ritual of passage that allows Johnny's death to be fully acknowledged in the context of the community. The regularity of the wake rituals, paired with the communal expression of grief, makes the loss feel more manageable, as it is processed through established customs that bind the mourners together.

This sense of communitas is not limited to the wake but extends to the practical rituals that follow. When the community comes together to dig the grave, the physicality of the task becomes part of the mourning process. Joe is asked to bring "the sharp steel spade and that good pick and the crowbar" suggesting that the tools, though functional, also have an element of ritual significance (McGahern, 2002, 278). The tools, commonly used in rural life, take on a new, more profound meaning in the context of a burial. They signify the continuity of life, the collective responsibility in the rites of passage and the reverence with which these actions are carried out. Maher's observation that in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, "religion is part of the social fabric of the community in the same way as the other rituals that mark their lives" reinforces this idea (Maher, 2003, 27). The burial, much like farming duties or pub visits, becomes a social and communal ritual that transcends formal religious devotion. It is a communal act, contributing to the cohesion of the village.

Fergal Casey further argues that in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, "social activity has taken the place of religious worship in maintaining communal cohesion" which highlights the shifting role of ritual in McGahern's depiction of rural life (Casey, 2013, 422). The death of

Johnny, though it follows traditional rites, is also marked by the community's approach to death, which centres more on the social and communal aspects than on religious observance. The Ruttledges' respect for these rituals, despite their lack of regular church attendance, reflects this evolution of ritual in rural Irish life. It is not the strict adherence to religious rites that marks the grieving process, but the social participation in the rites and rituals that help to preserve the community's cohesion.

Finally, the conversation between Joe and Mary, where Joe reflects on the process of laying out Johnny's body, reveals the personal impact of these rituals. Joe tells Mary that he was glad to have participated, noting that it "made death and the fear of death more natural, more ordinary" (McGahern, 2002, 278). This reflection is key to understanding the role of ritual in McGahern's work. It transforms death from a fearful unknown into a shared, ordinary part of life. The intimacy of the ritual, the physicality of preparing the body and the communal support make death less alienating and more a part of the natural flow of life. McGahern's portrayal of death, then, is not just about the rituals themselves, but about their role in re-contextualising death as part of a broader communal experience.

The burial scene, which occurs the day after the wake, takes on a rich symbolic and ritualistic significance, underscoring the relationship between the living, the dead and the community. The moment when Patrick Ryan dramatically exclaims: "I marked the grave out wrong… We have put the head where the feet should go. We have widened the wrong fuckin' end" is a striking example of McGahern's exploration of ritual as a social and cultural anchor (McGahern, 2002, 281). This "dramatic cry" is not merely a functional correction of a mistake but a profound expression of the collective responsibility the men feel toward preserving the propriety of the burial rites. McGahern's careful choice of language, particularly the use of the term "dramatic" to characterise the exclamation, imbues the error with a gravity that connects it directly to the religious and social expectations surrounding death. The men's perception of

this error as a significant lapse reflects the weight of ritual within their lives, which is not just about following prescribed actions but about honouring communal bonds and faith.

When the men correct the grave's alignment, positioning the head facing west to "so that when he wakes he can face the rising sun" they are not only re-establishing the physical order of the burial but also engaging in a symbolic act rooted in Christian tradition, which anticipates the resurrection of the dead (McGahern, 2002, 281). The juxtaposition of traditional Christian practice with McGahern's broader thematic framework calls attention to the cyclical and inclusive nature of existence. The idea of facing the rising sun in preparation for resurrection transcends its traditional Christian context and invites a more communal, collective interpretation. Derek Hand notes that McGahern's characters "face outwards towards other people, rather than inwards towards the self" (Hand, 2011, 286). This outward-facing posture is indicative of a broader existential orientation that opens up the possibility of redemption for all, not just the deceased. By framing the resurrection in terms of community and connection, McGahern shifts the focus away from individual salvation, instead suggesting that the living, as much as the dead, are subject to cycles of transformation, loss and renewal.

Moreover, the correction of the burial position marks a pivotal transition in the narrative, one that connects both the living and the deceased to the cyclical nature of existence. Ivan Emke's interpretation that "after the burial of the departed, the living move away from the realm of the deceased, to rejoin the world of the living, marking the transition to a post-liminal phase" reinforces the liminality that pervades the novel (Emke, 2007, 4). The deceased must face their afterlife, while the living must face a future without their departed friend. This transition is not merely personal but collective, as it reflects the shifting dynamics within the community as they move forward without the deceased's physical presence. The liminal space of grief, where the boundaries between life and death are blurred, must ultimately give way to a post-liminal state,

where the living must return to the "ordinary" world, albeit forever changed by their encounter with death.

McGahern's vivid use of natural imagery enhances this exploration of the cyclical and interconnected nature of life and death. The description of the shadows "stretched beyond the open grave" as they are "juxtaposed with wave after wave of carved shapes of light towards that part of the sky where the sun would rise" functions as a powerful metaphor for the flow of life and death (McGahern, 2002, 281). The imagery of light and shadow reflects the balance between life and death and the cyclical progression from one to the other. It underscores that both life and death are part of a larger continuum, inextricably linked through natural and spiritual forces. In this way, McGahern uses the ritual of burial not just as a social or religious custom, but as a poignant symbol of the larger rhythms of human existence; where death is not an end, but a necessary part of the ongoing cycle of life, renewal and transformation. This symbolic interplay between death and the natural world further reinforces McGahern's view of existence as a constant, evolving process, where every ending is also a beginning.

The liminal space has shifted to the post-liminal and change is afoot. The Ruttledges visit Johnny's brother and sister-in-law and note the change in the landscape as they approach the lake. Telephone poles have been installed and this is indeed a dramatic change for the rural location. Even the grieving couples' house has changed. Mary and Jamesie have taken down their assortment of unsynchronised clocks from the walls, getting them ready for adjustments so that they can chime in harmony. Mary has moved into her post-liminal phase also and tells the visitors that: "Poor Johnny's gone. It's almost as if he never was" (McGahern, 2002, 288). McGahern avoids sinking into any form of overly sweet sentimentality. However, this does not mean that the narrative lacks emotion, especially the kind that arises from the close, interconnected lives of the local community (Flannery, 2020, 70). The strong societal bond is the key to the understated narrative of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. The rituals and

traditions surrounding this community are organic, frequent and meaningful, none more so that the rituals surrounding death. The role of community within the liminal phase of death and burial is an important part of a narrative technique for Irish authors, where they draw on the oral and written history of Ireland. Community plays a vital role in the Irish funeral tradition, where the liminal space is shared by not only the immediate family, but by the larger circle of persons who have been part of the lives of the deceased and the mourner. This communal mourning can be beneficial for both the family and the community. Fearon suggests that Irish traditions aid the process of loss: "Even when it is expected it is still a time of difficult transition where grieving provides a liminal space for families and community to process the loss of a person, and the rituals of religious and civic practice enable that process emergence" (Fearon, 2013, 1). McGahern shows just how important the rites of passage surrounding a death are granted upmost importance and how the liminal space can result in the structural shift in responsibility and expectation. *Communitas* can therefore ease the load of the bereaved and enable them to concentrate solely on their grief. In McGahern's novel, although women are depicted as participating in the wake ceremonies, the predominant portrayal highlights men as the primary actors in the rituals related to Johnny's wake and burial. It is possible that McGahern purposefully emphasises the male characters to underscore the cultural significance of these rituals in the Irish context. As suggested by Butler, roles: "such as laying out the body, activities during the wake itself and lamenting of the dead were all primarily seen as women's work in native Irish worldview" (Butler, 2008, 118). The laying out of Johnny's remains is performed by males, transcending traditional gender roles of the past. In *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, the rituals are the priority rather than the gender of those performing them. The overall effect of the rites and rituals afforded to Johnny's passing is one of communal respect for the deceased, and for his family.

This exploration of communal mourning and its transformative effect on individuals leads seamlessly into Donal Ryan's works, where the role of community in the face of loss and grief also emerges as a central theme. Like McGahern, Ryan delves into the intricacies of rural Irish life, but in his novels, the communal experience of mourning is intricately tied to the larger economic and social shifts of contemporary Ireland. Ryan has been praised for capturing the essence of rural Irish existence, particularly the rural Irish man, and for his ability to weave the experience of grief into the broader social context of his characters' lives. His novel *The Thing About December* (2014) offers a powerful exploration of how death and mourning intersect with community dynamics. Kaitlin Thurlow notes that Ryan uses the "syntax of rural dialects to draw out the specificity of his characters" infusing his fictional towns with realism and grounding his characters in the nuances of their rural lives (Thurlow, 2020, 126). Through his use of the vernacular, Ryan brings to life a world where the economic forces of the Celtic Tiger era contribute to the tension and isolation felt by his characters, particularly those experiencing grief.

Ryan, much like McGahern, employs the theme of liminality, particularly through his exploration of death and mourning, to enrich his portrayal of community in rural Ireland. The opening of Ryan's *A Low and Quiet Sea* (2018), contains a poignant parable about community: "If a tree is starving, its neighbours will send it food" (Ryan, 2018, 3). This line encapsulates Ryan's belief in the universality of human connection and the essential role of community. As he notes: "We all live in small groups, in various forms of villages, and the mechanics of human connection are universal […] we all of us share common motivations and impulses, to love and be loved, to survive, to propagate" (Ryan, 2017). Critic George Berridge aptly describes Ryan as a "chronicler of fortune and folly in close-knit Irish towns," and communitas plays a central role in his work (Berridge, 2018, 22). In Ryan's novels, the communal engagement with death and funerary rituals profoundly influences character development, particularly as these events

create a space for both individual and collective grief. This communal dynamic is often situated in the context of economic transition, with Ryan frequently addressing themes of land and property. *The Spinning Heart* (2012), for example, examines the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger years, while *The Thing About December* (2014) is set a decade earlier, during the height of land speculation, "when soaring land values stoked a frenzy to buy" (Jordan, 2015). Ryan has been hailed as the "chief pathologist - and poet" of the Celtic Tiger's legacy, reflecting the deepening divide between personal and collective values during this era (Barry, 2014). In exploring the collapse of the Irish economy, Ryan's works offer a raw, unflinching portrayal of contemporary rural Ireland, navigating the tensions of grief, humour and societal decay (Jordan, 2018).

In *The Thing About December* (2014), Ryan employs a calendric structure, spanning from January to December of the same year, to unfold the emotional and societal shifts in the protagonist's life. The twelve months of the novel reflect the emotional journey of Johnsey, whose grief over the loss of his parents is compounded by the societal changes around him, leaving him adrift within a community that is itself struggling with the echoes of the past. This liminal space between mourning and healing, both personal and communal, becomes a space in which Ryan's characters can reflect on their place within a society that is at once deeply connected yet increasingly fragmented by the forces of economic change. In this way, Ryan, like McGahern, uses the rituals surrounding death not only as a means to explore individual grief but also to interrogate the broader social dynamics at play in Irish rural communities. While McGahern presents a vision of communal mourning that emphasises collective respect and solidarity, Ryan delves deeper into the emotional isolation that often accompanies grief, particularly when exacerbated by the disintegration of long-standing economic structures. Through his subtle portrayal of the relationship between community and death, Ryan provides a striking portrait of contemporary Ireland, one in which the bonds of community are both a

source of solace and a reminder of the painful transformations that the country continues to undergo.

Ryan's protagonist, Johnsey, is bullied by local youths and struggles with a sense of inadequacy, frequently demeaning himself as a "thick," "spastic," or "gom" (Ryan, 2014, 7-12). The community's prejudice intensifies following the death of his parents, exacerbating his grief and alienation. As Asier Altuna-García de Salazar observes, Johnsey's grief, particularly the loss of his father, his role model and protector, leaves him vulnerable to further exploitation (Altuna-García de Salazar, 2022, 1). When his mother dies, his grief deepens, yet the community's support offers little solace. The land inherited from his parents becomes a commodity, a notion that Johnsey struggles to grasp. Altuna-García de Salazar suggests that Ryan explores the intersection of individual vulnerability and communal attitudes toward loss and economic prosperity, especially against the backdrop of Ireland's changing social landscape (Altuna-García de Salazar, 2022, 1). Michael Fountain further argues that Ryan portrays a community defined by pettiness and distrust, the result of escalating social and economic competition (Fountaine, 2019, 64).

The novel's twelve-month structure begins in January and as the seasons change so too do its protagonist's moods and circumstances. From the outset, we learn how Johnsey is frequently "tormented by yahoos every single day" and he angers at his inability to "be a proper man", instead of "creeping along like a red-faced child, afraid of his own shadow", while holding back "tears of shame" (Ryan, 2014, 7-8). It is in the first chapter that Johnsey first mentions thoughts of ending his own life. He walks alongside a stream and wonders what it would be like to drown himself: "to lie down under the water and, when all the breath in his lungs was gone, just stay down there and breathe in water instead of air" (Ryan, 2014, 8). This thought is merely fleeting and instead Johnsey's musings progress to ones of fictional fantasies. His thoughts shift towards the idea of going back to be with his mother, envisioning her

preparing dinner and baking a pie, all set to greet him with comforting words: “He’ll tell her it was a lovely dinner and she’ll say Was it, pet, I hope it was, you need a dinner after your hard day” (Ryan, 2014, 9). The alternating language and tone in their dialogues, particularly the simplicity of their exchanges, convey their respective emotional states. While Johnsey’s language is often blunt and self-deprecating, his mother’s words become increasingly absent, reflecting her detachment from both reality and her son. We learn that Johnsey’s mother is suffering in her grief and now rarely has the dinner fresh and ready for her son. Often, she is distracted by her grief and could be found “where Daddy was buried, saying prayers and cursing at the weeds” (Ryan, 2014, 9). Johnsey pictures his father “getting no respite above in heaven” with all the praying she is doing (Ryan, 2014, 9). On his return to the house, Johnsey finds his dinner saved for him, “covered in tinfoil, and cutlery on the table” (Ryan, 2014, 10). This suggests a break from the dinner routine of the family prior to the death of his father. He acknowledges dinner will never be the same without him. He notes that since his father’s death, his mother “didn’t really listen to his answers to her fired-off questions any more” (Ryan, 2014, 11). Her grief sees her “nodding and not seeing him and not hearing him” (Ryan, 2014, 12). Johnsey’s mother is experiencing a different level of grief to that of her son. Thomas Attig suggests that the distinct emotion of grief is distinct from the process of managing and working through that grief and this emotion can often threaten to preoccupy the bereaved (Attig, 1996, 33). Johnsey's mother is suppressing the harsh truth of her bereavement, rejecting the idea of living without her husband. She is currently experiencing the denial phase of grief, a stage characterised by a tendency to detach from reality, leading to a temporary decline in productivity. During this phase, individuals who are typically decisive may exhibit a notable decrease in performance, often seeking additional guidance and reassurance (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 10). With this in mind, the widow’s emotional grief is a complex experience and

one of which she appears to have lost control of. Attig suggests that this "extreme grief emotion [is not only] irrational; it is dangerous" (Attig, 1996, 35).

Johnsey's journey through his family's yard, towards the farm now leased to Dermot McDermott, highlights his internal struggle with both grief and the loss of a traditional way of life. As he walks, he imagines McDermott's mocking thoughts: "Look at this ape, his father dies and he can't manage the bit of a farm that's left behind!" (Ryan, 2014, 13). This reflects the cultural importance of land in rural Ireland and the generational inheritance that has historically been central to family identity. As Liam Kennedy observes, rural Irish farming is deeply tied to "the role of inheritance and its associated institutions of family and kinship" (Kennedy, 1991, 497). In Irish fiction, the liminal space of funerals often serves as a platform for exploring disputes over land and inheritance, but in Johnsey's case, his grief is complicated by his lack of siblings, which removes the potential for a familial inheritance conflict. Instead, Ryan uses the broader community to underscore the pressures Johnsey faces regarding his inherited land, notably the interest of land developers during the boom of the Celtic Tiger years. The Cunliffe farm, once an integral part of Johnsey's life and his connection to his father, becomes a commodity, making Johnsey vulnerable to external forces.

As Johnsey navigates the emotional weight of his grief, he becomes aware of the transformation around him, both in the community and in the very land he once shared with his father. He describes the "deadness" of the yard as a physical heaviness, where the air feels "thicker and harder to walk through", yet he chooses this solitude over the thought of McDermott taking over his father's legacy (Ryan, 2014, 16). This sense of isolation deepens as Johnsey grapples with the shift in his relationship with the land. Land that has been commodified, losing its personal and familial significance. The Celtic Tiger boom has reshaped the rural landscape, leaving Johnsey's family affected by its economic forces (Epinoux and

Healy, 2016). The once solid connection to the land now feels tenuous, a reflection of the larger social and economic shifts that have swept through rural Ireland.

Throughout the novel, Johnsey's grief and loneliness are intertwined with his struggle to belong within a community that seems indifferent to his suffering. His sense of dislocation is reflected in the imagery of the dilapidated outhouse, once a place his father frequented. Johnsey's emotional disrepair mirrors the physical state of the building, which is described as "broken," "warped from dampness and rot" (Ryan, 2014, 13). The building, once a symbol of his father's presence, now serves as a reminder of the fragility of the past and the way in which the present is marked by absence. Johnsey's memories of the outhouse, which he once viewed as a sacred space, evoke religious imagery: he compares it to the Nativity scene, imagining his father, their two male neighbours, and the birth of Jesus all symbolically represented in the structure (Ryan, 2014, 13-14). This metaphorical connection to the past highlights Johnsey's deep adoration for his father and the men who were part of his life, but it also underscores the sense of loss and disillusionment that now surrounds him.

The imagery surrounding the yard, and its structures, deepens as Johnsey reflects on how everything seems to have "died" with his father. The buildings, "shaped by his weight and worn by his touch," now stand as silent memorials to the life his father led (Ryan, 2014, 15-16). The stonework of the buildings evokes the permanence of a grave, as if the stones are now meant to honour his father's strength and presence, but they also serve as a reminder that Johnsey cannot envision anyone else filling the space his father once occupied. This sense of loss, compounded by the economic and social changes around him, places Johnsey at the intersection of personal grief and the communal shifts occurring in rural Ireland. As the rural landscape changes, so too does Johnsey's sense of identity and belonging, further reinforcing the narrative of grief and communitas in contemporary Irish life.

As Johnsey surveys the interior of an outhouse he sees a crossbeam in the roof structure; an object that he could use for his suicide. Johnsey's contemplation of suicide serves as a poignant illustration of the deep psychological toll that grief has taken on him. As he surveys the structure of the house, particularly the "stout crossbeam that dissected the roof," he envisions it as a potential support for a rope (Ryan, 2014, 14). This moment, steeped in his emotional distress, reveals Johnsey's internalised pain. The crossbeam, described as sturdy and well-built, is tied to Johnsey's memories of his father, who valued craftsmanship and physical resilience, saying, "Things was built right in them days" (Ryan, 2014, 14). However, Johnsey's consideration of using the crossbeam for suicide suggests a profound sense of disrepair in himself; he no longer sees himself as "built right." He, like his father, appreciates the workmanship involved in the slatted house's construction. He could, however, also be alluding to his own mental health, now damaged by his three years of grief, exposed to the elements, like the building. The crossbeam itself might also be subtly referencing the Christian cross, evoking a sense of religious symbolism. Johnsey's frequent use of religious imagery in his musings reflects the intersection of faith, suffering, and loss in his grief process. The potential of the crossbeam as an instrument of death, combined with his thoughts about the crucifixion, suggests that Johnsey is searching for some form of redemption or release from his agony, but is also haunted by the weight of religious expectations and the societal norms around him. This tension between despair and hope is central to his mourning, as he struggles to reconcile the idea of suffering with any sense of salvation or peace.

As Johnsey pictures the potential failure of his suicide, imagining the "whole village" standing in his yard, watching his humiliation, there is a raw, almost comical element to his thoughts (Ryan, 2014, 14). His mortification at the thought of failing at the very act of ending his life underscores the depth of his self-loathing. The language here is indicative of Johnsey's perception of himself as an object of ridicule: "Imagine if he did it arseways and fell on his hole

and broke his leg! And Dermot McDermott found him say. And called Mother. And the fire brigade. And Father Cotter" (Ryan, 2014, 14). These thoughts show the importance of social dynamics in rural life. Johnsey's thoughts of suicide are not solely influenced by his grief and isolation, but also by his deep awareness of the constant judgment of the community, always watching and evaluating his every move.

Yet, within this mortifying vision, there is also an acknowledgment of the community's mixed treatment of him. As Johnsey imagines the crowd gathering around him, he notes that "someone kind would break it up and push them away and try to help him" (Ryan, 2014, 14). Johnsey's recognition of kindness, despite the ridicule, reflects the complex and contradictory nature of communal life in rural Ireland. He feels the sharp sting of judgment, but also understands that his community, despite its harshness, would step in to help him during a crisis. The kindness he perceives is not without complications; it is intertwined with the pain of being seen as a failure, but it still highlights the multifaceted dynamics of communal bonds. In Johnsey's case, the village functions as both a site of judgment and care, and this tension plays a crucial role in the emotional landscape of the novel. It reflects the simultaneous forces of social alienation and solidarity that shape his grieving process.

The language Ryan uses in these excerpts further illuminates the nature of grief in a rural Irish context. Johnsey's self-deprecating humour, expressed through vivid and somewhat exaggerated scenarios of failure, offers insight into his emotional turmoil. His fear of being pitied or humiliated by the community is palpable, yet it is precisely within the community's gaze that he seeks validation. This interplay between isolation and the desire for connection is central to Johnsey's grief, as it is through the communal lens that he both experiences and internalizes his sorrow. The slatted house, the crossbeam and the imagined failure of his suicide all serve as metaphors for Johnsey's mourning; a mourning that is as much about his fractured self-identity as it is about the loss of his father.

Johnsey divides the community into the ones who are kind and those who are not. He says that "Father Cotter was that way, and the Unthanks" but that "Packie Collins wasn't" (Ryan, 2014, 14). Collins is his employer and reminds Johnsey - on a daily basis - that he only keeps him in his employment "out of respect for his father, Lord have mercy on him. He was a *liability*" (Ryan, 2014, 14). We learn how Collins whispers about Johnsey to customers who would, in turn, "look around and smirk", waving in "a way that was too friendly" (Ryan, 2014, 14). He knows they are being condescending and his observations show he is brighter than given credit for. He acknowledges that the local priest is nice but that it is "his job to be nice to people; he worked for God, who gave strict instructions to all to be good and nice" (Ryan, 2014, 14). Ryan uses humour to poke fun at the Catholic Church and how its practices are often ignored by its regular church-go-ers. Johnsey's bullies attend mass yet show no sign of being either "good" nor "nice" to the young man (Ryan, 2014, 14). Mr Unthank is also seen as being one of the kind members of the community. We learn how he was: "Daddy's great old friend; they'd palled around together since they were small boys" and how he was deeply affected by the loss of Johnsie's father: "He'd stood at Daddy's coffin for ages in the funeral home, with his hand on the rim […] and Johnsey saw a tear rolling off of Mister Unthank's chin and landing on his father's cheek, so that it looked like Daddy himself was crying" (Ryan, 2014, 14-15). Given Johnsey's Catholic background, it's not unreasonable to suggest that he might interpret this act of grief through a religious lens. The image of tears falling on the deceased's body could remind him of the weeping effigies and statues commonly seen in Catholic tradition, where such symbols often represent divine compassion and sorrow (Nickell, 1993, 48). Johnsey's grief may lead him to view Unthank's tear as not just a personal expression of sorrow, but also as a symbolic connection between the human and the sacred; a gesture that underscores his father's enduring presence and the profound emotional weight of the loss.

The village comes to life with tales of how Mother called the ladies of the Irish Country Women's Association (ICA) the "aul biddies" (Ryan, 2014, 15). We learn how these women often called on her mother for requests of apple tarts for the ICA show. They were fond of gathering for mass on Sundays, the gossip in the co-op shop and the cruel taunts of which Johnsey is at the receiving end. His only ever friend, Dwyer, a boy whose "heart was in worse shape than his crooked leg, by all accounts" had died years previously and Johnsey recalls how the community had their traditional meeting in Mammy's kitchen to dissect the loss of the young boy:

> His mother and father had been mad about him. Sure why wouldn't they have been mad about their little crathur, Mother said to Molly Kinsella the day Dwyer died and a few of the ICA biddies had gathered in Johnsey's mother's kitchen to pick at the tragedy like crows picking at a flungaway snack box (Ryan, 2014, 24).

In this passage, Ryan skillfully employs evocative imagery to portray the spontaneous gathering within his family residence, where his mother sympathises with the anguish shared by recently bereaved parents who held deep affection for their departed child. The women of the ICA represent the local community and how they thrive on gossip and do not see how a "lad like that" could be loved "the same as a lad that would be fine and tall and handsome" (Ryan, 2014, 24). Johnsey, no doubt picking up on his mother's feelings toward Mrs Kinsella, describes how she acknowledges the parents' grief, while Mrs Kinsella only states that "she supposed, throwing her old hairy eyebrows and her witchy chin towards heaven" (Ryan, 2014, 24). Johnsey's observation of Mrs. Kinsella's gesture and the description of her "old hairy eyebrows" and "witchy chin" seems to reflect his unconscious sensitivity to the underlying tensions between Catholic and pagan elements in Irish culture. His use of these particular physical features may highlight his perception of Mrs. Kinsella as someone not fully aligned with the sacred rituals he has learned to associate with death and mourning. The reference to "heaven" seems almost dismissive, and it could symbolise Johnsey's recognition of the clash

between religious beliefs and more folkloric, supernatural ones; ideas which remain present, albeit less acknowledged, in his rural community. His reaction suggests a confusion, as he is caught between the teachings of priests, teachers and elders and the more secular, modern realities of Ireland. In this sense, Johnsey's childlike innocence, combined with the complex cultural landscape of contemporary Ireland, makes it plausible that he interprets Mrs. Kinsella's behaviour as a conflict between the sacred and the profane, revealing his struggle to understand the changing world around him. During the time around the death of his friend - a liminal space which allows for contemplation - Johnsey wonders if the dead can see the living and Ryan uses this trope to add humour to a serious topic by allowing Johnsey to imagine "one of those who had passed away" watching him masturbate and remembering: "The dead are all around us, according to Father Cotter" (Ryan, 2014, 26). Once more, this implies Johnsey's childlike innocence, highlighting his lack of peers or cultural influences to challenge the beliefs instilled in him by the priest.

In the wake of her husband's death, Johnsey's mother retreats into the seldom-used front room, which now serves as a space of emotional and physical isolation. Here, she watches television, knitting "something with no shape," while the "big brown clock ticked and tocked the night slowly away" (Ryan, 2014, 26). The room itself, once part of a vibrant family life, has become a liminal space, disconnected from both the past and future. It is a place where memories of her former life seem suspended, and the rhythmic ticking of the clock becomes a symbol of the slow, almost agonising passage of time in mourning. In this room, Johnsey's mother neither engages with the past nor looks to the future, encapsulating the nature of grief as something that both isolates and lingers, unshaped and unspoken. The imagery of her knitting, devoid of purpose or structure, mirrors her grief: something ongoing yet without resolution, unable to be formed into anything tangible. The clock, with its incessant ticking, imposes a slow, relentless passage of time, highlighting the heaviness often felt by those in

mourning. The contrast between this front room and the former familial space (the “long, battered green couch” in the back kitchen) reinforces the loss of warmth and unity since the father’s passing (Ryan, 2014, 26). The couch, once the seat of shared family moments, now stands abandoned, laden with boxes. Johnsey’s remark that “It wouldn’t have been balanced right, anyway, without Daddy” (Ryan, 2014, 26) reveals the deep void his father’s absence has left. The empty space on the couch becomes a metaphor for the emotional void that cannot be filled, its emptiness drawing out the grief in much the same way a vacuum cleaner pulls dust from hidden corners. This poignant image speaks to how grief is not merely an absence, but an active, haunting force that shapes and occupies the space left behind by the departed.

As Johnsey navigates this atmosphere of sorrow, he is left to confront his mother's grief, which remains inaccessible to him. Her withdrawal into herself, where she has “hardly any words left for the world, only lonesome thoughts and muttered prayers” deepens his isolation (Ryan, 2014, 27). He struggles with his own inability to think clearly or engage meaningfully with her, reinforcing how grief can create a barrier between individuals, even those who share the same loss. This dynamic of emotional distance and the challenge of mourning in isolation is central to Johnsey’s experience of grief. The tension between the public and private aspects of grief is further explored when Johnsey imagines himself as the last man alive, carrying his father’s shotgun as a symbol of protection and strength (Ryan, 2014, 30). This fantasy, where Johnsey assumes the role of protector for a group of girls, is a reaction to the overwhelming sense of loss and vulnerability he feels. The shotgun, which had been kept “asleep in its leather holder” since his father’s death, becomes both a literal and symbolic tool in his contemplation of power, control, and his battle with grief. The idea of using the weapon, first to protect, then later to potentially harm, symbolises his internal conflict between seeking safety and control in a world that now seems chaotic and threatening (Ryan, 2014, 30). Johnsey’s pain is amplified by his ongoing experiences with bullying, particularly from Eugene Penrose, whose harsh

treatment only deepens Johnsey's sense of isolation. The unsettling memory of Penrose's "limp and sweaty" handshake at his father's funeral represents the conflicting nature of grief and social interaction, where public displays of mourning are marred by expectations and a lack of sincerity (Ryan, 2014, 37).

This memory triggers more funerary recollections and Johnsey summons back images of the ICA biddies in the Cunliffe's front room, where they were talking of how they heard that his father was "*riddled* by all accounts" (Ryan, 2014, 38). The women had picked away at the gossip with glee: "they opened him up took one look and closed him again […] He was riddled, the aul crathur. He. Was. RIDDLED" (Ryan, 2014, 38). Ryan uses capitals to underscore the profound enthusiasm with which the women engage in conversations about the cancer that claimed Johnsey's father's life. The grieving son was deeply troubled by this conversation and he "imagined Daddy's insides, black and full of holes" (Ryan, 2014, 38). We learn that Johnsey was present at the end of his father's life and that the dying man's breath smelt rotten. He compares his father's body to that of an opened chestnut: "A conker that was peeled, it looked fine for a while but then got hollow and dried out and shrivelled up and dead-looking" (Ryan, 2014, 38). These thoughts greatly upset Johnsey and cause him physical distress. The anxiety manifests itself in a tightening of his throat and an inability to swallow, often resulting in panic attacks. He is learning to control his tears by "blinking like a madman and holding his breath" but states that this took a lot of practice which took weeks to master after his father died (Ryan, 2014, 38). Nonetheless, in moments of solitude, he frequently allows himself to express his emotions openly, unrestrained. His attempt to regulate his emotional responses aligns with the prevailing societal concept of masculinity, which emphasises the display of predominantly masculine emotions: "He wished he could be hard and closed like some men seemed to be" (Ryan, 2014, 38-39).

Research into gendered responses to grief suggests that women are often more inclined toward intuitive expressions of sorrow, while men tend to adopt instrumental coping strategies, such as suppressing or compartmentalising their grief. Though these gender distinctions persist, an increasing number of individuals are challenging traditional gender roles, embracing more fluid expressions of emotion. This shift is gradually dismantling the boundaries of gender expectations, allowing people to mourn and grieve in ways that feel authentic to them, rather than adhering to societal norms (Lloyd, 2018, Chapter 3).

Johnsey's understanding of grief is influenced by the rigid expectations of masculinity within his rural community. He compares his own reaction to the grief of a local man, whose son has died in a farming accident. Johnsey observes, "[H]e stood above in the church like a thing made of rock, he was ghostly white and had no words for anyone, but no womanly sobbing either. You wouldn't see big hard men like him stumbling along the road weeping, or standing at his father's deathbed keening like a banshee" (Ryan, 2014, 39). In Johnsey's eyes, this stoic, silent mourning is the model of masculine grief. He associates the more emotionally expressive forms of mourning - such as weeping or wailing - with femininity, viewing them as somehow beneath the idealised image of a "hard man." This reveals the tension between Johnsey's expectation of masculine strength and the emotional vulnerability he cannot escape.

Kevin Toolis, in *My Father's Wake* (2017), offers insight into how male mourning is often perceived in contrast to female grief rituals. Reflecting on his own father's funeral, Toolis describes how he felt disconnected from the deeply emotional expressions of sorrow carried out by the women in the community. He writes, "unsure in my maleness, of my place in this feminine chorus at sonny's wake, I looked on awkwardly" (Toolis, 2017, 217). Toolis notes that the mourning women's expressions were not just displays of grief, but part of a communal ritual that served to rejuvenate both the individual and the community: "Through this chorus of women and their daughters there was the promise of new life to come" (Toolis, 2017, 217).

Like Johnsey, Toolis feels estranged from this female-dominated ritual, observing it from the margins rather than fully participating. However, in doing so, Toolis recognises the powerful role that this mourning ritual plays in the community's regeneration. Johnsey's distance from traditional expressions of grief, particularly from female mourning, mirrors Toolis' experience. Johnsey's discomfort with the displays of grief he associates with femininity reveals the societal pressures that prevent men from fully expressing their sorrow. His grief is internalised, mediated by the harsh judgment of others and by the oppressive gender norms that define his emotional life. Both Ryan and Toolis highlight the complex interplay between public expressions of grief, gendered expectations, and the private sorrow of the mourner. In this way, Johnsey's struggle with grief is not just an individual experience, but a reflection of the emotional contradictions and communal tensions present in rural Ireland, where gender roles and rituals often dictate how grief can, or cannot, be expressed.

Johnsey is aware that his grief is prolonged and that it has become problematic. As suggested by grief-support worker, Caroline Lloyd, when someone who tends to be introverted and enjoys spending most of their time at home experiences a loss, it is reasonable to assume that their grieving process would predominantly occur within the comfort of their home (Llyod, 2018, Chapter 3). Johnsey knows he cannot continue "seeing blackness" (Ryan, 2014, 39). He describes the weight of carrying not only his own grief, but also the grief of his mother. He sees her "shrinking" and describes how she has journeyed from "fully upright" before her husband's death, to slightly stooped after his passing, to "a little hunched-over thing, like a question mark, wrapped in sorrow and silence" (Ryan, 2014, 39). Her physical manifestation is mirrored by her change in personality. Johnsey recalls how prior to losing her husband she was "all movement and talk", was always "giving out and laughing", full of local gossip and surrounded by "a cloud of flour" from her baking. In a very telling sentence, Ryan abridges the day of Daddy's funeral and the moment his mother changed before his eyes:

> It wasn't until Daddy was buried, when the house was at last empty of people who came full of condolences and left full of sandwiches, apple tart, tea and drink that Mother at last came to a dead stop (Ryan. 2014, 39).

Through Johnsey's eyes, Ryan creates an almost ethereal visual of a woman stooped by grief and stumbling through her days "with no great purpose", always looking downwards and only leaving the house to visit her husband's grave. (Ryan, 2014, 39). Johnsey knows, like his own, his mother's prolonged grief is not considered normal and that "Sympathy doesn't last forever. Like a pebble thrown in a river, it's a splash and a ripple and it's gone" (Ryan, 2014, 39).

In *The Thing About December,* the concept of a defined "shelf-life" for grief is openly discussed among the women of the ICA, who gossip about "wans whose husbands had died" (Ryan, 2014, 39). They maintain an unspoken rule that grief should subside within a year, stating, "Yerra, she'd want to be getting over it now, they'd say, it's been a year" (Ryan, 2014, 39). This fixed timeline reflects societal expectations that mourning should be a process with a clear endpoint, beyond which any continued grief is seen as unnatural and unwarranted. The women's disapproval of prolonged mourning mirrors broader cultural attitudes that view emotional expression, particularly grief, as something to be constrained and controlled, rather than embraced as a fluid, individual process. The women also draw distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable mourning practices, suggesting that if Christmas falls "between the death and the present you had no right to be olla-groaning anymore" (Ryan, 2014, 40). The implication here is that certain cultural milestones, like Christmas, serve as markers that separate legitimate mourning from excessive or "improper" grief. This reflects the societal expectation that grief must conform to prescribed timelines and public rituals. Johnsey, in a moment of ironic reflection, compares this rigid, externally imposed timeline to the "hard and fast rule" of abstaining from food for an hour before receiving communion (Ryan, 2014, 40). This parallel highlights the absurdity of the rules governing grief, as they are just as rigid and unquestioned as other religious rites in his community.

This societal pressure again aligns with research into gendered expressions of grief. In the case of the ICA women, grief becomes a communal performance, subject to judgment and conformity. These gendered expectations also reflect Jennifer Dayes' assertion that grief is not universally defined by a set of "stages" or timelines, but rather by the nature of the attachment to the deceased (Dayes in Lloyd, 2018, Introduction). Johnsey's discomfort with these expectations is evident when he imagines his mother as one of the women in the ICA, now in another kitchen, being scorned for not "getting over it." This moment underscores his internal conflict: while he may be sympathetic to the pain of the widows, he also sees his mother's grief as deviant in the eyes of their community. He compares the gossiping women to crows, with their "clucking" and "tutting" about the grieving process, further dehumanising their actions as they enforce societal norms about grief (Ryan, 2014, 40). As suggested earlier, in juxtaposing Johnsey's perspective on grief with the communal expectations of the ICA women, Ryan subtly critiques the rigid social structures that dictate how grief should be performed. The emotional complexity of Johnsey's experience - shaped by both personal attachment and societal pressure - reveals how grief is not only a private sorrow but a public negotiation of identity, masculinity, and conformity.

In February, when Johnsey comes back home one evening, he senses a change in the atmosphere. There is no dinner prepared for him as usual. Although he admits that his dinners had been decreasing in quality since his father's death, never had they been completely absent. He knows, instinctively, that something is not right: "A fist of worry clenched Johnsey's gut. The house felt cold, wrong" (Ryan, 2014, 41). He finds his mother's body on the floor of the front room - the room which never felt right to him. Her legs are twisted, and her arms are "out from her sides like Christ on the Cross" (Ryan, 2014, 41). Johnsey notes that his mother is wearing a dress which is normally reserved for mass. This perhaps suggests that she has taken her own life and wished to be discovered in her best clothes. Father Cotter praises Johnsey for

his calmness “through the ordeal” and we learn how, despite the traumatic discovery, he had managed to call an ambulance, hold his mother’s hand, close her eyes and “answer all their questions” (Ryan, 2014, 42). He later finds out that his mother had been dead for approximately five hours, again alluding to the fact that her death may have been pre-meditated, as she would have known her son was working and she would rarely have been in the front room at that time of day (Ryan, 2104, 42).

As the novel moves into March, Johnsey reflects on the unchanging world around him, observing that “the world doesn’t change, nor anything in it, when someone dies” (Ryan, 2014, 45). He notes how “the sky was the same blue the day after Daddy died as it was before” and how “the uncaring rain didn’t stop while they buried Mother” (Ryan, 2014, 45). This stark observation captures a central tension in Johnsey’s grief, the disconnection between his inner world and the relentless progression of the external world. The passage of time continues, indifferent to his sorrow, and Johnsey begins to accept this reality. He is moving into what the *acceptance* stage of grief where an acknowledgment that the death of his parents has irrevocably changed his life and that the world, unfeeling, will continue to turn despite his mourning (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2009, 7). Yet, while the weather and time remain unaffected, Johnsey’s social world shifts temporarily to accommodate his grief.

During this period, Johnsey is afforded a brief liminal space, a time when he is allowed to grieve without the usual social demands. The bullying from Eugene Penrose and others stops, and even Packie Collins, his previously harsh employer, behaves “tolerably nice for a few weeks” (Ryan, 2014, 44). This shift in behaviour signals a momentary break from societal expectations, in which Johnsey is given space to mourn, unburdened by daily struggles. The community recognises his loss and, in line with traditional mourning practices, they provide him with food and shelter. The Unthanks offer him “a fine lunch every day,” and Herself even serves him dinner “in her own kitchen for the first while” (Ryan, 2014, 44). This temporary support, while

appreciated by Johnsey, is short-lived. Once the liminal period passes, and he returns to work, Herself offers him dinner "wrapped in tinfoil to carry home and heat up in the microwave" (Ryan, 2014, 44). The shift from daily care to a cold, practical offering in the form of a microwaveable meal suggests the transition from the community's brief tolerance of his mourning to a return to normalcy, with the implicit expectation that he will resume his place within the social order.

This transition also highlights the community's role in organising Johnsey's mourning. As his Aunties push him to "sort the house out" and go through his mother's things, Johnsey stalls, sensing the intrusion of others into his grief. He compares them to "crows picking at a dead dog's eyes," disturbing the illusion that the dog might just be sleeping (Ryan, 2014, 49). This vivid metaphor reveals Johnsey's sense of violation as others take control of the situation. He is no longer the agent of his own mourning; instead, others, like the "small army of biddies" and his Aunties, dictate the rituals surrounding his mother's death (Ryan, 2014, 49). While communitas, as Turner suggests, describes the collective bond that forms in times of crisis, Johnsey's experience is one where the community's involvement in his mourning feels less like support and more like an imposition (Turner, 1969, 96). He observes the ICA women and others with suspicion, sensing that their "kind help" is often driven by self-interest and hidden agendas. This perception of being preyed upon by the community casts a shadow over what could have been an opportunity for healing, turning Johnsey's grief into a spectacle for others to exploit.

As March progresses and Spring approaches, Johnsey realises that change is inevitable. The seasons shift, and with them, his grief becomes a permanent fixture of his existence. The Unthanks leave for their holiday, and Johnsey anticipates that "his loneliness then would be absolute" (Ryan, 2014, 52). The absence of the community's support forces him to confront his solitude once again. His grief, compounded by the prolonged sadness he witnessed in his mother over two years, now takes centre stage in his life. He reflects on how she may have planned her

own death and wonders if his father was “in on it, somehow” (Ryan, 2014, 47). This reflection highlights the complex, layered nature of grief, where Johnsey is not only mourning his mother’s passing but also grappling with the emotional weight of his father’s earlier death. The burden of despondence, heavy and suffocating, fills the void left by their absence.

Johnsey’s profound loneliness is further exacerbated by the eerie isolation of the house, which “creaked and moaned at night,” making him fear that an “enemy [is] arming himself” or “a demon preparing to suck his life out” (Ryan, 2014, 48). This imagery captures the emotional and psychological toll of living with grief, where even the physical space feels charged with unease. In his solitude, Johnsey contemplates suicide, questioning, “how big of a sin could it really be to want to be with your mother and father in heaven?” (Ryan, 2014, 48-49). This desperate desire for escape highlights the depth of Johnsey’s grief, where the line between life and death blurs in his mind, and the agony of living without his parents becomes too much to bear. The notion of eternal reunion with them offers a brief respite from the emotional turmoil, though Johnsey also doubts whether this is truly what God would want for him. In these moments, Johnsey’s grief becomes not just a personal experience but a complex interplay between internal suffering and external social dynamics. Ryan effectively explores how the communal and individual aspects of grief are intertwined, where Johnsey’s mourning is both shaped by his own emotional attachment and the rituals and expectations imposed by the community. While the external world remains unchanged, Johnsey’s internal world is in turmoil, and the tensions between the personal and the societal frame his journey through grief.

As the months progress, the communitas that had surrounded Johnsey begins to dissipate, leaving him increasingly isolated. The passage of time becomes an oppressive force, and Ryan uses literary techniques to portray this with a striking physicality. Johnsey reflects that “[t]ime drips by. It never flies, really” and the imagery becomes even more visceral as he “could feel each second drip from the clock above the press and splash down on his head”

(Ryan, 2014, 51). Through this personification of time, Ryan underscores the suffocating nature of Johnsey's grief and his inability to move forward. Turner's concept of liminality is once again evident here, as Johnsey remains trapped between two states of being. His old life, defined by his parents' presence, has ended, yet he has not transitioned into a new existence and remains in this unsettled, in-between space. This sense of liminality is exacerbated by Johnsey's lack of meaningful relationships. Lloyd suggests that young individuals navigating grief benefit from peer support, particularly during adolescence or early adulthood, when they are already dealing with significant psychological and physical changes (Llyod, 2008, Chapter 5). Johnsey, however, has no peers, and his only companions are the Unthanks, whom he describes as "two elderly people [he] had inherited" (Ryan, 2014, 56). Although they continue to offer meals and companionship, Johnsey remains disconnected. He feels no desire to stay in a world without his parents, friends or "nare a woman" (Ryan, 2014, 56). His sense of isolation deepens, and he once again considers suicide as a way out of his misery, picturing "the deep pool in the river or the crossbeam in the slatted house" as offering "sweet salvation from the miserable torment of just being" (Ryan, 2014, 56).

Ryan's use of dreamlike imagery further reflects Johnsey's disorientation. The "stream of people" who had attended his parents' wakes has disappeared, and Johnsey struggles to recall their presence, describing the memories as "like dreams you only have half a hold of when you wake" (Ryan, 2014, 62). This blurring of memory and reality illustrates Johnsey's detachment from the world around him. His days of mourning are neither fully part of his past life nor a sign of his future, but instead represent a liminal space. Turner's theory of being "betwixt and between" applies here, as Johnsey's grief prevents him from stepping into a new reality.

However, moments of connection offer glimmers of hope. Following a brutal attack by local youths, including Eugene Penrose, Johnsey is left hospitalised with severe injuries. While recovering, he encounters a nurse he identifies by her "Lovely Voice." Unable to see after

surgery, Johnsey clings to the soothing sound of her words. Ryan's use of auditory imagery highlights this moment of solace. "It would soothe you, that voice. You could just lie there, listening, and lose yourself in it" (Ryan, 2014, 77). The voice becomes a symbol of comfort and renewal, compared to "flowers abroad in the gardens, pushing up through the darkness towards the sun" (Ryan, 2014, 78). This metaphor aligns Johnsey's recovery with the cyclical rhythms of nature, suggesting a potential for growth even in the midst of his pain. In addition to the Lovely Voice, Johnsey begins to form a friendship with his hospital roommate, "Mumbly Dave." Together, they create a makeshift support system, offering companionship during their shared recovery. This unlikely trio - Johnsey, Lovely Voice, and Dave - becomes a source of solace for Johnsey, easing his isolation and helping him navigate his transitional journey through grief. By June, Johnsey's affection for the Lovely Voice has deepened, but he knows it is unrequited. "One-way hopeless love, he knew, but still love" (Ryan, 2014, 109). While this love remains unfulfilled, it marks an important step forward, as Johnsey begins to reconnect emotionally with others.

Returning home in July, Johnsey's grief resurfaces. The oppressive silence of the house, which "felt even emptier than it had once Mother's funeral was done and dusted" (Ryan, 2014, 115), triggers a regression in his progress. Ryan captures this through Johnsey's behaviour, as he begins sleeping on the sofa with the television on for background noise, recreating the environment of the hospital. The house, once a place of safety, now seems alien and isolating, amplifying Johnsey's loneliness. Meanwhile, the community's interest in his family's land grows. Paddy Rourke warns Johnsey that "every little sneaky prick in the country is watching to see what'll you do about the land" (Ryan, 2014, 117). This external pressure compounds Johnsey's grief, leaving him confused and mistrustful. The kindness of earlier mourners now seems tainted, their offers of help revealed as self-serving. However, in August, Mumbly Dave visits Johnsey at home, bringing genuine companionship. Their friendship offers a reprieve

from Johnsey's despair, described as being "as welcome as the sun when there was hay waiting to be saved or turf to be footed" (Ryan, 2014, 132). This metaphor ties their bond to the rural rhythms of life, symbolising the hope and nourishment that connection can provide. Johnsey begins to feel less alone. Although his journey through grief remains incomplete, the support of his new friends offers him the possibility of eventual healing. Through the use of metaphor, imagery, and symbolism, Ryan captures the complexities of grief, illustrating how moments of connection can begin to break through the oppressive weight of loss.

In September, Johnsey recalls the annual ritual of harvesting apples, remarking that "you had to be quick to get the windfalls before the scavenging insects" (Ryan, 2014, 147). This vivid image not only evokes the rural rhythms of life but also functions as a metaphor for the opportunistic individuals circling him, eager to profit from the sale of his land. This predatory behaviour reflects the broader societal pressures Johnsey faces, with his vulnerability further amplified by grief and isolation. The arrival of Siobhán, formerly referred to as Lovely Voice, marks a shift in Johnsey's fragile dynamic with Mumbly Dave. Johnsey is haunted by his father's warning that "women could cause terrible trouble for men," which inhibits his ability to fully express his feelings for the nurse (Ryan, 2014, 152). This reluctance reveals Johnsey's internalised fear of disrupting the delicate balance of relationships around him, as well as his struggle to reconcile his emotions with the rigid, patriarchal lessons imparted by his father.

As October progresses, the pressure surrounding the potential sale of Johnsey's land intensifies. Relatives reach out, not with concern for Johnsey but with self-serving agendas, warning of zoning restrictions and recounting financial troubles, such as unexpected university expenses (Ryan, 2014, 164–165). This intrusion underscores the theme of exploitation, with Johnsey caught in a liminal space where he is neither fully part of his community nor free from its demands. At the same time, Mumbly Dave begins to retreat, with Siobhán's presence becoming more dominant in Johnsey's life. By November, Johnsey observes the tradition of

offering sacrifices for the Faithful Departed, but his mother's dismissal of such practices as "only auld shaping" (Ryan, 2014, 172) reflects her perceptive nature and ability to see through the performative religiosity of others. This memory sharpens Johnsey's yearning for parental guidance as he struggles to navigate the moral and practical dilemmas of his situation. He wonders whether his parents would approve of Siobhán's presence in the house or be proud of his determination to keep the family land (Ryan, 2014, 176). These questions emphasise the disconnection Johnsey feels, not only from his parents but from any clear sense of direction in their absence.

By December, Johnsey has reached a turning point. He recognises that he is no longer entirely alone and that, despite his reluctance to trust others, he has found friendship. "Mumbly Dave loved him. He knew it before Siobhán said it" (Ryan, 2014, 186). This moment signifies Johnsey's movement into the post-liminal phase of his grief. However, Ryan also shows how deeply ingrained Johnsey's fear of betrayal remains. He continues to see loneliness as a safer alternative to vulnerability, remarking, "Isn't it a noble thing all the same, loneliness? There's dignity in it, at least" (Ryan, 2014, 187). This ambivalence is mirrored in the shifting dynamics between Siobhán and Mumbly Dave, whose conflict over their roles in Johnsey's life leads to a devastating rift. Dave's departure, marked by a poignant description of his tear falling "on to the floor" (Ryan, 2014, 194), leaves Johnsey staring at the "star-shaped puddle" it creates. This detail captures Johnsey's inability to confront the raw emotions of the moment, as he turns away from Dave and focuses instead on the inanimate trace of his grief. The following day, Johnsey learns that Mumbly Dave has been killed in a car accident, a revelation that plunges him into guilt and self-recrimination. He blames both Siobhán and himself, internalising his responsibility for Dave's death: "It was he was responsible" (Ryan, 2014, 196). Ryan uses stark imagery to convey Johnsey's torment, describing how he "lapped it up like an auld hungry dog getting fed scraps" from Siobhán while neglecting the pain of his only friend (Ryan, 2014, 196).

This moment lays bare Johnsey's vulnerability and his desperate need for connection, even as it exposes his failure to balance the relationships in his life.

Shortly after hearing of Dave's supposed death, Johnsey retrieves his father's shotgun, feeling "the power of death over life" (Ryan, 2014, 198). This action underscores the cyclical nature of violence and despair in the novel, with the weapon symbolising both Johnsey's inherited legacy and his growing alienation. Ryan captures the clarity that grief can bring as Johnsey reflects, "Maybe a shock like he'd gotten brings clarity to the mind" (Ryan, 2014, 198). However, this clarity is fleeting. When armed police arrive and Johnsey learns from Himself that Mumbly Dave is still alive, the revelation destabilises him further. Himself's reassurance - "we love you the very same as if you were our own child" - offers Johnsey a sense of belonging, but it is not enough to counteract the debilitating weight of his loss and isolation (Ryan, 2014, 203–204).

Ryan closes the novel with Johnsey's untimely death, a tragic culmination that underscores the fragility of his existence. Johnsey reflects, "That's the thing about December: it goes by you in a flash. If you just close your eyes, it's gone. And it's like you were never there" (Ryan, 2014, 205). This final reflection captures Johnsey's lingering belief that his life has been devoid of meaning or impact. Ryan's use of imagery, from the apple harvest to the shotgun, reinforces the recurring patterns of grief, loss, and missed connections that define Johnsey's journey. Johnsey's experience reveals the fragility of communitas when faced with the practical realities of life in rural Ireland. While the community initially rallies around him following the deaths of his parents, their collective support proves to be temporary, gradually dissolving as time passes. This failure of sustained communitas leaves Johnsey stranded in his grief, unable to find solace or a sense of belonging. Turner's theory of communitas highlights its transient nature, a temporary suspension of hierarchies and individual roles in the face of shared experience. However, Johnsey's story exposes the limitations of this communal bond, particularly when the initial outpouring of solidarity fades and the bereaved are left to navigate

their loss alone. In rural Irish society, where social structures are deeply intertwined with familial and communal networks, the breakdown of communitas after such a loss can lead to profound isolation. Johnsey's lack of contemporaries and his estrangement from the broader community leave him unable to transition from the liminal phase of mourning to a post-liminal state. The community's inability to sustain its support reflects a broader tension within rural life, where economic pressures, shifting social values, and individual struggles often undermine the collective strength that is supposed to define these close-knit societies.

This chapter has explored the intersection of grief, mourning, and community in Irish literature, using Turner's theory of *communitas* as a lens to understand how these narratives reflect the cultural and social cohesion of rural Ireland. Through the examination of William Trevor's *Love and Summer*, John McGahern's *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, and Donal Ryan's *The Thing About December*, it has become clear that death and its rituals offer a vital space for negotiating both personal and communal identities. These novels highlight the dual nature of grief as both an intensely individual and profoundly collective experience, shaped by enduring traditions, evolving cultural expectations, and shifting societal norms.

The depiction of *communitas* in these works varies, illustrating its temporary and often fragile nature. In Trevor's portrayal of funerals as communal performances, the rituals bridge the private sorrow of the bereaved and the shared memory of the community, creating a fleeting sense of solidarity. Yet, as time passes, this shared experience of grief fades, revealing the transient nature of *communitas*. The community's support, while vital in the immediate aftermath of death, becomes increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of everyday life. Trevor's depiction underscores the way funerary rituals offer temporary solace, yet ultimately leave the bereaved to navigate their grief alone.

McGahern, on the other hand, emphasises the more intimate and tactile aspects of death - such as the laying out of the body and the collective effort of digging the grave - showing how communal participation in these rituals transforms grief into a shared act of solidarity and renewal. Here, the sense of *communitas* extends beyond the funeral, creating a momentary but powerful bond between the living. McGahern's rural community, though still grounded in tradition, reveals a more enduring form of solidarity, not necessarily fleeting but subject to the challenges of life in a changing rural Ireland. While the mourning process may not offer a permanent resolution to grief, it creates a space for connection that stands in contrast to the isolation that can characterise rural life in more contemporary settings.

Ryan's *The Thing About December* presents a more complex view of grief, shaped by the personal and social realities of contemporary Ireland. Johnsey's struggle to connect with the community stems from his social marginalisation, which is compounded by the community's inability to fully understand or integrate him. This sense of isolation is a result of the persistent alienation he experiences due to his mental condition. In Ryan's narrative, the rituals surrounding death offer a brief moment of communal connection, but Johnsey's inability to fully participate in these rituals reveals the limitations of *communitas* for those who are seen as "different" or who cannot fully engage in the expected roles of mourning. The community's support is fragile, and although they attempt to include him, Johnsey's mental disability makes it difficult for him to experience the solidarity that others might find in the rituals. His grief, deeply internalised, is shaped by the disconnect between his experience of mourning and the community's more conventional expectations. In this way, Ryan explores the tension between the desire for community and the profound isolation that can result from being socially excluded, highlighting the limitations of communal mourning in a rural context.

Furthermore, these texts highlight the complex interplay of gender and rural isolation in Irish mourning traditions. While Trevor's work is more focused on the broader communal aspects of

mourning, Ryan's *The Thing About December* places particular emphasis on gendered expectations and how these shape the experience of grief. Ryan's protagonist is constrained by societal expectations surrounding masculinity. His grief, though deeply felt, is internalised and suppressed by the cultural norm that men must be strong and stoic, especially in the face of loss. This gendered expectation of silence in mourning creates a sharp divide between Johnsey's internal suffering and the external expressions of communal mourning. This dynamic is compounded by the rural isolation he faces, as his grief is not shared in a way that allows for emotional release or connection with others.

In contrast, McGahern's work reveals a more nuanced portrayal of gendered grief, where the mourning rituals reflect both traditional masculine and feminine roles. In *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, men often engage in the physical labour of the funeral (such as digging the grave), while women are depicted in more emotionally expressive roles. However, McGahern does not create a strict divide between these roles, instead focusing on the shared experience of grief that transcends gender in the context of communal action. The rituals themselves, whether through physical labour or emotional expression, become a space where individuals, regardless of gender, momentarily experience a sense of *communitas*, despite the broader isolation that follows.

These narratives not only illuminate the emotional complexities of mourning but also underscore the enduring role of funerary rituals in Irish cultural identity. The wake and funeral, with their intricate blend of tradition and personal expression, continue to serve as vital spaces for processing grief, fostering connection, and reinforcing community bonds. At the same time, they provide a lens through which authors interrogate broader societal issues, from gender expectations and economic pressures to the waning influence of institutional religion.

Ultimately, this chapter has shown that grief and mourning in Irish literature are not static or reductive themes but dynamic, multifaceted explorations of human connection, cultural continuity, and the negotiation of identity. The rites of death, as depicted in these novels, are as much about the living as the dead, offering a means of navigating loss while reaffirming the values and bonds that sustain communities in the face of change. In doing so, these works contribute to a literary tradition that honours the past while engaging critically with the present, revealing the resilience and complexity of rural Irish life.

However, not all loss is accompanied by these rituals, and not all grief is communal. While this chapter has examined the role of shared mourning and its grounding in tradition, the next chapter turns its attention to the concept of ambiguous loss. Here, the absence of clear rituals or closure creates a different kind of liminal space; one marked by uncertainty and unresolved grief. These upcoming narratives explore the devastating effects of loss that defies comprehension, whether through sudden disappearance, the impossibility of holding a funeral, or the lack of a definitive goodbye. In doing so, they expose the fragility of rituals when faced with the complexities of modern life and challenge the assumption that grief always follows a structured path. This transition from communitas to ambiguous loss allows for an exploration of the interplay between community, identity, and the deeply personal nature of mourning.

Chapter 4
Grieving Without a Body: Miscarriage, Infant Death and Lost Bodies.

> Ambiguous loss is neither a disorder nor a syndrome, but simply a framework to help us understand the complexity and nuances of loss and how to live with it (Boss, 2022, iii).

As discussed in previous chapters, the Irish funeral and wake, along with their rituals and traditions, allow for the progression through the stages of grief and enable the bereaved to come to terms with their loss. The liminal space occupied by the bereaved is not one with a determinate timeframe, rather it is a flexible entity that allows the individual or individuals to process their grief. Their grief is an expected state-of-being and the support of the family, friends and communities, what Victor Turner termed as *communitas*, is often an aid to their liminal journey (Turner, 1969, 394). However, when there are no remains to bury or cremate, the mourners are denied their natural progression through to the post-liminal space. The grieving individuals find themselves in an indeterminate state of liminality, where they are deprived of surety and are experiencing an "ambiguous loss" (Boss, 1999, 5). Applying the work of Pauline Boss on ambiguous loss to contemporary Irish literature affords an extended understanding of the importance we place on funerals, wakes and the opportunity to say goodbye and how we struggle to navigate through the liminal space, in their absence.

"Ambiguous Loss" is a term which was first used in the 1970s by Pauline Boss, the principal theorist to coin the phrase which is now widely used in academic, professional and general discourse (McGeorge, 2006, 77). Ambiguous loss is characterised by an absence that lacks formal confirmation of life or death, resulting in a lack of closure. This type of loss arises when an individual is unaccounted for, and there is no definitive information regarding their whereabouts. According to Boss, ambiguous loss is the most emotionally taxing form of loss due to the absence of conclusive evidence (Boss, 2017, 521). Approaching her research from

a family therapy perspective, the theory was initially applied to family members suffering from unresolved grief, such as the families of military personnel missing in action (American Psychological Association, 2022). Interestingly, Boss states that while ambiguous loss has been "mostly silent" in clinical settings: "the phenomenon has always been the stuff of opera, literature and the theatre" (Boss, 1999, 5). It is only in recent times that grief counselling has become an option for those who are suffering from ambiguous loss and there is a dearth in published research which focuses on the mourners who have never recovered the remains of their loved ones (Wayland et al, 2016, 54). In a 2020 qualitive study, Ines Testoni et al found that when a family is experiencing ambiguous loss they are "faced with an emotional vortex relating to a never-ending wait", and their mourning can only cease when the missing person returns, or their remains are discovered (Testoni *et al*, 2020, 1). Unresolved grief ushers in profound uncertainty and unknowingness. The aftermath of war, natural (and unnatural) disaster and kidnapping are the obvious scenarios for ambiguous loss, but Boss's research has expanded to include the physical ambiguity surrounding stillbirth/miscarriage, divorce, adoption and the less obvious psychological absence of people suffering with Alzheimer's, addictions and mental illness (Boss, 1999, 8-9).

Boss is reluctant to apply the word "closure" when referring to ambiguous loss, which she says: "has a definition meaning final [and] is a harmful word in human relationships" (Boss, APA, 2022). She suggests that humans cannot just close the door on their grief: "There are continuing bonds as has been now declared in the grief literature and we don't close the door, we live with loss and grief" (Boss, 2022). Instead, Boss chooses to use the words "clarity" and "certainty" when referring to grief:

> [W]hat human beings want is not closure after a loss. What they want is certainty of what that loss was… where the remains are… That ambiguity is very, very stressful on top of a loss. In other words, it exaggerates the pain of the loss. It freezes the grief (Boss, 2022).

Freezing grief also freezes a person's ability to move forward into the post-liminal stage, following a bereavement. In *The Myth of Closure: Ambiguous Loss in a Time of Pandemic and Change* (2022), Boss states that "research suggests that we do better to live with grief than deny it or close it" (Boss, 2022, xvi). In literature, as in real life, there are not always answers or resolution, but there is insight into the need for the rituals and traditions we associate with death: the wake, the funeral and the opportunity to say goodbye.

This chapter will examine the presentation of grief associated with ambiguous loss in Kit de Waal's *The Trick to Time* (2018), Gillian Binchy's *Ruby's Tuesday* (2014), Donal Ryan's *From A Low and Quiet* Sea (2018) and Kathleen MacMahon's *Nothing But Blue Sky* (2020). Each novel features characters suffering from ambiguous loss but in different ways. The three protagonists have no bodies to bury, and this compounds their grief. Ryan's Farouk is a refugee who has lost his wife and daughter en route from Syria to Ireland; MacMahon's David is a widower whose wife was one of the victims of a terrorist attack on a flight; and de Waal's Mona is grieving her stillborn daughter. Each narrative may vary, yet each carries a common theme: ambiguous loss and the effects of uncertainty. Other examples from contemporary Irish literature shall be used to highlight how authors can use ambiguous loss to emphasise the importance of the rituals and traditions of the wake, funeral and burial. Extracts from Emily Pine's *Notes to Self* (2018) are included to add further depth to the effects of miscarriage and infertility and how her experience is relevant to the concept of ambiguous loss. This chapter will also examine the effect that Covid-19 had on our grief rituals and the traditions associated with saying goodbye to our loved ones. Examples of this can be found in Roddy Doyle's 2021 collection of short stories, *Life Without Children,* which features fictional tales set in Ireland, during the Global Pandemic. It is important that example of this specific grief is included in the research surrounding ambiguous loss as it magnified the importance of the Irish funerary traditions and how they help to frame our grief.

MISCARRIAGE, STILLBIRTH AND INFERTILITY

Behavioural scientist, Pragya Agarwal, states that: "women's stories have long been hidden, ignored, sidelined" (Agarwal, 2021, 2). In *(M)otherhood* (2021), she suggests that there is a lack of literature which examines women's stories surrounding the female body and the relationship women have with the expectations, restrictions and reality of living in the "shell we inhabit all our lives" (Agarwal, 2021, 3). Agarwal argues that despite living in an age of "unprecedented freedom", women are in fact not completely autonomous (Agarwal, 2021, 4-5). Social, political and cultural influences challenge women's reproductive autonomy and influence reproductive health and choices. She suggests that "motherhood is idolised" and this notion infiltrates women's lives, whether they choose to become a mother or not. Women can lose their sense of self as they begin an often-unhealthy relationship with their womb. The fear of unplanned pregnancy is taught to girls from a young age, with the idea of creating a life too soon deemed a societal *faux pas*.

Enright suggests that Irish women have historically been taught that pregnancy out of wedlock was one of the biggest mistakes a woman can make: "I was reared in the seventies, by a woman who had been reared in the thirties, and we were both agreed that getting pregnant was the worst thing that could happen to a girl" (Enright, 2004, 13). This attitude abruptly changes as women mature, perhaps get married and have a "career", and the pressure of the "ticking body-clock" becomes an acceptable cultural and societal trope, one which suggests is often used as a "tool for oppression" (Agarwal, 2019, 7). When there are issues of infertility, the idea of motherhood changes. Motherhood becomes an unreachable goal. Agarwal states that infertility is stigmatised and thus far has resulted in women feeling lesser than their fertile peers: "Guilt, anxiety, conflicts between our own desires and society's demands from women, and our own internalised conflicts and ambivalences, are rarely documented" (Agarwal, 2021, 6-7).

Irish author Sinéad Gleeson agrees with Argarwal's thesis. She states that desire to become a mother is not present in every female and that the "urge to procreate and propagate is as arbitrary as any other act of free will" (Gleeson, 2019, 89). Fertility has historically been seen as a form of transactional wealth, where a woman's ability to supply heirs was seen as an essential part of a marital match (Gleeson, 2019, 127). In fact, elements of historical attitudes to pregnancy and motherhood still exist today. Gleeson suggests that: "the anachronistic idea persists that a woman is not fully a woman until she is a mother" (Gleeson, 2019, 127). She offers the idea that women who choose not to reproduce are seen as "a lesser kind of woman" and viewed as "self-absorbed" and "unnatural" (Gleeson, 2019, 90). Even when a woman becomes pregnant, her body is seen as part of the public domain. Strangers encroach on the private arena of the pregnant women: touching the expectant mother's stomach, commenting on her appearance, offering advice and comments that were not asked for: "In gestating another person you become public property" (Gleeson, 2019, 99). The decision to pursue fertility and the choice to embrace or forego motherhood should be regarded as individual choices, immune to interference from religious institutions, governmental bodies or societal pressures. Likewise, infertility represents a personal path fraught with challenges, further complicated by the experience of ambiguous loss.

Jill Allison, Global Health Coordinator at the Faculty of Medicine, Memorial University of Newfoundland, suggests that being childless is often associated with "the presence of absence" and rarely is a woman who is suffering from infertility afforded the ability to grieve their loss of experiencing motherhood or to resist the idea that they have "failed as a woman" (Allison, 2013, 72). Allison's research has shown that many infertile women see their loss as not just a biological one, rather one that was conceived within them and was a grief which remained a "hidden sorrow" (Allison, 2013, 73). For the woman who cannot conceive, there is the idea that there is no "moment" which differentiates between being, and not being, a mother

(Allison, 2013, 75). Emilie Pine is candid about her experiences with infertility. In her collection of personal essays, *Notes to Self* (2018), she reveals how difficult her quest to become pregnant was and how her infertility had begun to overtake her life, and indeed her body:

> I pee on sticks and into sample cups. I pee on my own hand when the stream won't obey. I open my legs wide for sex, for the doctor's speculum. I hold my arm out for needles and blood pressure monitors […] I worry that I am empty, or that I am full of the wrong things. I worry that I am disappearing, eroded, failing (Pine, 2018, 39).

Pine is grieving for her inability to become a mother. She is filled with both anger and frustration, along with feeling less of a person for not being able to carry a pregnancy to full-term: "I only want to be a mother. Why is that so easy for some people and so hard for others? Why is it so hard for me?" (Pine, 2018, 39). Alexandra Kimbell suggests that: "for women, infertility manifests itself not just as personal shame but as confusion and existential grief" (Kimbell, 2019, 8). Like many women, Pine had decided to wait until she was more "mature" and advanced in her career before attempting to become a mother. She describes how, after years of avoiding unplanned pregnancy, she now must experience unprotected sex and for herself and her partner this is "weird" (Pine, 2018, 42). Their brief joy at seeing a positive line on a home pregnancy test is soon replaced by sorrow when the following tests display negative results: "I realise what I'm feeling is grief. R says he feels the same. We both really want to be parents" (Pine, 2018, 44). Their journey becomes a painful one of let-downs, invasive tests and discussions about optimum times to have sex, "cervical mucus" and "sperm mobilty" (Pine, 2018, 45). The pleasure and closeness that the couple once found in their sexual relationship has transformed into a burdensome task as they strive to conceive a child. As the failed attempts continue, their ambiguous loss causes friction in their relationship and she recalls how she began to become "an emotional bully" when it came to sex during her fertile period (Pine, 2014, 53).

Following a positive pregnancy test, Pine begins to bleed. After examining her at the maternity hospital, they report observing some growth in the foetus but are unable to confirm the presence of a heartbeat. They advise her to return for another examination in a week. Pine struggles with the idea that "Growth means life. But no heartbeat means no life" and she believes that these binary statements "mean ambiguity" (Pine, 2018, 55). She becomes cognisant of the legalities of her ambiguous pregnancy and how, in Ireland (pre-2018 Repeal of the Eighth Amendment), the Constitution allowed for equal status of the unborn and the mother, resulting in the prioritisation of the life of the foetus. This means that midwives were not permitted to declare the pregnancy as over, due to the signs of growth. Pine sees this as "the total disempowerment of us as 'parents' of this ambiguous pregnancy" (Pine, 2018, 55). The couple leave the hospital and are furious with the situation they are in: "I am a woman, in grief, and these women will not look me in the eye *as a fellow woman* and tell me that I am not going to be a mother" (Pine, 2018, 55). Pine finds herself in a state of liminality, in which she is carrying a foetus that lacks a heartbeat, but medical professionals are unable to confirm foetal demise. The legal constraints imposed by the Eighth Amendment hinder her progress through the grieving process and the acknowledgment of her loss. Neil Thompson proposes that the notion of disenfranchised grief holds significance on a broad scale: "as a grief that is not acknowledged or socially sanctioned is likely to be more difficult to bear" (Thompson, 2020, 21).

Some women choose to hold memorial ceremonies to help them process their grief when they realise that they can never carry a pregnancy to term. Allison states that: "the importance of death as a metaphor or analogy helps to construct the moment of disruption" and the ritual of saying goodbye to unborn children can be a cathartic experience, one which allows the idea of motherhood to exist within the realm of the woman's reality (Allison, 2013, 75). Allison relates to her findings where infertile women have held their own memorial ceremonies to mark

the loss of children which were never conceived. Often these take religious and ritualistic form, granting "loss legitimacy in a social context" (Allison, 2013, 75). For the women in Allison's research, their infertility and the loss of the opportunity to carry pregnancy is as "tangible as death" but society finds it almost impossible to accept their grief as equal to that of women who have suffered miscarriage, stillbirth or who have lost a child (Allison, 2013, 76). In her 2021 essay, "Lacrimosa/Tearful", author and poet, Nuala O'Connor, compares the loss of her sister, Nessa, who was "stolen away" by cancer, to "the loss of five planned pregnancies" (O'Connor, 2021, 56). O'Connor articulates that the most poignant moments of emotional distress in her life are attributed to the bereavement of her sibling and the experience of recurrent miscarriages. However, she suggests that the sorrow she endured subsequent to the loss of her pregnancies surpassed, in its intensity, the grief she underwent following the demise of her sister: "The grief over the lost babies was worse than my sister's loss, in ways, because it was/is a grief of self-blame, of body hatred, of what ifs. Cancer took Nessa" (O'Connor, 2021, 56). Kimball suggests that often women who struggle with infertility feel "insubstantial" and "become ephemeral": "If there is a single story of infertile women, its theme is isolation" (Kimball, 2019, 6). The sense of isolation is, in part, fuelled by the fact that individuals find it challenging to discuss miscarriage and struggle to offer an appropriate response to the uncertainty associated with this ambiguous loss.

Miscarriage is recognised as a period of mourning, and the provision of a proper burial allows for resolution of the uncertainty associated with the loss. The Rotunda Hospital, Dublin, offers burial facilities for "neonatal deaths" where the gestation is under twenty-four weeks, but the ceremony cannot be attended by the bereaved. This is mainly due to the fact that the remains of each baby are placed in a "small individual container" which is then placed in a coffin, along with the remains of other babies, and then buried "a number of weeks" later by a local undertaker (Rotunda Hospital, 2014). Should the miscarriage occur after the twenty-four weeks

gestation, the term changes from “miscarriage” to “stillbirth” and can be registered on the HSE Civil Registration Service, where all Births, Deaths and Marriages are recorded (citizensinformation.ie, 2014). A stillborn baby can be buried or cremated and their remains are afforded a funeral service as if the baby had been carried to full term, but with the added option of burial in the “Angels Remembrance Garden (Rotunda Hospital, 2014). While losing a stillborn child is granted a valid and natural response of grief, with the opportunity to mourn and be granted a funeral being separated by a matter of days, those who have experienced a miscarriage are left without recognition of their ambiguous loss. In a similar vein, opting for pregnancy termination does not exempt one from experiencing feelings of grief. The decision to terminate a pregnancy is driven by diverse motives and can result in varying degrees of grief.

Argarwal broaches the subject of unplanned pregnancy and how it is often considered a “female problem”: “Always the woman. Being judged, assessed, evaluated, examined, punished. Never the men” (Agararwal, 2019, 92-93). She suggests that society expects the woman to be celebrating their pregnancy news, with adverts for pregnancy tests never displaying the despair many feel upon seeing a positive result. There are often women for whom this result means less than joy, for many possible reasons: it may not be the right time of their lives, there could be financial difficulties, there are women who are in abusive relationships, women with addiction issues or those with already large families who fear they cannot manage the responsibility of raising another infant. There are also women who have been told that their foetus is “incompatible with life” (Wilkinson et al, 2014, 306). Before the 2018 Repeal of the Eight Amendment Referendum, Irish women were forced to travel to the United Kingdom when they chose to terminate their pregnancies. Enright states that Ireland “broke apart in the eighties”, with constitutional rows affecting mostly the Irish female population, concerning contraception, divorce and abortion. She suggests that it was “a hideously misogynistic time” (Enright, 2004, 186-187). According to statistics from The Department of Health for England

and Wales, more than 1700 women between 1980 and 2016 who had abortions in the UK had come from Ireland (Bardon, 2018). Before the changes in Irish law in 2018, all women were subject to a blanket-ban on abortion, without regard to their circumstances. The Irish Constitution included the Eighth Amendment which gave equal right to life to a pregnant mother and her unborn child, irrespective of the gestation period. Gleeson suggests that this enforced the idea that a woman's body was not her own: "The lines between body and womb have become blurred, a vessel inside a vessel" (Gleeson, 2019, 208).

While the 2018 referendum resulted in repealing the Eighth Amendment, Irish women are still dependent on the clinician to determine whether they are legally entitled to a termination or not, and medical professionals can decline the service on "moral grounds" (Fitzsimons and Kennedy, 2019, Chapter 7). Despite the limitations on access to abortion, TD Ruth Coppinger acknowledges the progress that has brought Ireland out of complete control of the Catholic Church: "The significance of winning this bodily autonomy in your country can't be overstated. Years of taboo, years of expense, years of secret, illegal journeys were over" (Coppinger, 2019). Roughly 2% of pregnancies are identified as having a congenital abnormality annually. Some of these abnormalities are likely to result in death, making them the primary cause of foetal and child mortality (Jackson *et al*, 2023, 2). Parents undergo a profound sense of shock and acute sadness upon receiving an unfavourable diagnosis about their child before birth. Intense grief begins and this is confounded by the decision of whether to carry the child to term, or to terminate the pregnancy (Statham, 2000, 731). Should a termination be the outcome, the decision must be made as to what should happen to the remains. In Ireland the foetus is afforded a death certificate and funeral if beyond twenty-four weeks, but should the termination take place in Britain, the decision to bury or cremate the remains of the foetus is complicated by repatriation (British Pregnancy Advisory Service, 2023). The delay

which results in returning the body of the remains results in a suspension of the grief process and leaves the parent(s) in a liminal space. They have no body to bury and no rituals to perform.

Kit de Waal's 2018 novel, *The Trick to Time*, explores the theme of ambiguous loss through stillbirth and miscarriage. Mainly set in an unnamed seaside village in the UK, the narrative reverts to 1972 Birmingham, and previous decades in Co. Wexford, Ireland. Mona, the protagonist, is introduced as a woman approaching her sixtieth birthday, remembering her past and wondering what her future holds. De Waal has stated that the novel is: "about a person's journey; about Mona navigating grief throughout her life…by finding her own way of living with grief and trauma, she finds ways of helping other people… And every time she helps someone, she helps herself" (Penguin, 2018). A gifted doll maker, Mona also creates weighted "dolls" made specifically for women who have had a stillbirth or miscarriage. These dolls are formed by a local carpenter who, when given the exact weight of the deceased baby, uses blocks of wood to carve and create a "baby", which can be placed in the grieving mother's arms.

Mona's service is recommended by word-of-mouth, and women know little of what to expect. When they arrive for an introductory meeting, they are often confused, scared and quite sceptical. The grieving women are asked for the birth weight of their child and each bespoke "baby" is matched to this weight. This shows the importance of a child's birth weight to a mother. One of the first questions we ask, following the birth of a child, is what weight the baby was: "'I just need the weight.' The woman's voice is a whisper when she speaks. 'Five pounds seven ounces,' she says, and she looks around as though she's told a secret" (de Waal, 2018, 5). For Mona, this question is part of the grieving process and, for the bereaved, it may be the only time they have been asked. The carpenter is careful to adhere to specific weights as he understands the importance of getting it right: "It's not the shape, it's the weight that matters…As he works, he weighs the baby on a set of scales…He measures and weighs and works and weighs and measures and works, and it goes like that until it's exactly what she

wants" (de Waal, 2018, 56). Mona also suggests that each mother brings something personal, to reflect the brief existence of their baby: "Bring a shawl or a blanket or anything else you like or nothing at all, it's up to you, but some people have something special and they like to bring it with them" (de Waal, 2018, 40). This concept reflects the ritual surrounding the dressing of the deceased. John D. Canine suggests the importance of this tradition: "A grieving mother dresses her baby in the clothing she has carefully chosen, holds him in her arms one last time, then places him in his casket. The finality of this ritual is difficult to deny" (Canine, 1999, 110).

As Mona is Irish, this ritual would have a particular resonance for her. The laying out of a body and the clothing chosen for the corpse are a centuries-old funerary tradition. One of the crucial elements of waking the dead was the preparation of the body and there were local women who specialised in such services. The women would come to the house to prepare the corpse for their wake. In the nineteenth century, these women would "lay out the body, washing, dressing and presenting the deceased, normally dressing them in a burial gown" and these traditions remained into the twentieth century, "linked to the process of professional embalming, which took the preparation of the deceased away from the family home and the layout women" (McCarthy et al, 2019, 124-125). As suggested by de Waal, who is half-Irish herself: "The Irish very much remain Irish wherever they are" (O'Kelly, 2018). Mona's appreciation of infant clothing is mentioned throughout the novel, as she creates bespoke outfits for her hand-carved dolls. When the grieving mothers bring their chosen blanket or piece of clothing, she amalgamates the item into the ritual of holding the "baby":

> She comes back with the baby wrapped in Christine's white lace shawl. The baby is cradled in her arms, the tail of the shawl drapes down… "It's a beautiful shawl, Christine, isn't it? Take a look. Ah, it's lovely. Fine linen and lace…It's so soft. And it smells of lavender. Someone went to a lot of trouble for you" (de Waal, 2018, 92).

In fact, this ritual helps to frame the closure of the novel when Mona re-visits the clothing she had hand-made, forty years earlier, for her own daughter. She unpacks the box of clothing,

covered in paper and with lavender tucked inside. She touches the package which contains the shawl she had embroidered and wrapped delicately in tissue paper, and "she can smile now at the memory" (de Waal, 2018, 257). For Mona, this is a post-liminal emotion and was only facilitated by acceptance and the clarity she gains from visiting the place where her daughter's body was laid to rest.

The inspiration behind Mona's bespoke service becomes clear early in the novel when de Waal's narrative shifts to a 1970s Birmingham hospital where Mona gives birth to her stillborn child. The experience is made worse by the treatment toward both herself and her daughter, who is taken from her immediately. When Mona sobs and calls out for her baby, she is told to remain quiet: "Ssshh. Listen, you have to be quiet, you have to be. If you keep screaming they send for a psychiatrist and they come and give you a drug to put you out" (de Waal, 2018, 154). Mona continues her request to see her daughter and is told that they have "put the baby in a special place. She's gone now" (de Waal, 2018, 154). De Waal's character is afforded a few minutes with her deceased child, due to the kindly act of a nurse. Hidden from view, the baby is placed in Mona's arms:

> Nurse Archer puts Mona's baby in her lap. "She's a good weight, isn't she? Seven pounds two ounces." … "Now listen", she says, "you have to be really quiet. I'll come back in a few minutes. You're not to move. Don't make a sound. No one must know" (de Waal, 2018, 155).

This small act of kindness allows Mona to physically connect with her daughter and aid her journey through grief and the liminal space she now finds herself in. Observing the chilliness of her infant prompts her to contemplate the location where her baby has been placed since the time of birth: "She wraps her baby up tight in the blanket because wherever they took her it was too cold and her skin is mottling, turning blue like she has a bruise underneath" (de Waal, 2018, 155). When the ward Sister discovers that Mona has been given the baby's body to hold, she "turns her savage face on Nurse Archer" and demands to know why she would "take a dead baby out of the sluice room" (de Waal, 2018, 161). The term "sluice room" shows the lack of

care and compassion towards the remains of the child and Mona is haunted by the image of her daughter being returned to such a place. De Wall acknowledges the generational difference in the aftermath of a stillbirth, explaining that: “Things were different then” (de Waal, 2018, 168). She notes how the current practices are less ambiguous and allow for the parents of the deceased baby to hold their child and grieve. In comparison, she describes what had happened in 1972, when her daughter was stillborn:

> They took her off me and put her in the sluice room…the room where they stick all the bits of liver and kidney they cut out…the skin and tissue they will put in the incinerator later. Or throw out in the bins. The rubbish room. Yes, that’s where they put my baby, my perfect baby (de Waal, 2018, 168).

Mona's anguish is magnified by the idea of her daughter being brought to such a location. She envisions human organs, skin, and other bodily components in her mind. She likens the room to a site for discarding waste, drawing a parallel to a bin. Having known her "perfect" child, the concept of her daughter's body being treated as if it was "rubbish" is deeply upsetting and compounds her grief. In fact, practices such as this were commonplace in 1970s UK and Ireland. An example was cited in a UK parliamentary debate in 2020: “In 1976, I was working on a gynae ward, and I was asked to take receipt of a cot that was coming up from the labour ward. In the cot was a baby that was still alive, which I was told was to be returned to “Rose Cottage” and put in the sluice room. The baby went there until it died a few hours later” (Department of Health and Social Care, 2020, 483).

When Mona’s husband, William, arrives during the interaction, the ward Sister is firm in her stance: “Your baby was born dead this evening. We’re very sorry. Your wife requested to see the child and that has been done although it’s not strictly allowed. The baby will now be taken away. It’s for your own piece of mind” (de Waal, 2018, 162). This was a common practice in hospitals during the late twentieth century and rarely did a mother get to see her deceased infant. This enforced separation could be seen as trapping the bereaved in the liminal space,

rather than allowing the natural progression to the post-liminal phase of grief. In a 1999 RTÉ radio documentary entitled *Holy Angels*, a bereaved father tells of how, when his daughter was born with complications and they were told she would shortly die, his wife was "heavily sedated" and this resulted in her inability to process their ambiguous loss. He states that upon hearing that his daughter had died, "the only piece of humanity or consolation" that he received in the hospital was from "the lady who was cleaning the corridor" (RTÉ, 1999, 13:45). De Waal alludes to the use of drugs to placate mothers following stillbirth: "Nurse Archer gave Mona something to make her sleep" (de Waal, 2018, 170). Interestingly she chooses the word "make" rather than the more common "help". This is a nod to the fact that Mona was not choosing to sleep, rather it was more convenient for the hospital staff. In the 1970s, there was little, if any, support given to the bereaved or details given as to what would happen to the remains of their baby (McCamley, 2020). Boss confirms that, in the past, stillbirth and miscarriages were treated with insensitivity and complicated the grief of the parents, due to an era of high infant mortality, and it is only in recent times that hospitals see these deaths as "real losses that warrant grieving" (Boss, 1999, 22).

In most cultures, mothers and fathers were encouraged to defer attachment to their baby until they were sure the child would live. While such beliefs made sense, historically, it is dysfunctional for women today to be expected to act as if nothing has happened when they experience a miscarriage or give birth to a stillborn (Boss, 1999, 18). In denying the mother the opportunity to say goodbye to their infants, grief is severely hindered. Kersting and Lang suggest that while the parent has "not built up a relationship with their infant" their grief is not significantly less than other bereavements (Kirsting and Wagner, 2012, 187). Mona's grief is still palpable, and her daughter (whom she named Beatrice) is never far from her mind. The immediate grief is shown in her reactions to children playing on the street outside her flat, just days after losing her daughter: "It's all she hears now, the voices of children and the crying of

babies" (de Waal, 2018, 174). Known as "child envy", this is when a bereaved parent can feel envious of others' children following miscarriage or stillbirth and often results in the further isolation of the grieving mother (Kirsting and Wagner, 2012, 188).

Contributing to Mona's ambiguous loss is the lack of knowledge as to where her daughter's remains are. With no funeral or memorial service, and without the rituals and traditions associated with a death, she is stuck in a liminal space and struggles to progress to the post-liminal phase. Kirsting and Wagner suggest this experience is made all the worse by the lack of acknowledgment of the loss from friends and family (Kirsting and Wagner, 2012, 189). Mona's friends, neighbours and district nurse all play down her loss with platitudes such as "you'll be grand. You're young yet", "Try not to think about it", "you're a healthy girl" and "these things happen" (de Waal, 2018, 174). These dismissive statements may not have been uttered had there been a funeral for Beatrice. Mona's role as a grieving mother would most certainly have been granted more sympathy, empathy and understanding, with the more traditional display of grief and the sympathetic shaking of hands from the gathered mourners. As suggested by Canine: "The memory of their participation in [a] funeral will affirm the reality of their loss" (Canine, 1999, 104).

In an attempt to deal with her ambiguous loss, Mona eventually returns to Birmingham, twenty-eight years after Beatrice's death. Sixteen years earlier, she had finally located where her daughter's remains had been placed and she now visits the site annually, with her friend Val. Mona expresses her guilt at how long it had taken to find her, but Val assures her that she had no choice in the matter: "You didn't know where she was, no one did…Some people never find their babies. At least you've got some where to come" (de Waal, 2018, 222). Beatrice's remains had been placed in the coffin of a man who had died in the hospital the same day as the infant. "That's what they did those days. They took her tiny little body and they put her in a coffin with a man who nobody claimed, who had no family. They threw her in and nailed it

shut" (de Waal, 2018, 251). This practice continued in Ireland and the UK until the mid-1980s. The Irish Health Service Executive confirm that "tandem burials" were common practice and acknowledge that this likely: "caused much distress and upset for families both at that time and now" (Wall, 2014). UK parliamentary papers also confirm this practice and note how neither families would have been advised of the "tandem" burial (Department of Health and Social Care, 2020, 486).

As Mona approaches the place where her daughter was buried, she thanks the man in whose coffin Beatrice is placed in: "I pay my respects to you and thank you again for taking care of my daughter" (de Waal, 2018, 222). The atmosphere of the graveyard is described in detail, with its moss-covered path and low yew branches hanging over the stone gravestones. Mona notes: "as always, the sense of stilling time…the same sense of monumental grief" and recalls her first visit to the site:

> the very first time when she had so much more to say, when she had to say sorry for taking twelve years to find her and they had years to catch up on. But these days, Mona is realistic and knows she talks to tiny bones, if those tiny bones still exist (de Waal, 2018, 223).

This acknowledgment suggests that Mona is moving into the post-liminal stage of her grief, and she is recognising that her ambiguous loss is a real loss and deserving of acceptance. Toward the end of the novel, de Waal shows Mona's progression through to the post-liminal phase, as she finally accepts a bespoke wooden "baby" from the carpenter, made to the specific weight of Beatrice's birth weight. She wraps the doll in the lavender scented embroidered shawl that she had made for her daughter, twenty-eight years earlier. She finally accepts her grief.

Gillian Binchy's 2014 novel, *Ruby's Tuesday*, examines the pre-referendum experience of having to travel to the UK to terminate a pregnancy. At her twenty-three-week scan, Afric Lynch has been given the devastating news that her baby has "absent cerebellum", and this means she is "incompatible with life" (Binchy, 2014, 46). Thus begins her journey through

ambiguous loss and the silent grief she will endure. When Afric returns to the hospital later that day to see a foetal abnormalities obstetrician, she tells him that since receiving the news, she had "a new vocabulary: three new words", which refers to the phrase "incompatible with life" (Binchy, 2014, 61). When the scanning probe is applied to Afric's belly, the doctor tells her that she is carrying a baby girl: "Just like that. All my dreams of guessing and wondering were gone. It was a girl" (Binchy, 2014, 62). Her use of the past tense shows how she has already accepted that her daughter will not live, before she has even heard the definitive results from the specialist:

> Afric, if your baby makes it to full term she will be both mentally and physically handicapped – that's if she makes it to full term. And if she does, she may survive only days, or maybe hours after she is born… I am afraid your baby is incompatible with life…Your baby has a foetal abnormality that is fatal (Binchy, 2014, 63).

When Afric is advised that there are "decisions to be made", she enters the liminal space she must occupy (Binchy, 2014, 66). She has left the pre-liminal phase, where she had been pregnant and preparing to become a mother, and is now in the liminal part of her grief. She must make a decision whether to carry her daughter to term and postpone her grief further, or terminate the pregnancy, process her grief and begin her journey to the post-liminal stage. Afric chooses to end the pregnancy and contacts a hospital in the UK. The staff at the Merseyside clinic tell her that they have "an Irish package", which suggests the frequency of Irish women who attend the clinic (Binchy, 2014, 70).

As Afric prepares to travel, she compares her ambiguous loss to that of normal grief: "When an old person dies, you mourn the past, the loss of their life. But I was mourning the future" (Binchy, 2014, 118). Angelo suggests that "every post-abortion woman has undergone a real death experience - the death of her child" (Angelo, 1992, 69). Afric's grief is profound and real, yet it will forever be an ambiguous loss, due the circumstances surrounding the death of her baby. The delivery of Afric's baby, Ruby, is described as beginning like that of a healthy

infant: “Early Tuesday morning Ruby was delivered with the same care, dedication and dignity as all other babies – nothing different – except she was perfectly still when she came into this world” (Binchy, 2014, 161). Afric is surrounded by kindly midwives who encourage her to grieve and treat her with respect and dignity. She spends many hours cradling her infant and processing the fact that she is deceased: “I was holding my own flesh and blood…She lay there lifeless and almost weightless” (Binchy, 2014, 167). The hospital room exists as a small, transitional area, within the broader transitional realm of Afric's grieving process. When she leaves the hospital - and baby Ruby – behind, she must navigate the next part of her liminal journey. She must return to Ireland without a body to bury. Ruby’s ashes will be returned, via courier, within a week. With no funeral to plan and no mourners to offer condolences, Afric is alone in her grief. Termination is seen as outside the norm of natural death and therefore there is no *communitas* to aid the mourners through their grief. Boss suggests that: “existing rituals and community supports only addresses clear-cut loss” and Afric’s loss is neither a legal nor a socially acceptable one (Boss, 1999, 20-21). Mary Maher describes Binchy’s novel as one “about a mother intent on creating an identity for her child” (Maher, 2014). Afric has bonded with her baby, and despite her death, she is forced to grieve alone. Binchy has confirmed that Afric’s story is semi-autobiographical, as she lost her daughter in similar circumstances, in 2013 (GillianBinchy.com, 2014). In giving Ruby a name, Afric recognises her ambiguous loss as something real. When Ruby’s ashes are returned to Ireland, Afric begins her journey to the post-liminal phase of her grief.

By contrast, a stillbirth is often afforded the rituals and traditions of a full-term, live birth and grieving can be structured to facilitate the mourners. Again, Pine portrays the contemporary approach to grief when a pregnancy results in the death of a baby. In *Notes to Self* (2018), Pine has written an account of her sister’s experience of birthing her stillborn daughter and how the family processed their loss. She simply refers to her sister as “V” and

tells of the day she received a call to say that V was in the maternity hospital, at thirty-seven weeks gestation: “I figure that the baby is making an early appearance” (Pine, 2018, 64). Upon arrival at her sister’s private room, V sobs and tells Pine that her baby has no heartbeat. V leaves the hospital and returns two days later to give birth to her daughter. When given the maximum painkillers and epidural, the midwife tells V that: “nothing can possibly harm the baby now” (Pine, 2018, 66). When Pine is brought in to see V and her infant in the delivery ward, she notes her sister is “lying propped up, holding her daughter, who is swaddled in the blue cotton blanket all newborns are wrapped in” (Pine, 2014, 66). V is being treated the same as any other mother who has just given birth. Pine does what any relative does, when visiting a newborn. She holds the baby and observes that: “Elena looks perfect, only impossibly still” (Pine, 2018, 66). While she is holding Elena, Pine feels her warmth (“still holding the heat of her mother’s body”) and notes that: “this is the end and the beginning” (Pine, 2018, 66).

Photographs are taken, and V “offers her beautiful child for the camera” (Pine, 2018, 67). These are memories that are important to the grieving family as they will be the only concrete thing left of the infant. Funeral arrangements are planned and Pine experiences a transitional stage that manifests as physical symptoms. She suddenly craves meat after years of being vegetarian, and for the duration between Elena’s birth and death, and her funeral, Pine eats at an alarming rate (Pine, 2018, 67). She also begins to shop excessively, spending hours browsing homeware but with no sense of why or what she is doing. Her grief reaction is not that unusual. “Shopping Therapy” is often associated with grief and is considered a diversion from coping with one’s emotions (Snowden, 2019). Following the death of her mother, Wendy Snowdon (like Pine) began shopping in a frenzied state. She states that it helped her to fill “the hole that grief ripped through me with yet more stuff” (Snowden, 2019). Lori Yosick, Executive Director at Mount Carmel Hospice and Palliative Care, suggests that “grief takes many forms of expression and physical manifestation” and often there are elements of behaviour which are

seen as outside the norm of the bereaved (Yosick, in Glazer and Clark-Foster, 2019, vii). Both Pine and Snowden are surprised by their urge to shop while grieving, yet retail therapy is seen as a form of restoring a feeling of "personal control" over one's environment and dispelling the "residual sadness" that continues during the morning period (Rick et al, 2014, 83). Nitika Garg and Jennifer S. Lerner suggest that increased consumption and the desire to purchase new items is influenced by a person's sadness and that the action of acquiring these items is a way of counteracting the inability to control the situation in which they find themselves (Garg and Lerner, 2013, 106). The recently bereaved often feel frustrated and helpless, and retail therapy can alleviate the feeling of being "out of control".

An example of this shopping frenzy can also be seen in Enright's *The Gathering* (2007). While waiting for the repatriation of her brother's remains, Veronica finds herself in a large Dublin department store, fighting with the urge to buy items that she "might need" (Enright, 2007, 189). She lists off a vast range of goods that she could buy, including bed linen, a bed, clothes, kitchen storage, food (Enright, 2007, 189). She stops herself, in the knowledge that this is her grief taking over her urges. She is aware of the privilege which allows for her ability to buy anything she wants, and the shame hits her, unexpectedly, as she descends the store's escalator: "I find myself crying [for the fact] that there is nothing here that I can not buy" (Enright, 2007, 189). She knows that the shopping is her reaction to her grief: "My brother has just died, and I can buy anything at all" (Enright, 2007, 191). Her loss is within the ambiguous spectrum, as her brother's body has not yet arrived in Ireland, there has been no wake and no burial. There is also the ambiguousness surrounding his death, as it has been suggested that Liam has taken his own life.

Another perspective on ambiguous loss is offered in Donal Ryan's 2018 novel *From A Low and Quiet Sea*, which tells the stories of three different men, from very different backgrounds, who each suffer in silence. Ryan explores themes such as loneliness, death, grief,

and guilt, while ambiguity plays a pivotal role in shaping the emotional landscape within each man's story. Ambiguous loss is predominantly displayed through the character of Farouk, a Syrian refugee, whose wife and daughter drowned as they escaped war-torn Syria, across the Mediterranean Sea. Ryan confirms that Farouk's story was inspired by a newspaper article he had read about a doctor who fled Aleppo and whose family had lost their lives on their journey to the UK. The story affected him deeply and he wanted to explore the human stories of refugees, not just the "perfunctory" newspaper stories which he saw as: "just a presentation of facts. This happened to a man…there was no feel of the massive, the unbelievable loss that he'd suffered" (RTÉ, 2018, 05.46). While Farouk remains in a refugee camp, receiving treatment for injuries sustained during his journey, his grief is suspended in a liminal space as he continues to believe his wife and daughter are still alive. His refusal to accept his loss is complicated by the fact that he has not seen their bodies and there is no official record of their disappearance. Boss suggests that while the ambiguous loss associated with "the disappeared" carries similar symptoms to PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), it may be even worse, as there is no *post* element to the trauma. Instead, the loss is seen as an unknown entity which continues to traumatise and, without proof of death, can prevent the progression to the post-liminal stage of grief and mourning (Boss, 1999, 24).

In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Sigmund Freud suggests that grieving will come to a natural conclusion when the mourner accepts the loss of their "love object". He states that: "The normal outcome is that deference for reality gains the day" (Freud, 1917, 154). In the case of a death, it is acknowledged that the loss is a permanent one and the bereaved are expected to progress through the liminal stage of grief, proceed through to the post-liminal stage, and eventually move on with their lives. However, with his ambiguous loss, Farouk cannot accept the loss of his wife, Martha, and their child, Amira. His ability to mourn is hindered by the fact that he has no bodies to view, no funeral service to hold, and no way to say

goodbye: “There was no reason to believe them to be dead” (Ryan, 2018, 45). Boss suggests that:

> an ambiguous loss may never allow people to achieve the detachment that is necessary for normal closure. Just as ambiguity complicates loss, it complicates the mourning process. People can’t start grieving because the situation is indeterminate (Boss, 1999, 9).

Ryan’s novel opens with Farouk’s decision to flee Syria, in the hope of finding a safer place for his family. David Bartram et al explain that asylum seekers and refugees are fleeing from their home countries as a result of fear. Most refugees have witnessed or been threatened by violence and need protection (Bartram et al, 2014, 105-106). Farouk had thus far chosen to remain in Syria with the hope of change. When the war escalates, he accepts they must flee: “The crucified boy swung the argument…he was left with no choice but to get his daughter and his wife to safety” (Ryan, 2018, 14-15). Farouk and Martha meet with a trafficker who is to arrange transport for the family, on a sea vessel bound for mainland Europe. United Nations Relief and Works Agency Commissioner-General, Philippe Lazzarini, states that: “No one gets on these death boats lightly. People are taking these perilous decisions, risking their lives in search of dignity” (UNHCR, 2022). Farouk and his wife fear their journey but feel it is their only choice. Their home had become a war zone and they fled in fear of their lives.

As the family approaches the boat, Farouk tries to stem his feeling of uncertainty surrounding the situation, instead shaping it as an heroic and bold move: “He felt a surge of pride that he was the kind of man who could arrange his family’s escape, who had the wherewithal to get them to the West, and make for them there a new life, new and better and absent of fear” (Ryan, 2018, 23). This optimism is short-lived as the reality of the journey becomes obvious. The vessel is not what they had been promised and the passenger lifejackets are confiscated as they board the boat. The family cannot escape the situation as the boat is moored offshore and the traffickers are equipped with firearms: “There was nothing then could be done” (Ryan, 2018, 24). Farouk now sees that he has no control over the situation. It is in

this chapter that we first encounter Farouk's ambiguous loss. He remembers the journey and how the boat had no crew, instead it had a "flashing, beeping box set by the wheel" (Ryan, 2018, 32). He remembers the screams and the wind, "the disgusted sea, lashing in all its rage" (Ryan, 2018, 32), and he begins to doubt the clarity of his memory, as he is questioned by immigration officials at the refugee camp in which he now resides:

> He sometimes wondered if he lied. They supposed him to be lying, all of them. About being a doctor, about being smuggled in a fishing boat, about the reasons he had left his home, about his wife, about his daughter. Perhaps he had never had a daughter or a wife. They no longer seem possible (Ryan, 2018, 32).

The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that in the month of June 2022, there were 3,321 dead or missing at sea. Most of these cases were refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea, in the hope of finding asylum (UNHCR, 2022). In September 2022, the bodies of seventy-one migrants were discovered following a shipwreck off the coast of Syria (UNHCR, 2022). The vessel reportedly carried many more passengers than the death toll suggests. This implies that there are many more people who are missing at sea. Farouk is one of the many survivors who are faced with ambiguous loss and his tragic journey is now superseded by a traumatic future of uncertainty.

Finding himself in a refugee camp, Farouk finds time "immeasurable" and struggles to remember how long it is since he boarded the boat. He notes that it is now summertime and that he must have been lying on his cot-bed, silent and unmoving, for at least a week (Ryan, 2018, 33). Another refugee tells him that they may be moved out of the camp and brought to a new destination. Farouk tells the man that he will have to wait for his family. When he asks Farouk why he "has to wait", Farouk tells him: "I have to wait for my daughter and my wife. They're with the other women and the children in some other part of the camp" (Ryan, 2018, 35-36). Farouk has not accepted that his wife and daughter have drowned. His ambiguous loss means that he still has hope of their existence elsewhere in the camp: "I don't mind waiting here…We

have to be patient, all of us. There's no point in striking against the tide" (Ryan, 2018, 36). This sentence suggests that although Farouk is in denial about Martha and Amira's deaths, he realises that the "tide" will always win. The "tide" had taken his family and the "tide" will not turn.

Farouk tells his roommate that: "Martha has our papers and Amira is a clever girl and between them they'll arrange things and fetch me when it's time" (Ryan, 2018, 36). The old man worries about Farouk's refusal to accept his loss and places his hand on his shoulder, gently squeezes it and tells him to rest: "Sleep now, my friend, lie down and sleep…you need to sleep, brother" (Ryan, 2018, 36). As Farouk lies down his inability to grasp reality once again becomes obvious. He thinks of how pleasant it will be, as the summer progresses, when he can leave the tent flaps open: "so that the cool air would balm them and the soft sound of the sea would sooth them…he and Martha and Amira would have a tent together at the edge of the camp near the sea so that they would all three listen to the breaking waves and feel the gentle salty breeze" (Ryan, 2018, 36-37). Farouk's desire to experience the sounds of the sea in such a gentle way is a juxtaposition to the tragedy he has just experienced. The sea he speaks so lovingly about is the same sea that took the lives of his wife and daughter. Neuroscientist Mary-Frances O' Connor suggests that this is how our brains cope, following a time of trauma. She states that part of the human brain is wired to believe the disappeared person is still present and without empirical memory of the loss, the rewiring of our understanding will be fractured and delayed, causing more suffering (O'Connor, 2022, 53). Farouk's connection to the sea continues, and he pursues it with the belief that his family are nearby: "he felt happy that Martha and Amira were having this time together, this period of gradual adjustment, before they would regroup and continue their journey" (Ryan, 2018, 38).

Farouk's thoughts are in fact a sign that his brain is trying to send the message that his wife and daughter were taken by the "rolling waves", they are "sequestered" in heaven or the afterlife, or "a more pleasant place". The "sea view" is ever-present in their death and Amira

and Martha are "having this time together" in a liminal space, where each member of the family are in a "period of gradual adjustment." The concept of regrouping and "continuing their journey" could also be seen as a reunion, following Farouk's own death, and their journey into their new afterlife (Ryan, 2018, 38). Boss suggests that ambiguous loss can "freeze people in place", preventing from them moving on with their lives (Boss, 1999, 20). Bryant et al suggest that there is a deficit of research into the area of prolonged grief in refugees (Bryant et al, 2021, 302). This is surprising as a refugee, by nature, is fleeing a traumatic event and often has suffered a loss (or losses) as a result of their situation. Farouk's physical, emotional and mental health are considered normal for a refugee who has gone through such trauma. Sarah Crowther suggests that: "Refugees are ordinary people, but some have been through extraordinary and damaging experiences. They have experienced loss and prolonged stress" (Crowther, 2019, 155). She confirms that "any person who has gone through experiences of violence, departure and transit and losses, will probably end up dealing with painful memories and complex, difficult emotions" (Crowther, 2019, 118).

Farouk is weighed down by his grief and the ambiguity of his loss is blocking his acceptance. He wants to return to his bunk and continue "his wait":

> for Martha and Amira to prepare their house, to arrange their beds and their tables and their chairs, because surely the accommodation given to families was more salubrious than this, surely there'd be tables for their meals and not their laps, and chairs to sit on instead of bunks, and a door that opened onto a low place in the line of dunes that fortressed them against the sea (Ryan, 2018, 42).

His imaginary future is framed by the sea and yet offers protection from its waves. He sees this fictional home as being "fortressed" and capable of keeping the family safe. This idyllic future helps Farouk to mask the realities he faces as a refugee. He does not want to talk about the camp, the procedures or the outcomes: "Delays or complications or refusals of consulates or countries or agents thereof to grant visas or mercies or passage or grace or […] lost

identifications or lost purses or lost luggage" (Ryan, 2018, 42). Not only does he refuse to talk about the process of being an asylum seeker, but neither does he wish to talk about Syria or the trauma he witnessed: "bombed hospitals or dead colleagues or escalations of hostilities or conflagrations or annihilations or massacres" (Ryan, 2018, 42).

His memory reverts to the day of the crossing and he recalls in great detail the events which led to the sinking of the boat: "The Memory of it, as real and as violent as the thing itself" (Ryan, 2018, 43). Farouk remembers the moment that he and the other passengers realise that the vessel had no crew, no captain and no escape plan. They feverishly hope that they will be discovered by a "rescue ship, a navy boat, full of seasoned mariners who'd winch them to safety and bring them to land" (Ryan, 2018, 43). Their hopes are fruitless however, as the sea displays its superiority over the inadequate vessel:

> The final mighty list and the exceeding of some critical point, some terminal axiom of gravity, the small boat's surrender to the sea. The water's shocking cold, the silence. The splintered boom, floating. The grey craft looming, the uniformed men and women telling him they were sorry, they were sorry, they had come too late: the sea had taken thirty souls (Ryan, 2018, 44).

Farouk makes the decision to pretend that he has accepted that Martha and Amira are dead. He believes this is what they want to hear: "It seemed important to them, this pretence" (Ryan, 2018, 45). However, he privately believes that they could be alive: "There was no reason to believe them dead" (Ryan, 2018, 45). According to Boss, maintaining hope is a prevalent characteristic in cases of ambiguous loss, and the absence of a chance to see the missing person's body makes it difficult to alter their perspectives on whether the person is present or absent (Boss, 1999, 26).

After numerous visits from an aid worker, Farouk finally begins to reveal his story and some of his memories of the crossing he had made with his wife and daughter. He gives details of Martha and Amira's dates of birth and appearance and asks when the boat would be raised. The woman pauses when asked this and then states: "Some day, maybe, the boats will be raised.

It's all they can do now to […] take the living from the sea to safety" (Ryan, 2018, 46). She gently raises the issue of his wife and daughter with him and "with more resolve" advises that: "Martha and Amira are not in this camp, or any other camp. You will not find them. Accept this, Farouk" (Ryan, 2018, 46). He does not reply and asks to be allowed to return to his tent. Narendran submits that this behaviour is normal for those suffering from ambiguous loss with "no evidence" and "no identifiable remains":

> There is guilt too at "abandoning", "giving up hope". People keep alive the memory, the hope, and the fantasy that the person will return and normalcy will be restored. Those with a need to stay strong and maintain a façade of near normalcy later pay a physical, mental and emotional price (Narendran, 2020, 25).

Farouk walks the beach area at the perimeter of the camp and searches for the area where he had supposed his wife and daughter to be the: "special quarantine or quarter for mothers and daughters separate from the husbands and fathers" (Ryan, 2018, 47). When he realises that no such place exists, he considers suicide. He walks to the edge of the water and: "wonders at the stillness of it, as though its breath were held, as though it were too ashamed to reveal anything of itself to him, to admit the violence latent in it" (Ryan, 2018, 48). He blames the sea for taking his wife and daughter and is ready to join them in its vast waters. He walks into the sea and "struck out face-down for the empty horizon", hoping the sea will take him: "to carry him down, and fill him, and slough his flesh and salt his guilty bones" (Ryan, 2018, 48). The blame is now shifted from the sea to himself. However, the sea refuses to take him: "Each time he was immersed he came back up, and he tried and tried to drown, he opened his mouth to fill his lungs with water but he couldn't inhale it: his body pushed the flood back out" (Ryan, 2018, 48). In this instance, a transformation occurs in Farouk's psychological condition, as he starts to acknowledge that the sea is not responsible for the loss of his family. His body's rejection of water inhalation implies that Farouk should also not hold himself accountable for the deaths.

Farouk continues his pretense in the belief that he has accepted the loss of Martha and Amira and tells his story of refuge to delegations from all over Europe. His refugee status is processed, and he finds himself: “aboard a plane, and he was seated by the window looking down at the toe of Italy” (Ryan, 2018, 49). Along with other Syrian refugees, he is on his way to Ireland, to begin a new life. Although time has moved on and it is now obvious that his wife and daughter are not alive, Farouk is stuck with his ambiguous loss and refuses to believe otherwise. The exceptional circumstances surrounding his family's demise intensify Farouk's struggle to come to terms with their loss. With no bodies to view and no funeral to mark their passing, the incompleteness leaves a void which obstructs his grief.

Bryant et al suggest that over 15% of Syrian refugees have been diagnosed with prolonged grief disorder. PGD is defined as: “a persistent yearning for the deceased, and associated emotional pain, difficulty in accepting the death, a sense of meaninglessness, bitterness about the death, and difficulty in engaging in new activities, persisting beyond six months after the death” (Bryant et al, 2021, 31). Ryan re-introduces Farouk toward the end of the novel, where he is settled in a rural Irish town and is working as a locum doctor. He meets Florence and before long they form a friendship and a connection. Through Florence’s narrative, we gain insight as to how Farouk is moving through his grief: “Farouk was talking today, more than he had ever done, and she felt he was about to say something, about his wife and daughter or his faraway home, and about what happened to him (Ryan, 2018, 162). Florence is aware of Farouk’s story but never pressures him to discuss it. She knows that he has “armoured himself against the truth of things” and that he probably has not cried in many years, convincing himself that “nothing ever happened” (Ryan, 2018, 163). Despite ongoing racist commentary from family and friends, Florence continues to welcome Farouk into her life and Ryan creates an impression of hope in their relationship. At this point in the novel, Farouk is beginning his transition from the liminal stage of his grief into the post-liminal. His ambiguous

loss and associated trauma will never be forgotten, but he now has acceptance of his loss and has integrated himself into the Irish community. As suggested by Bryan Fanning, discourse surrounding migration in Ireland has tended to focus on the stories of the Irish who emigrated and of the families and communities they had left behind: "A considerable body of academic scholarship and literature has sought to grapple with these cultural legacies. By comparison, the lives and travails of recent and past immigrants have yet to become part of the mainstream Irish story" (Fanning, 2018, 1). As we transition into the twenty-first century, literature has increasingly depicted a more diverse and representative Ireland, characterised by a multitude of cultures, nationalities, and experiences. Tom Inglis suggests that: "Over the last 50 years, the cultural map of Ireland has changed dramatically. Ireland has become a multinational, cosmopolitan, globalised society" (Inglis, 2016). Ryan's work underscores the inclusion of asylum seekers within Irish society, asserting their rightful place in the canon of Irish literature. Through the portrayal of Farouk's grief, Ryan sheds light on the difficult realities of seeking asylum and the extreme measures people take to secure a safer life.

In his 2020 article 'Journey Through Ambiguous Loss: Reflections and Learnings', Narendran asks, "How does one grieve when the message is 'we don't really know for sure' – no evidence, no identifiable remains" (Narendran, 2020, 26). The author draws from his personal experience of ambiguous loss as his wife, Chandrika Narendran, was one of the 239 missing persons from Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 when it disappeared en-route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing on 8th March 2014 (Narendran, 2017, Chapter 1). Narendran recounts his experience of the uncertainty of grieving the "disappeared" and how it is a form of grief which is stunted by lack of information, false reporting and a persistent hope that his wife would have somehow survived the crash (Narendran, 2017, Chapter 3). Narendran's experience of ambiguous loss is echoed in Kathleen MacMahon's 2020 novel, *Nothing But Blue Sky.*

MacMahon's novel tells the story of David, who has lost his wife, Mary Rose, following an aircraft crash. Julia Kelly suggests that: "The shock of unseen and unanticipated events is at the core of Kathleen MacMahon's third novel" (Kelly, 2020). The narrative is based on David's journey through his ambiguous loss, and how he uses the liminal space of his grief to re-examine his marriage and how he begins to realise that he, in fact, did not know his wife all that well. MacMahon states that: "[David's] wife died in circumstances that would until that moment have seemed to him unimaginable. The assumptions he had made about his life and his marriage – all those notions – had to be re-evaluated" (MacMahon, 2020). David internalises his grief and the first-person narrative allows for a more thorough understanding of how he processes the ambiguity surrounding her death. He is an experienced investigative television reporter and has therefore witnessed many tragedies worldwide and yet the unimaginable has happened to him, personally. As the novel progresses, David begins to realise that his memories of a content and idyllic marriage may be inaccurate. The liminal space in which he resides becomes an opportunity to re-examine his marriage and who Mary Rose was. In a 2020 podcast interview with *The Business Post*, MacMahon states that she wanted to address the fact that "another person is always a mystery" and it is impossible for any of us to know another's "inner life" (MacMahon, 2020, 25.57). She says that:

> after Mary Rose is gone, David comes to understand that a lot of her inner life was not accessible to him and he has to question himself about that and wonder did he not want to know…and that's quite a burden to bear, to think that you'd let someone leave this world without being understood (MacMahon, 2020, 26.00).

The novel opens with David's return to a seaside village called Aiguaclara, in the Catalan area of Spain, where he had holidayed annually with his wife. Having missed the previous year, due to the loss of Mary Rose and an attempt to avoid their favourite destination, he now sees that missed visit as a "breach of faith" or "at the very least, a breach of […] tradition":

> it seemed to me that the pain of being there without her could hardly be greater than the pain of being anywhere else without her. At least in Aiguaclara there might be some memory of our lives together that I had until then forgotten (MacMahon, 2020, 1-2).

Aiguaclara was established as their "pit stop", part of their traditions and rituals that David cannot seem to relinquish. He sees this place as an almost sacred place which he recalls as being the environment where the couple deeply connected for two weeks, every year of their marriage. Upon returning to the "mending" place that he shared with Mary Rose, David is inflicting an "anniversary reaction" on himself (MacMahon, 2020, 1). This term relates to the triggering effect that may happen around the anniversary of a death, or when the mourner re-visits places or experiences that they may have shared with their loved ones. A Mayo Clinic report suggests that due to the unpredictability of grief, anniversary reactions can last for many days, or even longer: "During an anniversary reaction you might experience the intense emotions and reactions that you first experienced when you lost your loved one" (Mayo Clinic, 2020). David's connection with his holiday spot implies his inability to let go of the past and how being stuck in the arena of complicated grief is not only debilitating but can alter one's memories.

He recalls how the previous year he was incapable of making the decision to return to Aiguaclara and had allowed his friends and family to dissuade him: "The world and his wife were of a mind that I should not go back, and I found myself adrift on their certainties, because I myself had none" (MacMahon, 2020, 6). David found himself in the transitional stage of mourning and was unable to grasp the idea of progressing in life without his wife. He could not envision how returning to Aiguaclara may have impacted him in the absence of Mary Rose, or how others believed that journeying elsewhere could be seen as a means to navigate through his grief. Despite his misgivings, he had agree to travel with friends to the south of France, resulting in "a mistake of comical proportions" (MacMahon, 2020, 7). He acknowledges that his friends had "painstakingly" curated the location, guest list and even the bedrooms, not wanting to highlight David's new status as a widower (MacMahon, 2020, 7). As the friends

meet on the veranda of their rented house, the first thing that David notices is the view, "where an endless succession of planes traversed the empty sky" and he thought how this should have been the "perfect moment for one of us to say something, but we didn't" (MacMahon, 2020, 8). The planes were not referenced by the group of friends and would not be mentioned for the remainder of the trip: "The others pretended they hadn't noticed them. It was a pretence they would be forced to maintain for the entire journey" (MacMahon, 2020, 9). David's friend, Deborah, was the organiser of the trip and he sees her private despair at the unplanned view. He notices how tired she looks, and he realises only now how the loss of Mary Rose has also affected their friends: "So monstrously absorbed was I in my own titanic grief that I had not until that moment seen how the wake of it had washed over other people's lives" (MacMahon, 2020, 10). He then recalls how Deborah and her husband, Michael, had been there from the very beginning of his ambiguous loss:

> From that very first day when they appeared, wordlessly, at my door before dawn […] They set up camp in my kitchen, fielding phone calls for me and driving reporters away from my door and, finally, pouring me full of whiskey. In the weeks that followed, they cooked and they cared for me and somehow helped to fill the days that came at me relentlessly and without mercy (MacMahon, 2020, 10-11).

The passage reflects the critical role of community and shared rituals in navigating the intense challenges of ambiguous loss. Their actions, described as "setting up camp in [his] kitchen," and fielding logistical and emotional challenges such as handling reporters and offering comfort through acts of care, serve to temporarily suspend David's isolation in grief (MacMahon, 2020, 10).

Boss suggests that the days, weeks and months following an ambiguous loss are particularly difficult and that *communitas* plays a big part in helping the bereaved through this time of "confusion and distress" (Boss, 1999, 5). Following a tragic event, such as a flight crash

or disappearance, *communitas* is a vital part of functioning through grief. MacMahon shows how Mary Rose's sisters aid David through his loss by helping him with the clear-out of Mary Rose's wardrobe: "They came one day armed with a roll of black refuse bags" (MacMahon, 2020, 200). They each chose items which reminded them of their sister and the rest of the items are removed. David requests that they do not donate the clothes to the local charity shop, for fear that "I might one day bump into a stranger wearing some of Mary Rose's items" (MacMahon, 2020, 200). In this instance, David is recognising the fact that there will be moments where he is triggered in his grief.

The extra layer of uncertainty that accompanies ambiguous loss requires not only the rituals performed as part of a "normal" loss, but also the ones that are unforeseen and require additional assistance for the mourner. Boss explains the difficulty that faces the person facing ambiguous loss, who cannot be sure whether the "missing" are dead or alive, or perhaps injured and waiting to be discovered: "Not only is there a lack of information regarding the person's whereabouts, there is no official or community verification that anything is lost – no death certificate, no wake or sitting shiva, no funeral, no body, nothing to bury. The uncertainty makes ambiguous loss the most distressful of all losses" (Boss, 1999, 6). In *Nothing But Blue Sky*, David is also experiencing a lack of information, clarity and accountability from authorities connected to the crash of the plane on which Mary Rose travelled. Navigating the liminal space after a death is a normal rite of passage but, without a body, the journey becomes disjointed and more difficult to traverse. The remains of the person are not physically present and therefore they are not afforded a funeral and this may cause the status of "missing" to be delayed, adding to an ever-present state of limbo (Narendran, 2020, 26-27).

David visits his father-in-law, Willie, and notices how the death of his daughter has aged the man, far beyond his years. Willie has become obsessed with all details of the crash and has "developed a specialist knowledge of plane-crash investigations", with an office full of maps,

reports and graphs: “so buried was he in the facts. The forensics. The politics of it all” (MacMahon, 2020, 210). The phrase “buried in the facts” could be seen as Willie’s version of a funeral, an acceptance that his daughter is beyond reach. Unlike Willie, Marie Rose’s mother is dealing with the ambiguous loss in a very different way. Willie says that his wife has “turned her face to the wall” (MacMahon, 220, 211). She remains silent and grieves alone. David tells a friend that his mother-in-law is “just waiting to die” (MacMahon, 220, 229). Boss suggests that there is scant support offered to those who are suffering from ambiguous loss as the circumstances are beyond the realm of normal grief (Boss, 1999, 7). Mary Rose’s parents both handle their loss in their own way, each affording the other a respectful distance from their respective pain. When David discusses his ambiguous loss with a friend, he describes the different levels of mourning throughout Mary Rose’s family. He states that he: “at least had the luxury of owning Mary Rose’s death”, whereas her parents and sisters were assigned the lesser mourning roles: “I was at the very hierarchy of mourning” (MacMahon, 2020, 228). The hierarchical distribution of mourning also reveals the inequities in how grief is socially acknowledged. While David grapples with the overwhelming attention tied to his role, Mary Rose’s parents and sisters are relegated to “lesser mourning roles,” their grief overshadowed by societal focus on David’s experience. This dynamic reflects broader cultural practices where the spouse or partner often becomes the symbolic representative of loss, leaving others in the deceased’s life feeling overlooked or displaced in their mourning. MacMahon’s portrayal of David’s experience illustrates the complexities of grief within a communal framework, where the societal need to assign mourning roles can both validate and alienate

Unfortunately for David, he finds this chief mourner role to be extremely uncomfortable: “In the weeks after Mary Rose died, I couldn’t go out the door without being bombarded by the sympathy of strangers. People I hardly knew – people Mary Rose hardly knew – came up to me in the street of the supermarket, to offer their condolences” (MacMahon,

2020, 92). The tragic nature of Mary Rose's death seems to afford David a role similar to one of a "proper celebrity" (MacMahon, 2020, 92). He finds the physical condolences uncomfortable and the emotional ones unnecessary. Bereavement coordinator Jo Hamer believes that many individuals who have experienced loss may feel that others are more "deserving" of their grief or possess a greater "right to grieve" based on the closeness of their relationship with the deceased. She suggests that it is essential to recognise that this perception is unfounded, as emotional responses to loss are inherently personal and valid, regardless of external judgments or societal expectations regarding their appropriateness (Hamer in Marie Curie, 2021). Similarly, Robson and Walter argue that while social norms prioritise the grief of the widow or widower, the loss experienced "by other close family members and other intimates" (Robson and Walter, 2012, 100). David recalls how the sharing of other people's tales of bereavement irritated him: "I felt like roaring with rage at the suggestion that any other person had ever suffered like I was suffering. My grief was totalitarian: It was self-absorbed in the extreme, and monstrously exclusive" (MacMahon, 2020, 93). Boss confirms that a study at the Centre of Prisoner of War Studies in the US Naval Health Research Institute in San Diego supports "the thesis that ambiguous loss is the most difficult loss people face" (Boss, 1999, 14), so David's reaction is not uncommon. Through David's discomfort and the hierarchical mourning structure, the novel critiques the ways in which public rituals of grief can inadvertently amplify the isolation and disorientation already inherent in loss.

The semantics surrounding death also begin to aggravate David: "'Sorry for your trouble' people said to me, a hundred times a day. Or, 'Sorry for your loss'. Some of them just said they were sorry" (MacMahon, 2020, 93). He logically understands that these people are just offering their condolences, but he is "confounded by the language that they used, with its implication that they were in some way responsible for her death" (MacMahon, 2020, 93).

David is fixated on the semantics of the proffered sympathies: “The words people used were often curiously inaccurate, I noticed. I took everything literally” (MacMahon, 2020, 93). He reads an offer of taking the bins out by a neighbour: “You shouldn’t have to worry about things like that. Not while you’re recovering from the death of your wife”, as an insult: “I am not recovering, was what I wanted to say. I am never going to recover” (MacMahon, 2020, 93). He is surprised to find his renewed interest in language, realising that he had not considered “the nuts and bolts of language” since he had attended junior school:

> Certain words took on added significance: words like ‘body’ and ‘wreckage’. The term ‘remains’ was used, with its heart-crushing accuracy. Verbs became thick with meaning, verbs like ‘retrieve’ and ‘repatriate’. Possessive pronouns jumped out at me by attaching themselves to things that should not by rights have been mentioned in the same sentence as Mary Rose. Her DNA, her dental records. Her death certificate (MacMahon, 2020, 94).

Ivan Emke suggests that: “Death is clearly a transition in social and physical terms, but it is also marked by a transition in relation to language” (Emke, 2007, 1). The language surrounding death can be specific and harsh, transitioning from the “person” to the “object” or “non-specific material” (Emke, 2007, 1). Emke states that: “The move from life through to remembrance is marked by different terms for the body. From ‘a person’ or ‘a deceased person’ to the ‘deceased’ to a ‘body’ to ‘remains’ or a ‘case’ (Emke, 2007, 5-6). The change in language can be a difficult transition for the bereaved and often results in emotional reactions. When a funeral mass is eventually organised for Mary Rose, David is quite conscious of the transition in language and even refuses to assign her name to the event: “A funeral without a body […] The funeral mass – I can’t bring myself to say hers” (MacMahon, 2020, 94). It would be seven months before “what was left of Mary Rose” would be returned from the Department of Forensic Medicine in Cairo but David and his in-laws decide to “go ahead and have a funeral” (MacMahon, 2020, 94). Boss suggests that for persons navigating ambiguous loss: “A symbolic closure is better than none at all” (Boss, 2007, 14). Although David is not feeling any closer to accepting his loss, the funeral is necessary for the family and the community.

Boss suggests that the funeral or memorial show how much importance we place on these liminal rites of passage and how it indicates our culture is accepting of the existence of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2007, 18). Canine argues that: "Rituals are an indispensable component in our journey through the grief process…Rituals give us permission to discharge our distress over the loss" (Canine, 1999, 102). The absence of a coffin is a difficult element to Mary Rose's funeral and David notes how the priest has "discreetly placed an easel in the centre aisle instead" (MacMahon, 2020, 94-95). Following the service, David resumes his role as chief mourner and, along with Mary Rose's family: "lined up at the back of the church afterwards to receive the mourners" (MacMahon, 2020, 94-95). He receives condolences for "over an hour and a half, shaking hands and surrendering myself to tearful hugs" (MacMahon, 2020, 95). Mary Rose's mother surprises David with her thoughts on death. She tells him how she has been thinking that everyone must die at some stage: "Maybe it doesn't matter so much how it happens. Maybe none of this matters in the grand scheme of things" (MacMahon, 2020, 97). David finds himself agreeing with this thesis and feels "suddenly – and in truth only very temporarily – exhilarated at the thought that we could choose to shrug our shoulders in the face of death" (MacMahon, 2010, 97). Thomas Attig suggests that we have limited control over the timing and nature of death and that bereavement is a "choiceless event" (Attig, 1996, 32). However, Attig argues that: "grieving, too, is choiceless…grieving is yet another something that happens to us when we are bereaved, a process into which we are thrust against our will, that we must somehow survive" (Attig, 1996, 33).

As time progresses, families of the "missing" silently come to terms with the "never-knowing" but can often be triggered by the bureaucracy that inevitably follows such a loss. David encounters many triggers during his grief, not least his return to Aiguaclara, but it is the unexpected bureaucratic issues that irritate him. Following a long delay from Egyptian officials, he finally receives a death certificate for Mary Rose and is "able to proceed with the

considerable paperwork" required to remove Mary Rose from bank accounts, insurance and other practical documentations (MacMahon, 2020, 200). He rings his bank to close Mary Rose's accounts. Without sympathy, he is told he will be transferred to "the deceased person's department" (MacMahon, 2020, 201). When he rings to cancel his wife's car insurance, he is told that because he is named on Mary Rose's policy, it will no longer be valid without her name on it. David declares that what he is finding hard to understand is: "How my wife can continue to be the policy holder, when she's *dead*. She won't be driving anywhere any time soon" (MacMahon, 2020, 201).

David slowly moves through his liminal space and begins to note a change in himself: "After Mary Rose died, I found I felt different about just about everything" (MacMahon, 2020, 142). He finds his former "shameful ambivalence" has disappeared and been replaced by a "virulent sense of peril" never felt before (MacMahon, 2020, 142). What Mary Rose had tried, for decades, to garner some "passion in me for something outside of myself – was accomplished in one brutal moment by her death" (MacMahon, 2020, 142). He muses on how, when Mary Rose was alive, his "nasty streak was the foil to her decency" and now, since her death, he sees his malicious disposition fading (MacMahon, 2020, 145). His journey through grief is slowly progressing and he is beginning to live his life independently of his late wife: "In losing Mary Rose, I have lost the only person who ever fully grasped the fact that, behind all the misanthropy, behind the antipathy to any form of conviviality, I am actually a nice person" (MacMahon, 2020, 146). MacMahon states that she wanted to portray how in his acceptance of the death of Mary Rose, he became aware of the change within himself: "It's almost as if the world turns on him and he sees everything in a different light" (MacMahon, 2020,13:02). David is transitioning from the liminal phase of his grief to the post-liminal stage, where he has accepted that Mary Rose will not come back and he must adapt to his altered reality. This new stage of his life offers the opportunity to re-evaluate his identity and explore the roots of his

past behaviours, perhaps even allowing for self-reinvention. As the year after the crash progresses, David feels a subtle change in his grief. He notices that his nightly dreams of Mary Rose have become less frequent and less horrific: “The nature of the dreams changed too. Whereas at first I had a sense that she was lost and looking for a way home, after a while she seemed to be pursuing another life” (MacMahon, 2020, 212). He sees Mary Rose as physically altered, with shorter hair and a tan, telling him that she is happy where she now lives. This dream pleases David immensely and helps him to accept his ambiguous loss: “I woke with a feeling of great relief. I had not realized how much I worried about Mary Rose, and how anxious I was about her well-being, as if she was only missing” (MacMahon, 2020, 212). David appears to be accepting his “closure” and the fact that Mary Rose has died. He can now move through to the post-liminal stage of grief, with an acceptance that his wife is indeed gone.

Each of the novels featured in this chapter show how much importance we place on the rituals and traditions associated with death. De Waal’s Mona finds her peace when she discovers where her baby has been buried and can finally say goodbye. The ritual of wrapping the weighted doll represents her funeral and this aids Mona on her road to the post-liminal life, decades after her daughter died. Ryan’s Farouk will never have the remains of his wife and daughter to bury, but his acceptance of their death allows for him to take the risk with moving on with his life. MacMahon’s David holds a memorial service, in place of a funeral, yet still struggles to accept his loss. It is only when he returns to the place where he and his wife were happiest, and examines his marriage within this liminal space, that he finally feels acceptance of his loss. What ties these narratives together is their shared exploration of ambiguous loss. Each character grapples with the devastating uncertainty of "not knowing," highlighting how the absence of closure can obstruct the grieving process. Death, as these novels reveal, is not always expected or comprehensible, nor is the grieving process linear. Saying goodbye is not always possible, and the lack of rituals or traditions, such as funerals or wakes, can leave

individuals suspended in their grief, unable to progress. In these stories, ambiguous loss emerges as a force that disrupts the natural rhythms of mourning, underscoring the pivotal role of rituals in helping the bereaved find resolution and meaning..

The following chapter transitions from examining adult experiences of ambiguous loss to investigating the often-overlooked role of children in the grieving process. Contemporary Irish literature provides an illuminating lens through which to study this dynamic, portraying how the rituals and traditions surrounding death are frequently enacted without the inclusion or input of children. This exclusion not only shapes how children engage with grief but also reflects broader cultural assumptions about their emotional capacity and resilience. The chapter delves into how children's experiences of grief differ from those of adults, exploring how their perspectives are influenced by their developmental stage, cultural context, and personal connection to the deceased (Dyregrov, 2008, 15). Children often approach grief in ways that can seem inconsistent or unexpected to adults, oscillating between deep sorrow and moments of playfulness or distraction. These behaviours reflect their evolving understanding of death and their attempts to process loss in ways that are meaningful to them. By examining the role of children in funeral rituals as depicted in contemporary Irish literature, this chapter seeks to emphasise the importance of involving young mourners in these communal traditions, thereby fostering a sense of inclusion and allowing them to navigate the complexities of grief alongside their families (Søfting *et al,* 2016, 141).

Moreover, the analysis will highlight how children's grieving processes are often subtle and distinct, shedding light on the ways in which these experiences enrich our understanding of loss and mourning. Whether through their symbolic presence at wakes or their exclusion from certain rituals, children's interactions with death challenge traditional narratives of grief. By transitioning from the ambiguous losses explored in this chapter to the representation of children and their grieving in Irish literature, the study broadens its scope, exploring how rituals

surrounding death serve as a bridge between individual and communal mourning, and between generations. In doing so, it underscores the universality of grief while honouring the unique ways in which different individuals, at different stages of life, engage with this profound human experience.

Chapter 5:
Did You Hear Mammy Died?: The Irish Funeral and Wake Through the Child's Eye

Grief and mourning are a universal part of life, yet there are often subtle differences when processing grief. Albert Aynsley-Green suggests that bereaved children and young adults are "hidden mourners" (Aynsley-Green, 2017, 5). He explains that when children experience the loss of a parent, sibling or someone close to them, they are experiencing feelings of desolation, abandonment and solitude. A child's grief is compounded by their lack of understanding and awareness surrounding death. Although death and the process of dying are intrinsic aspects of life, we tend to avoid discussing this with children, due to our discomfort. This reluctance to broach the topic is a relatively new occurrence, unlike in earlier centuries when death was not considered a taboo subject (Aynsley-Green, 2017, 6). Kate Jackson suggests that until the mid to late-twentieth century, the deep grief experienced by children after the loss of significant individuals in their lives was not widely recognised or acknowledged (Jackson, 2015, 20). Research from Anna Freud developed and enhanced child psychoanalysis to create a unique form of therapeutic practice and studied the effects of grief and mourning on children (Young-Bruehl, 1988, 289-290).

Freud drew a parallel between the way children cope with losing cherished belongings and the process of mourning a loved one. She noted that when we lose something valuable, we often initially experience a sense of loss and deprivation. Subsequently, we may experience guilt, as if we deliberately let go of the possession rather than it being an unintentional loss. This insight could also be relevant to the notion of survivor guilt (Freud, A, 1967, 313). In "About Losing and Being Lost" (1967), she explains that during the advanced stages of mourning, individuals may have a series of "typical dreams" and she notes that the hidden content of these dreams often involves a conflict between the desire to preserve and the urge to

let go, where the mourner struggles with "desires to maintain allegiance to the deceased or to forge new connections with the living" (Freud A, 1967, 314). These foundational ideas about grief and its psychological nuances provided a critical framework for subsequent models, such as Kübler-Ross's stages of grief, which further explored structured patterns of denial, acceptance and adaptation. Later research expanded these theories to encompass the reluctance of the bereaved to let go of the past and continue their lives without the presence of the deceased.

Following Anna Freud's publications, researchers began to recognise that children did indeed suffer sorrow, pain and loss following a death of a loved one. Despite this shift in the acceptance of childhood grief: "myths and misunderstandings persist, obscuring the needs of children in the wake of a significant loss" (Jackson, 2015, 20). According to Roger Grainger: "The funeral reveals death as more important and powerful than any kind of social structure" which allows for an acceptance of the inevitability of death and "our search for new life" (Grainger, 1998, 129). Fintan O'Toole suggests that: "Death is terrifyingly ordinary. It happens to everyone, everywhere, sometimes" yet we have hidden death behind a veil of denial and now "the deceased have become obscene" and are entrusted to a professional "death industry" including hospitals, hospice care and funeral directors. (O'Toole, 2014, 20). All this is in stark contrast to the traditional Irish way with death.

Aspects of the "Good Wake" remain today but these are now seen as a nod to the traditions and rituals of the past, rather than a retaliation against the limitations of the Church. Traditionally, children had always participated in the rituals and traditions surrounding wakes and funerals in Ireland, yet their involvement has been gradually reduced over recent decades. Research from Doka (2000), Dyregrov (2008), Barry (2020), Rolfe Silverman (2000), Shapiro (2000) and more, suggests that children would like to be included in discussions about the impending death of a loved one and would appreciate more involvement in the preparations of the funeral and wake. In "The Child's View of Death" (1965), Maria H. Nagy suggests that: "it

is really not possible to conceal death from the child nor should concealment be permitted" (Nagy, 1965, 98). Depending on a child's age, their understanding of death varies and yet research suggests that from their earliest years, children are aware of what death is and what it can look like (Wass, 1995, 269). Hannelore Wass suggests that: "In previous eras, death occurred most often in the home and children helped with the care of the dying family member, were present at the moment of death, and participated in the funeral" (Wass, 1995, 269). The degree to which children engage in culturally specific mourning practices, such as attending funerals, memorial services, or visiting graves, influences their grief outcomes. In Western cultures, there is often a tendency to shield young children from these rituals, with some families even considering them detrimental (Hooyman, Kraymer and Sanders, 2021, 100-101).

Contemporary Irish literature provides an insight into the way children process grief and how their mourning can often be treated differently to that of adults. This chapter will investigate the utilisation of liminal spaces occupied by children in the aftermath of loss in contemporary Irish literature, drawing upon various examples. Specifically, it will scrutinise the extent of their involvement in the rituals and customs associated with death and funerals. A funeral, for a child or young person, is a different experience to that for an adult. Adults understand death and the process of dying, as well as the various expectations and behaviours that are associated with the experience of losing someone. Irish writers can use the child's perspective to produce a more innocent view on death, but one that is no less impactful than that of a more mature protagonist. From the seven-year-old Tess in Mary Costello's *Academy Street* (2015) and the similarly aged child in Claire Keegan's *Foster* (2010), to the young adult students in Kevin Power's *Bad Day in Blackrock* (2008), the age bracket of the mourners is shown to have little bearing on the impact of grief. Using examples of grief during the Irish Famine in Orla McAlinden's *The Flight of the Wren* (2018) and the present-day loss of a

conjoined twin in Sarah Crossan's *One* (2015), we can see how grief is an unavoidable part of life for children and one which time and era cannot alter.

The loss of siblings is well represented in contemporary Irish fiction with varying age brackets addressed. An adolescent boy mourns the death of his younger sibling in Fiona Scarlett's *Boys Don't Cry* (2021), a nine-year old boy experiences the ambiguous loss of a mother and brother in Kit de Waal's *My Name is Leon* (2016), while in Doreen Finn's *My Buried Life* (2015) the death of a brother by suicide has long-term effects on his sibling. A child's first experience of a wake is examined, showing how the rituals they encounter have a similar effect to the one they have on adults. Notably, novels that revolve around children often shift their focus away from the deceased individual and the factual aspects of their death. Instead, they emphasise the liminal atmosphere and the community's active participation. Seamus O'Reilly's 2021 memoir, *Did Ye Hear Mammy Died?* takes a humorous look at how the author reacted to his mother's wake, when he was only five years old; while in Alan McMonagle's *Ithica* (2017), eleven-year-old Jason is not fazed by his encounter with a corpse and is more concerned about how his mother is behaving at a funeral.

Irish literature thus fearlessly confronts themes of death, mortality and funerary practices in relation to children, highlighting the enduring significance attributed to the customs and ceremonies associated with Irish funerals. It underscores the crucial involvement of children in these rituals, emphasising that by excluding them from such sombre occasions, we may inadvertently hinder their passage through their personal liminal journey through grief. This is the point at which an author can seize the opportunity to introduce supplementary storylines, expand the narrative by incorporating new characters, and enhance the descriptive elements of the environment, thereby enriching the overall depth of the literary work.

Dr Atle Dyregrov suggests that children's understanding of grief is in direct relation to their age and their "cognitive maturing through childhood" (Dyregrov, 2008, 15). Children under the age of five do not understand the finality of death and often believe the deceased will return. However, Dyregrov believes that despite a smaller child not fully grasping the concept of death, there is evidence to suggest that they have strong reactions to the loss of a loved one (Dyregrov, 2008, 16). Between the ages of five and ten years of age, children begin to understand that death is an irreversible occurrence but often become curious about the process of death and decomposition of the remains (Dyregrov, 2008, 19). There is also a common fascination with the afterlife and the ghostly presence of the deceased: "Magical components are still part of their thinking; they may assume that the dead person can see or hear the living, and they may work hard to please the deceased as a consequence of this" (Dyregrov, 2008, 19). At this development stage, children may also openly discuss their desire to communicate with a deceased parent, express a wish to die in order to be with the parent, or describe their idea of an afterlife (Hooyman, Kraymer and Sanders, 2021, 99).

Fiona Marshall cites research into how damaging the long-term effects of losing a parent can be: "especially if it happened when the child was under ten" (Marshall, F, 2011, 58). From ten through to adolescence, children have the cognitive ability to understand the consequences of death and can have very strong reactions to the loss. Dyregrov suggests that they are "more capable of reflecting on deeper themes and more existential aspects of death" (Dyregrov, 2008, 20). Dr Harry Barry believes that the loss of a parent during childhood can results in nuanced distinctions, in comparison to the grieving processes observed in adults, particularly in younger children (Barry, 2020, 237). He states that: "It is important for all, especially children, to see the body, as it allows us to conceptualise better the reality that the person is truly gone" (Barry, 2020, 185). A clinical study from Gunn Helen Søfting, Atle Dyregrov and Kari Dyregrov suggests that by engaging in ritual enactments, children are afforded the chance to personally

witness and experience the grieving process, which serves a dual purpose: facilitating a deeper understanding and acceptance of the actuality of the loss and providing a means to bid farewell to their departed loved ones (Søfting *et al,* 2016, 141). The results of the study indicate that all the interviewed children expressed contentment with their participation in the rituals, including those who initially had reservations about attending the wake. Moreover, drawing from their own experiences, every child recommended that children partake in rituals when coping with the loss of a loved one. They conveyed that being denied the opportunity to attend the rituals would have left them feeling saddened and distressed (Søfting *et al,* 2016, 150). The themes of understanding and acceptance are frequently used in contemporary Irish fiction, particularly in the context of children grappling with their limited understanding and acknowledgment of the fate of their deceased loved ones' bodies or the chance to bid their final farewells. In allowing the child to participate in rituals surrounding death, it can help alleviate an expectation of the return of the deceased. The child's grieving process is significantly influenced by crucial factors, such as their grasp of death's irreversibility and the guidance they receive throughout their mourning journey (Tracewski and Scarlett, 2022, 8-9).

Research suggests that to prevent a child from participating in the rituals and traditions associated with death can have negative long-term effects. Jackson states that it may be unwise for a child to be prevented from attending a funeral because they are too young. She proposes that children should be extended comparable support and empathy to that provided to grieving adults. (Jackson, 2015, 21). Phyllis Rolfe Silverman agrees that children should be involved in the funeral arrangements: “Involving the children in this ritual may be the most reassuring thing that a parent can do for them. It brings them into the family circle and identifies them as mourners” (Rolfe Silverman, 2000, 86). While some adults shield their children from the concept of death, doing so may impede their capacity to acknowledge death as an inherent aspect of life. Parents must attend to their own mourning to respond effectively to their

children's grief. Unfortunately, some parents are so immersed in their own pain and emotional exhaustion that they are unable, at least in the beginning, they are unable to provide the supportive environment and open communication their children need to find comfort. (Hooyman, Kraymer and Sanders, 2021, 99). Shapiro suggests that when children are given the opportunity to understand the realities of death as part of their ordinary lives, they are better equipped to deal with their own personal grief, when the time comes. She believes that there is a "much-needed cultural shift" in the dialogue surrounding death, dying and bereavement (Shapiro in Rolfe Silverman, 2000, xiv).

The children and young adults featured in this chapter come from various age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, and time periods, creating a rich landscape for understanding how grief and death rituals are experienced differently across contexts. This diversity allows us to better grasp how age, social status, and historical context shape both the grieving process and its portrayal in contemporary Irish literature. By considering these factors, we can explore how each character's engagement with grief is shaped by their unique circumstances and the cultural frameworks they inhabit.

Age plays a critical role in how children and young adults process grief. Younger children, such as Seamus in *Did Ye Hear Mammy Died?*, often grasp death more abstractly, with their grief rooted in emotional reactions rather than understanding its permanence. In contrast, older children and adolescents, like Jason in *Ithica* or Grace in *One*, have a more sophisticated understanding of death's finality, making their grief more complex and introspective. This developmental shift affects how these characters interact with death rituals, with younger children focusing on the physical presence of the deceased, while older children and adolescents engage more deeply with the meaning of loss and its personal implications.

Socio-economic background also influences how grief is understood and experienced. In *The Flight of the Wren*, set during the Irish Famine, children face grief against the backdrop of widespread poverty and death. Their mourning is shaped by the harsh realities of the time, where funerary practices are influenced more by survival than by tradition. In contrast, children in more contemporary works, such as *Foster*, experience grief through different social and economic lenses, with wealthier children exposed to more formal mourning rituals, while those from poorer backgrounds might face a more minimalist approach. These socio-economic differences impact the emotional support available to children, with wealthier families often having access to professional help, while children from poorer backgrounds may experience grief more in isolation.

The time period in which a child lives also deeply affects how they experience grief. Children during the Irish Famine, for example, encountered death as a daily reality, where mourning practices were practical and shaped by collective suffering. In more modern settings, such as in *Academy Street* or *Did Ye Hear Mammy Died?*, grief is framed by evolving social norms, where death rituals are more individualised, and children may have access to modern coping mechanisms like therapy or social media. This temporal shift underscores how children's understanding of death and grief is shaped not only by personal and familial factors but by the broader cultural and historical forces of their time.

Ultimately, the intersection of age, socio-economic background and historical context forms a complex framework for understanding grief in Irish literature. Each of these elements offers unique insights into how children's responses to loss are shaped, highlighting the importance of considering the broader contexts in which grief occurs. This chapter deepens our understanding of the complex interplay between grief, cultural rituals, and narrative form, offering a valuable contribution to Irish literary studies and the evolving discourse on childhood bereavement.

Contemporary Irish literature explores the cultural transformation regarding death and the involvement of children in funeral rituals, albeit with different levels of participation. The child's eye view of the wake and funeral is a trope which appears in many genres: poetry, short stories, non-fiction, memoir, fiction and theatre. Irish literature featuring a wake or funeral will inevitably note the presence of the corpse at the gathering. Children attending funerals in Ireland seem less distressed by viewing the deceased, possibly influenced by the historical significance of waking the dead and showing great respect upon passing. While children in some cultural contexts might be shielded from the deceased, Irish narratives suggest a more open approach, possibly influenced by the historical tradition of waking the dead and the associated deep respect for those who have passed. For example, Seamus Heaney's 1966 poem "Mid-Term Break" vividly captures a young boy's sombre yet composed reaction to seeing his brother's body: "Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple/ He lay in the four-foot box as in his cot/ No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear/ A four-foot box, a foot for every year" (Heaney, 1990, 7). Similarly, Sarah Crossan's 2013 verse novel, *One*, explores the profound grief of a conjoined twin who loses her sibling after separation surgery: "I howl and I scream/I ache for my sister/I ache for my sister in my blood and bones/in my limbs and my veins/ I ache for myself/'I love you,' I tell her/and I ache (Crossan, 2013, 410). In both examples, the children's responses to death, though emotionally charged, are portrayed as moments of transformation, where grief becomes a palpable, physical experience.

The quieter, more contemplative reactions of younger children are equally compelling in works like Claire Keegan's *Foster* (2010) and Mary Costello's *Academy Street* (2014). In *Foster*, the unnamed child narrator encounters death for the first time and observes the scene with detachment rather than fear: "and in the middle of it all, a big wooden box with an old dead man lying inside of it. His hands are joined as though he had died praying, a string of rosary beads around his fingers" (Keegan, 2010, 52). The simplicity of her observation reflects

her lack of experience with death, but also her innate ability to adapt to the solemnity of the occasion. In Costello's *Academy Street*, Tess similarly encounters death for the first time when she sees the body of a child laid out on a table: "Tess sees a wooden table and on it a child is lying, dressed in white…her eyes closed, her face snow-white, her hands crossed on her chest. She is dead (Costello, 2014, 19, 27). The children in these examples are less distressed than those who may have been prevented from viewing the deceased persons, or attending the burials, and rely on a fictitious imagining of the remains.

Very young children are often overlooked as being one of the "mourners" at a wake. An open coffin is typically placed on a table, which may prevent a small child from seeing more than the smallest glimpse of the remains. Jackson suggests that "kids are masters at being able to distract themselves and focus on other things" (Jackson, 2015, 22), a claim that aligns with Seamus O'Reilly's memoir *Did Ye Hear Mammy Died?* (2021). O'Reilly recalls his mother's wake, but his memories of the open coffin centre more on the reactions of mourners than on his personal viewing of the body: "sniffled consensus prevailed that my mother looked 'just like herself'…people arrived…ashen-faced, clasping hands and embracing those of us there gathered, only to see the body and suffer an emotional collapse" (O'Reilly, 2021, 12-13). Rather than inducing trauma or sadness, O'Reilly recalls the day fondly, reflecting a childhood resilience shaped by the atmosphere of the wake itself. Rolfe Silverman argues that understanding how children cope with death requires observing the behaviour and attitudes of the adults who surround them, including both immediate family and the broader community (Rolfe Silverman, 2000, 9). A child will absorb and often mirror the emotional tone set by adults during the mourning process. The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network supports this perspective, suggesting that allowing a child to see and spend time with the body of the deceased can be beneficial: "Rather than being upsetting for them…it can actually help a child to understand what has happened" (Irish Childhood Bereavement Network, 2023). This

communal and open engagement with death, particularly in the Irish context, demonstrates how the rituals of mourning can foster understanding and resilience in children.

While this section introduces examples from key texts, these instances are explored in greater detail later in the chapter, where the emotional, psychological, and cultural significance of these moments is further unpacked. For instance, *Foster* offers an extended meditation on how the absence of parental figures in a child's life impacts their understanding of mortality, while *Academy Street* delves into how early encounters with death shape Tess's lifelong relationship with loss. Similarly, O'Reilly's memoir provides a touchstone for examining how children's grief manifests in ways that challenge adult expectations, revealing the intricate and sometimes conflicting ways in which young mourners process their emotions. This chapter, therefore, seeks to establish a foundation for understanding the representation of children in Irish funerary rituals and literature, moving beyond mere description to interrogate how these moments reflect broader cultural assumptions and emotional truths. As the chapter progresses, these examples will be analysed in depth, illustrating how children's perspectives on death expand our understanding of grief and mourning traditions in Irish literature.

In Costello's *Academy Street* (2014), set in 1945, the depiction of Tess's grief following her mother's death illustrates the detrimental effects of excluding children from mourning rituals. The narrative begins with Tess's confusion about the sudden changes in her household. Her first inkling of something being wrong is conveyed through the line: "For two days people have been coming and going and now there is something near. She wishes everyone would go home and let the house be quiet again" (Costello, 2014, 1). This observation highlights her sense of unease and her desire for normalcy, yet the adults around her fail to acknowledge her

need for information or emotional support. Tess's innocence is underscored as she cannot read the signs of her mother's impending death. When Tess visits her mother shortly before her death, the scene is described in tender but understated terms:

> They took Tess up to her mother's room last week and her mother was sitting up in her white nightdress. They lifted her onto the high bed and her mother kissed her forehead. But then, when Tess started to stroke her mother's hair and lie against her, Evelyn said, Come on, down with you now, madam, and she took her away (Costello, 2014, 11).

This interaction, though brief, becomes Tess's final moment with her mother. The abruptness of her removal from the room by Evelyn is indicative of how adults in the novel shield Tess from the reality of death, believing that such protection spares her from grief. However, this well-meaning intervention ultimately deprives Tess of the opportunity to engage meaningfully with her mother during her final moments, exacerbating her sense of confusion and disconnection.

Tess is offered no details of her mother's impending death and is not included in any preparation for her funeral. Her two older sisters return from boarding school and Tess believes "something is going to happen" (Costello, 2014, 4). Tess finds herself in an unfamiliar liminal state that she does not comprehend. She witnesses the house filling up with people: "There are people standing around the hall, waiting. The front door is open and there are more people…She looks around at the faces of her aunts and cousins, her neighbours. Her teacher Mrs Snee is smiling at her…Suddenly she is frightened" (Costello, 2014, 4). Tess's realisation is fragmented and indirect, illustrating how children often rely on intuition and fragmented clues to make sense of events from which they are excluded (Worden, 2002, 12-13). This approach reflects the cultural tendency to underestimate children's capacity to process loss during the earlier part of the twenty-first century.

A pivotal moment in Tess's experience occurs when she witnesses the removal of her mother's body from the house. The narrative captures the weight of her realisation: "At the

exact moment she sees the coffin, she understands" (Costello, 2014, 6). The coffin, a stark and tangible symbol of death, forces Tess to confront the reality of her mother's passing. This moment is made all the more poignant by the fact that Tess had not been prepared for this event or allowed to participate in the wake. Her exclusion from these rituals leaves her to process this realisation in isolation, intensifying her emotional turmoil. It is hard to envision this approach to childhood bereavement in contemporary times, but young children were often deemed too fragile to deal with the harsh realities of death (Worden, 2002, 10). Had Tess been offered a chance to say goodbye to her mother and take part in the funeral preparations and burial, research suggests that her grief may have been processed in a more organic way. Instead, she is stuck in this unknown liminal space and has no concept of how to break through it. She watches as the coffin is loaded into the rear of the hearse "like into a mouth", and observes the mourners follow the hearse in a procession, down the driveway. She notes that: "Everyone is crying, but she is not" (Costello, 2014, 7). This is not an unusual response from a young child, following a bereavement. Susan Thomas suggests that children often may not show outwards signs of grief but can be "grieving tremendously on the inside" (Thomas in Jackson, 2015, 22). She compares a child's grief to that of an adult; both with states of numbness and shock: "It seems as if a shutter comes down on our brain, protecting us from the intensity of the grief experience, and as they weeks and months go on, that shutter slowly goes back up. However, with children, that shutter seems to stay down a bit longer" (Thomas in Jackson, 2015, 22). According to Kübler-Ross, the denial stage of grief: "helps us to cope and make survival possible. Denial helps us to pace our feelings of grief. It is nature's way of only letting in as much as we can handle" (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, 10). Tess's denial is a natural response to her grief. She is protecting herself from the realities of her loss.

The emotional impact of this exclusion is evident in Tess's reaction as she watches the hearse leave the house: "It slows and turns left onto Chapel Road, and the people follow, like

dark shapes. Then they begin to disappear. She stands still, watching until the last shape fades and she is alone. She is gone. Her mother is gone" (Costello, 2014, 9). The imagery of the "dark shapes" and the finality of the hearse's departure condenses Tess's growing awareness of her mother's absence. Her isolation in this moment underscores the emotional weight of her exclusion, as she is left to grapple with her loss without the communal support that the wake and funeral might have provided. Rolfe Silverman notes that while it is the norm that parents die before their children, it is not expected that they will die while their children are young and still living at home (Rolfe Silverman, 2000, 77). Tess is now part of a single-parent family, with her father dealing with his own grief, in his own way. He refuses to talk about the loss of his wife and Tess is left pondering the idea of God, heaven and the afterlife: "She wonders if her mother is on her way now, this minute, moving through the dark sky, in and out among the cold stars. She grows a little afraid" (Costello, 2014, 12). Costello is acknowledging Tess's religious upbringing, and her belief in heaven. Tess's perception of her mother's death and absence is intertwined with religious symbolism, which Costello uses to explore how Tess tries to make sense of the loss. Tess envisions her mother's journey as being upward, and somewhere that they will meet again. Her thoughts suggest an intuitive understanding of death and the afterlife, despite her age and limited experience with death. The belief in heaven and an eventual reunion with her mother is a coping mechanism for Tess; a child's longing to reunite with their deceased loved ones (Alvis et al., 2023, 450). This longing for reconnection is a form of emotional processing and protection against the harsh reality of permanent separation.

Tess's instability increases on the day of the funeral. She is upset to hear that she is considered too young to go to the funeral and burial. When the mourners have left for the church, Tess notices an immediate shift in the atmosphere: "When they are gone the house is quiet…Everything is changing. No one puts the wireless on any more…Upstairs the floorboards are creaking. She starts to grow afraid" (Costello, 2014, 13). The empty quiet of the house and

the absence of daily routines symbolise the disruption and instability Tess feels as her world shifts with her mother's death. The creaking floorboards, often a background noise in a lively household, take on a menacing quality, highlighting the sense of fear and dislocation that Tess experiences as she navigates the unfamiliar territory of grief and loss. This shift is not just emotional but also physical, suggesting that the space Tess occupies is no longer a place of comfort and familiarity but a space of unease and fear.

To add to Tess's distress, she has learned that her baby brother will not be returning to live with the family. He has been given to their Aunt Maud and she will have to say her final goodbyes the following day. This is a dramatic change in Tess's life and one that contributes to her grief. She has lost not only her mother, but also her sibling. When her brother is taken away, Tess watches helplessly: "The next evening Aunt Maud comes and brings Oliver away. They have packed all his things. Tess watches as their uncle Frank's car drives away" (Costello, 2014, 20). Costello brings attention to the inner turmoil Tess faces as her family structure changes. This moment highlights how grief can be multifaceted for children, encompassing not only the loss of a loved one but also the destabilisation of their family structure.

Through dialogue and external interactions, Costello highlights Tess's alienation from the adult world of mourning. When her classmates crowd around her with questions: "Did ye touch her - was she as cold as marble? Where's she buried?" (Costello, 2014, 21). Tess's discomfort shows the emotional cost of her exclusion from the wake and funeral. These questions highlight her lack of firsthand knowledge about her mother's death, making her grief more difficult to articulate and share. Rolfe Silverman notes that bereaved children often avoid discussing their loss, as the reminders of their parents' absence can be too painful (Rolfe Silverman, 2000, 95-96). Tess's reluctance to engage with her peers reflects this protective instinct, as well as the isolating effects of her exclusion from mourning rituals. Through Tess's story, Costello critiques the cultural practices that prioritise shielding children from death over involving them in rituals

that might facilitate healing. By denying Tess the opportunity to participate in her mother's wake and funeral, her family inadvertently isolates her in her grief, leaving her to navigate her loss alone.

In Claire Keegan's 2010 novel *Foster*, a young girl is temporarily placed under the care of the Kinsella family for the summer, and it is during this time that she encounters her first wake. The girl's guardian acknowledges that this might be an unsettling experience for her: "I don't know that this'll be any place for you but I can't leave you here" (Keegan, 2010, 49). The child's experience of the wake, however, is marked more by her attention to the food and drink than by the sombre rituals of mourning. After changing into her "new dress, the ankle socks and shoes" she is brought to the wake house, where the food is a prominent feature (Keegan, 2010, 49). She observes the bustling kitchen with "big bottles of red and white lemonade, stout," and notices the mourners who "shaking hands, drinking and eating and looking at the dead man" (Keegan, 2010, 52-53). This scene illustrates how the child's focus at the wake is not on the ritual of death, but rather on the sensory details (food and drink) that mark the event for her. It is only later that she reflects on the "old dead man" in the wooden box, but her attention is primarily captured by the feast that surrounds her (Keegan, 2010, 52).

Similarly, in In Costello's *Academy Street*, the food laid out for the mourners at Tess's mother's wake serves as a key sensory and symbolic element, grounding Tess's experience in the tangible realities of loss. Descriptions such as "good china and cutlery," "a leg of mutton," and "warm brown bread" offer a sensory overload, highlighting the richness and communal aspect of the occasion (Costello, 2014, 13-14). The choice of food (a mix of traditional, hearty dishes) evokes the ritualistic nature of Irish mourning practices, where food plays a central role in bringing the community together (Hourihane, 2021, 198). However, it also marks Tess's transition from the

innocence of childhood into the adult world of grief. Food, often a source of comfort and sustenance, here becomes a marker of change, tying Tess's experience of loss to the physical world around her.

The repetition of these foods, "mutton sandwiches and shop cake", later in the story, further reinforces the enduring presence of grief (Costello, 2014, 20). Tess and her sister, when sent back to school with leftovers from the funeral, are given more than just lunch; they are offered a reminder of the death that has altered their lives. The "leftover" nature of the food suggests that Tess's mourning is far from complete; instead, she remains in the liminal space of grief, where she is still surrounded by the material remnants of the funeral rituals. The food, once part of a communal event, now serves to sustain Tess in her ongoing process of grieving, tying her still to the rituals of mourning even as she returns to the everyday world of school. This continued association of food with mourning reflects the persistence of the liminal space that Tess inhabits. Her engagement with food, both at the wake and in the days that follow, accentuates her emotional and psychological displacement. She is suspended between the world of childhood and the adult world of loss, with the food at the wake and the leftovers from the funeral offering a concrete link to the ongoing process of mourning. In this way, Costello uses the imagery of food not only to depict the communal and cultural aspects of Irish mourning but also to illustrate the emotional weight carried by Tess as she navigates the disorienting, in-between space of grief.

In contrast, in *Did Ye Hear Mammy Died?* (2021), O'Reilly recalls his experience of his mother's death and the wake that followed. As an adult, he has scant memories of the death itself, but he vividly remembers the sensory details surrounding the event. O'Reilly opens his memoir with a nod to the tradition of dressing well for a funeral: "One thing they don't tell you about Mammys is that when they die you get new trousers" (O'Reilly, 2021, 1). He remembers "fiddling with unfamiliar cords" which had been purchased especially for the occasion

(O'Reilly, 2021, 1). As he listens to a family friend tell him that God had specially chosen his mother to be a part of his garden in heaven, O'Reilly is more concerned about his "new corduroy slacks…clean and inordinately delightful to fiddle with" (O'Reilly, 2021, 2). As the house gradually fills with visitors, the young narrator becomes "mesmerised by the strange acoustic novelties now occurring in rooms removed of their furniture: the echoing clang of chairs and tables dragged about the place" (O'Reilly, 2021, 8). The familiar domestic space is transformed into a liminal environment, where the once-ordinary sounds of the household are distorted and unfamiliar, reflecting the disorienting nature of grief. In this altered setting, the usual markers of stability and comfort are stripped away, leaving the child to navigate a space that is both physically and emotionally unsettled. The absence of furniture, coupled with the unsettling acoustics, emphasises the sense of dislocation and instability that accompanies the experience of loss. Turner's theory of liminality, which describes a state of being "betwixt and between" stages of a ritual process, helps illuminate this disruption (Turner, 1969, 95). During such a liminal period, normal social structures and roles are suspended, creating a temporary space distinct from everyday life. Turner's theory helps explain why O'Reilly's focus is on the acoustic changes, the disarray of furniture, and the unfamiliar activities that fill the house during this period. The *normal* life of the house, as well as its material and social structures, have been temporarily suspended, placing the house and its inhabitants in a liminal state.

The young boy is also stimulated by the food which has been produced for the wake. O'Reilly recalls the array of foodstuffs that would not be seen outside of this liminal space:

> There were casseroles and tureens of soup and pyramids of vol-au-vents…sandwiches were liberally distributed. Egg and onion, of course, but also ham, and not merely the thin, wet slices you got for school lunches, but the thick, rough-cut chunks that still had the fat on…all manner of glazed meats and boiled vegetables...fruitcake. Brown, thick and studded with dried fruits (O'Reilly, 2021, 9-10).

The detailed and evocative descriptions of food convey both the abundance and the strangeness of the wake's offerings, emphasising the liminal nature of the wake. Phrases such as "pyramids of vol-au-vents" and "thick, rough-cut chunks" present the food as almost excessive, a sensory overload that contrasts with the gravity of the situation. Along with the "sheer mass of food on display", the boy notices the cigarettes that are passed around on a silver-plated tray which was normally reserved for "bringing meat joints to neighbours" (O'Reilly, 2021, 10). Reflecting on children's attendance at funerals and wakes, Paul J. Shaefer believes that "children accept death with equanimity" and he suggests that the physical presence of a deceased person becomes a peripheral aspect within the broader context of the mourning rituals and events (Shaefer, 2013, 20). For a young child, the change in their daily rituals is more memorable than the sudden departure of the one they have lost. As suggested by Dyregrov, small children do not comprehend the finality of death and this can explain why they are often distracted by food, optics and acoustics (Dyregrov, 2008, 16-17).

In these narratives, the importance of food and attire at wakes and funerals underscores the ritualistic aspects of mourning that children experience. While adults engage in the solemnity of the occasion, children often gravitate toward the more tangible, sensory aspects of the event, such as the food. As Marco Schmidt and Michael Tomasello suggest, children's understanding of grief is shaped by their developing awareness of "conventional norms" and the desire to conform to societal expectations (Schmidt and Tomasello, 2012, 232). As a child reaches an age of awareness, they begin to accept the concept of conventional norms and therefore agree that it would be "reprehensible" to not dress appropriately for a funeral or wake (Schmidt and Tomasello, 2012, 233). This idea resonates across Irish literature, where children navigate the rituals of mourning through sensory and tangible experiences, particularly food and clothing.

This cultural aspect is vividly illustrated in many of the works cited in this chapter, where authors employ literary techniques to foreground the sensory and ritualistic elements of mourning. In McMonagle's *Ithica*, Jason's clothing reflects the tension between casual youth and formal expectations: "Take off that hoodie and put on some clothes, Ma was yelling at me when we were heading out the door" (McMonagle, 2017, 45). The direct dialogue captures both the mother's urgency to conform to societal norms and Jason's reluctance, symbolising the friction between youth and tradition. Similarly, in Costello's *Academy Street*, imagery is used to emphasise Tess's transformation into a figure of poise and propriety: "Her hair is tied back neatly. She stands straight, smiling politely when she is praised" (Costello, 2015, 14). Here, Tess's physical appearance becomes a symbol of her adjustment to the adult world of grief. In Power's *Bad Day in Blackrock*, the narrator's description of Conor's classmates "Directly behind the extended family were Conor's Brookfield Leaving Cert class, wearing dark suits and red-and-white scarves, respectfully tied" uses visual imagery to reflect the communal respect and conformity demanded by funeral rituals (Power, 2008, 97)

This attention to attire at wakes and funerals is not confined to fictional narratives. In her book *Sorry for Your Trouble: The Irish Way of Death* (2021), Ann Marie Hourihane recounts the meticulous planning involved in preparing funeral attire. Reflecting on her father's funeral in 2020, Hourihane describes how she and her mother carefully selected their clothing. Her mother's sandals required mending, and "good tights" were requested to complete the look (Hourihane, 2021, 264). A friend even "approved" a top Hourihane had purchased specifically for the funeral, and she drove back to her home to collect a locket after her mother advised that she "needed something around her neck" (Hourihane, 2021, 266-277). Even as the coffin was loaded into the hearse, Hourihane noticed and admired her cousin's wife's coat (Hourihane, 2021, 268). Through these personal anecdotes, Hourihane uses narrative perspective to

underscore how clothing choices become both practical and symbolic, embodying respect, memory and communal identity.

The shift from traditional all-black mourning attire to more personalised or themed dress codes is also a notable feature of contemporary Irish funerals. Families often incorporate elements that reflect the deceased's personality, hobbies or interests. For example, during the funeral of journalist Lyra McKee, her mother requested attendees to don Harry Potter attire as a tribute (Blake Knox, 2019). Similarly, the family of author and broadcaster Deirdre Purcell encouraged mourners to wear colourful clothing to represent her vibrant nature (Moloney, 2023). This personalisation of attire not only reflects individual identity but also functions as a form of symbolic storytelling, where clothing choices narrate the deceased's life and values. Holloway et al. describe this phenomenon as a way to portray *communitas* - a shared sense of unity and mutual regard present in ritualistic settings (Holloway et al., 2013, 40).

The food and attire at wakes and funerals thus play significant roles in the mourning process, particularly for children. While adults navigate the ritual's emotional and social dimensions, children often find themselves immersed in the sensory and physical aspects of the event. For children, food, drink and clothing serve not only as tangible markers of the occasion but also as tools for understanding and coping with loss. Authors frequently use techniques such as imagery and symbolism to highlight these sensory elements, bridging the gap between the abstract nature of grief and the concrete experiences of a funeral. These elements help children process death within the broader cultural framework of Irish mourning practices. In this way, food and attire transcend their practical functions, becoming symbols of both continuity and change, as children and adults alike navigate the complexities of mourning.

Older children in Irish literature are represented as less concerned with the food and dress-code at the wake and seem to be more focused on their own personal grief, especially

following the death of a parent or sibling. Parental or sibling loss during childhood subtly differs from the grief experiences of adults, particularly concerning younger children. On the other hand, the grief experiences of adolescents tend to align more closely with those of adults, particularly as they progress into their later teenage years (Barry, 2020, 237). Dyregrov suggests that the older child might perceive elements of a bereavment in a manner distinct from an adult: "Cognitively they are more capable of reflecting on deeper themes and more existential aspects of death" (Dyregrov, 2008, 20). Fictional adolescents allow scope for the author to address the more emotional aspects of their liminal space and how the character interacts with family, friends and the community. Frequently, the child feels disillusioned by the standardised funeral arrangements and expresses a desire for a more personalised experience; one that reflects the unique qualities of their loved one, rather than adhering to a generic, one-size-fits-all service.

In Fiona Scarlett's 2021 novel *Boys Don't Cry*, seventeen-year-old Joe has lost his younger brother, Finn, to cancer. The boys have had a difficult upbringing, with their father in prison and their mother struggling to raise her two sons alone. The bond between the siblings was strong and now Joe is struggling to process his grief. Psychotherapist Orla McHugh suggests that the loss of a sibling should not be underestimated, especially when there was a unique and meaningful connection with the deceased sibling within the family dynamics (McHugh, 2006, 71). At Finn's funeral, Joe is resentful of its blandness: "The funeral was like Granda's. A Fucking old man's funeral. With a teddy on the coffin that you hadn't seen in years and a jersey of a team you'd long since abandoned. There was none of you there" (Scarlett, 2021, 227). Joe is feeling guilty for his lack of input into his younger brother's funeral and regrets not arranging something more fitting:

> I wish I'd asked you what you wanted. I wish we'd played songs you could dance to. I wish we'd brought balloons, and colour and fun. If we'd had you cremated, I'd still have part of you here. I could have done something cool with your ashes. Like skydived, or brought you on space

> mountain, or sprinkled them over Principal Kelly's car in the school car park. You would have laughed your head off at that (Scarlett, 2021, 227-228).

By recognizing Joe's dissatisfaction with the distant and impersonal nature of his brother's funeral, Scarlett portrays the realities of contemporary funerals and how children should be afforded participation in arrangements of the rituals which they perceive as fitting for their family member. Despite Joe and Finn sharing a deep and unique bond, shaped by their shared experience of a traumatic upbringing, Joe was not given any opportunity to have a say in the arrangements for his brother's funeral. His feelings of guilt at allowing this to happen is obvious as he thinks of the ways he could have made his service and burial more in keeping with his brother's twelve-year old lifestyle.

The literature, clinical trials and research focusing on grief in children extensively examine a diverse array of emotions, among which guilt, shame and self-blame hold notable prominence. Children often contemplate unfulfilled experiences and lament the opportunities they did not have time to pursue (Dyregrov, 2008, 37). Joe believes he has let his brother down by not making his funeral more personal and this is stunting his ability to mourn. Dyregrov suggests that parents should encourage children to participate in funeral preparations. In allowing their input, they can support the child to develop an "inner relationship to the lost person" (Dyregrov, 2008, 33). She affirms that fostering open communication and adopting a more inclusive approach with the grieving child leads to a decreased occurrence of depressive episodes during the bereaved child's transition into adulthood (Dyregrov, 2008, 33). In the context of the Western world, approximately 4% of children and adolescents encounter the loss of a parent before reaching the age of sixteen years (Revet *et al*, 2018, 63). Holloway et al suggest that a growing discourse in both "academic and popular writing" highlights the inclusion of "personalisation" at contemporary funerals (Holloway *et al*, 2013, 30). Research also indicates the significance of children's inclusion in mourning rituals, thereby

acknowledging their role as grievers on par with adults. This inclusive approach serves to validate their position as integral members of the family unit, allowing for equal standing with adult grievers during a crucial and delicate phase of the family's journey (Søfting *et al*, 2016, 141). The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network suggests that involving teenagers in funeral rituals can aid them but should be age appropriate. They note that the bereaved child often wants to "take an active part" in the arrangements or "to mark the death in their own way" (Irish Childhood Bereavement Network, 2013). Research in the field of adolescent bereavement literature indicates a notable distinction in the grieving patterns between Early Adolescents (12-14 years) and Late Adolescents (15-18 years), with factors such as cognitive, psychological, social and biological changes (Revet *et al*, 2018, 68).

Scarlett's Joe is on the cusp of adulthood and struggling to process his grief. His mother is medicated during Finn's funeral and is showing no outward sign of emotion: "Dr. Flynn had to give Ma an injection. It blocked her feelings from reaching the surface for those few hours. She stared blankly at the priest and clenched on to me so tightly her fingerprints bruised my arm" (Scarlett, 2021, 227). Compounding his sense of isolation within his grief, the boy's father is attending the funeral handcuffed to a prison officer, with a no contact order:

> They let Da come, but he wasn't allowed to sit with us. He had to sit down the back, chained and wedged between two Guards…They wouldn't let him talk to us after, either. They just shuffled him back into their van as he screamed and wailed and cursed. They wouldn't even let him touch the coffin. How was he supposed to say goodbye? (Scarlett, 2021, 227).

John Holland suggests that the necessity for children to experience grief becomes particularly pertinent during the funeral, as it aligns with the period when the family is most likely to be overwhelmed by the initial shock following the death. Unfortunately, amid this emotional turmoil, the children's needs might be inadvertently disregarded (Holland, 2004, 11). Joe experiences a deep sense of isolation during his mourning journey. He suppresses his emotions, and his acceptance of the loss is limited to conventional gestures such as the handshakes

extended by those attending the funeral. There is no collective acknowledgment of the family's grief. Scarlett examines a crucial aspect of childhood bereavement, specifically the significant role played by parents in aiding their children in coping with such a loss.

In *My Buried Life* (2015), Doreen Finn presents a haunting exploration of unresolved grief, focusing on the long-lasting emotional repercussions of a sibling's suicide. Through Eva, the protagonist, Finn examines the intersections of grief, trauma, and addiction, revealing how the absence of proper support for children grappling with profound loss can lead to self-destructive coping mechanisms. As Eva reflects on her life after her brother's death, Finn uses alcohol as a symbol of both temporary relief and psychological distortion, demonstrating the dangerous allure of escapism. This analysis will argue that Finn's portrayal of Eva's struggle with grief and addiction highlights the specific challenges faced by children dealing with loss in Irish society, offering a critique of both familial and societal failures to address their pain. In doing so, *My Buried Life* becomes a poignant commentary on the complex and often isolating experience of childhood grief in contemporary Irish literature. In the opening paragraph of the novel, Eva acknowledges her buried grief:

> My brother was my favourite person in the world, and he died when I was 16. He was a long time dying when it finally happened, yet I live with the aftershocks still. They tremble around the spaces I inhabit, quieter now, but still daring me to forget him, challenging every attempt I make at redemption. It happened so long ago, but it's all I can think about today (Finn, 2015, 1).

This affecting opening establishes the novel's central theme of unresolved grief and sets the stage for Eva's journey back to Ireland following her mother's death. The act of returning home reawakens a liminal grief, one that bridges the immediate sorrow of losing a parent with the deeply entrenched trauma of her brother's suicide decades earlier. Through reflective passages, Finn reveals the extent of Eva's trauma, particularly through the memory of discovering her brother's body: "I sank among the bloodied sheets, buried myself in the clammy coldness. I lay there till evening…My brother lay on his bed, a dead king still on his throne" (Finn, 2015, 209).

The vivid imagery of "bloodied sheets" and "a dead king still on his throne" conveys the visceral and haunting nature of Eva's memory, with the description evoking both horror and a sense of frozen reverence. Finn's choice of the term "buried" reflects not only the physical act but also the suppression of grief that Eva has carried into adulthood.

The narrative further explores Eva's strained relationship with her mother, who holds her responsible for her brother's death: "I suppose we shouldn't have been surprised by his death, but we were. It shocked us to the core…This is your fault! You knew he was going to do this and you didn't stop him!" (Finn, 2015, 205). Finn uses direct dialogue here to capture the essence of the mother's misplaced blame, underscoring the familial dysfunction that exacerbates Eva's isolation. As Eva reflects, "leaving a mentally ill person in the care of someone so young was beyond anything that could be deemed acceptable nowadays" (Finn, 2015, 207). This acknowledgment highlights the societal failure to adequately support grieving children and underscores the burden placed on Eva at a young age. Eva's prolonged feelings of guilt, her estrangement from family and friends, and her difficulty in processing her brother's death align with theories of unresolved grief. Rolfe Silverman suggests that there is an additional dimension to grief when a sibling commits suicide (Rolfe Silverman, 2000, 153). A growing body of evidence indicates that individuals who lose a loved one to suicide are likely to undergo a more challenging and complex grieving process compared to those who experience a death resulting from natural causes or accidents (Sanders, 1999, 181). In accordance with Sanders' proposal, suicidal actions are strongly linked with depression, and investigating genetic factors has opened up opportunities for establishing a link between a family's history and suicide. (Sanders, 1999, 183). Alec Roy suggests that: "in many suicide victims [there] will be genetic factors involved in the genetic transmission of manic depression, schizophrenia, and alcoholism – the psychiatric disorders most commonly associated with suicide" (Roy, 2011, 244). Alexis Revet et al also

suggest that there might be a heightened risk of suicide when individuals are exposed to the suicide of a loved one at a young age (Revet *et al*, 2017, 18).

Eva recalls her first encounter with alcohol in the wake of her brother's suicide, revealing her desperation to escape the overwhelming weight of grief. The passage offers a vivid, sensory depiction of Eva's initial attempt to self-medicate her sorrow: "I was 16 when I first got drunk…My brother had been dead two weeks and I hadn't slept properly since…I slipped out of bed and crept down the stairs, thinking I might leave the house, wander away forever into the ebony night. Disappear, just like my brother had done" (Finn, 2015, 40). Finn employs a first-person narrative that draws the reader directly into Eva's inner turmoil, allowing them to experience the fragmented, raw emotions that define her grief. The disjointed structure of the sentences echoes the chaotic nature of Eva's thoughts, illustrating the psychological upheaval she is enduring. The description of the "ebony night" conveys an overwhelming sense of darkness and mystery, reflecting the void left by her brother's death and the uncertainty of her own future without him. Eva's desire to "disappear" draws a parallel to her brother's act of taking his own life, subtly hinting at the self-destructive tendencies that will later surface in her journey.

Finn skilfully captures the unsettling stillness that descends in the aftermath of a funeral: "The house is now quiet, and the visiting mourners have returned to their normal lives" (Finn, 2015, 41). This shift in atmosphere (from the busy, ritualistic motions of mourning to the isolating silence that follows) highlights Eva's profound sense of solitude. As Barry observes, the period after a funeral can be one of the hardest phases of grief, as the bereaved are left alone to face the full weight of their loss without the distraction or comfort of external support: "One of the hardest parts of the initial bereavement process is the period when the burial is over, the crowds are gone and you are left on your own, with the reality that the person you love is gone" (Barry, 2020, 185). Finn captures this isolating experience by placing Eva in a quiet, almost suffocating

domestic space, drawing a sharp contrast between the external calm and the storm brewing inside her. The stillness of her surroundings only amplifies the intensity of her inner chaos, highlighting her emotional disconnection: “I chose the brandy and drank it straight from the bottle. It burned the back of my throat, forced tears into my eyes, and I almost choked on its strength…When it hit my bloodstream it slowed me, quietened my brother’s name to a whisper, steadied me… “ (Finn, 2015, 41-42).

Eva’s choice to drink brandy is portrayed with vivid, sensory language, making the effect of the alcohol on her body almost tangible. The sharp burn as the liquid slides down her throat reflects the tension in her chest, and we feel the warmth spread, a fleeting moment of relief amidst the chaos. The imagery of burning and choking reflects the physical pain that mirrors Eva’s emotional suffering, while the metaphorical “quietening” of her brother’s name in her mind illustrates the numbing effect of the alcohol. Finn’s use of sensory detail captures the duality of alcohol as both a temporary balm and a destructive force. While it “steadied” her, it also set a dangerous precedent for her coping mechanisms. The narrative also reveals Eva’s burgeoning dependency on alcohol as a means of escapism: “Almost accidentally I’d found something that helped me. Something that worked. And it was so simple…I daydreamed about getting drunk, about the glorious buzz alcohol drove through my veins, blunting my edges, editing my memory” (Finn, 2015, 42). Finn uses a combination of narrative perspective, fragmented structure, and vivid sensory details to convey Eva’s grief and her reliance on alcohol as a coping mechanism. The contrast between the physical sensations, like the burn of the brandy, and the psychological effects, such as the quieting of her brother’s memory, highlights the complexity of her mourning. The text’s disjointed form reflects Eva’s fractured state of mind, conveying her inner turmoil and her search for any kind of relief in the wake of such profound loss.

Rolfe Silverman indicates that siblings undergo profound emotional shifts as they navigate the changes within themselves and their surroundings stemming from the death. A sense of

loneliness envelops many siblings, as the home becomes hushed, and they struggle to acclimate to the newfound silence (Rolfe Silverman, 2020, 156). She suggests that siblings often "seek ways to get away from these feelings" and, for the older child, this often includes experimenting with alcohol or drugs (Rolfe Silverman, 2020, 157). Eva's mother did not help her remaining child process the loss of her brother, rather she confounded her daughter's grief by assigning blame for his death. Much like Joe in Scarlett's *Boys Don't Cry*, Eva's grief is solitary: "I couldn't bring myself to speak his name to my mother" (Finn, 2015, 41). Eva soon finds herself dependent on alcohol and within months she has shelved the "thought of my mother's rage tipping over me" and she "stopped caring" (Finn, 2015, 42). Her dependency leads her to watering down bottles of alcohol in the house, stealing money from her mother's purse and stealing bottles from supermarkets. As suggested by Rolfe Silverman, she seeks ways to escape her grief: "I drank alone, always, and hugged my grubby secret to me…I could count on booze to get me out of anything at all. I simply stopped caring" (Finn, 2015, 43). The absence of support from Eva's mother leads to her experiencing her grief in isolation and the burden of guilt for not being able to prevent her brother's suicide becomes overwhelmingly heavy. Her brother's passing is a traumatic incident that leads to a complex form of mourning. She finds herself in a state of denial regarding various aspects of her loss, the emotional distress it brings and its far-reaching consequences. These are signs of complicated mourning, as proposed by Therese A. Rando's research (Rando, 1995, 239). Finn employs Eva's multifaceted sorrow to construct a narrative characterised by seclusion, remorse and ambiguity. Alcohol serves as her means of escape from grief, enabling her to momentarily numb her emotional pain. Through this portrayal, Finn not only explores the deeply personal experience of grief but also critiques society's failure to adequately support those struggling with loss, forcing them to seek solace in self-destructive ways. *My Buried Life* becomes not just a narrative about one woman's sorrow

but a broader commentary on how addiction and emotional pain intersect, revealing the isolating and harmful consequences of trying to escape without real help or healing.

While the exploration of childhood grief in *My Buried Life* and other Irish texts focuses primarily on the clear-cut loss of a sibling through death, the experience of grief can also manifest in more ambiguous ways. In Kit de Waal's *My Name is Leon* (2016), the loss Leon experiences is not one marked by funeral rites or burial, but by the painful separation from his baby brother, Jake, when he is adopted by another family. This form of grief is ambiguous and unresolved; it echoes the intense emotional turmoil of bereavement but is complicated by the absence of closure and the uncertainty surrounding the separation. The grief Leon feels, while rooted in the traumatic absence of his brother, shares thematic connections with the more traditional forms of childhood mourning seen in Irish literature. However, *My Name is Leon* expands the conversation by offering a lens on the grief of children caught in the foster care system, where separation from siblings and family members creates a unique form of trauma that is rarely addressed in conventional narratives of loss. By comparing these forms of grief across different contexts, we can see how contemporary Irish literature depicts the persistence of mourning and the varying ways children process such profound loss.

De Waal's own background lends authenticity to her portrayal of grief in *My Name is Leon*. Having worked in family law and contributed to training manuals for fostering and adoption, de Waal draws on her personal experience, growing up with a foster carer mother, to infuse the narrative with emotional depth and credibility (Evaristo, 2016). The novel is set in 1980s England and presents an alternative lens on childhood grief. Though the grief Leon experiences resembles that of bereavement, it is compounded by the additional layer of

uncertainty, as he is left in a liminal space without clear progression through the stages of mourning.

At the heart of Leon's grief is his relationship with his brother, Jake. The two boys are from different fathers, with Leon being mixed-race and Jake being white. Neither father is involved in their lives, and their mother, Carol, suffers from mental health issues, leading to the children being taken into care. Leon, who is only eight years old, assumes a surrogate parental role for Jake, caring for him when their mother is unable to do so. Leon's emotional connection to his brother is profound and his caregiving role is central to his sense of identity: "It took him a few weeks but now he could tell anyone what to do to look after a baby" (De Waal, 2016, 22). However, their lives are irrevocably altered when Jake is adopted by another family and Leon is left behind. This separation is not accompanied by any formal mourning rituals and Leon is left in a state of emotional turmoil without the closure typically afforded by death.

The ambiguity of Leon's grief is crucial to understanding his emotional experience and it aligns with the theory of ambiguous loss, as articulated by Wojciak et al. (2022). According to Wojciak et al., children in foster care often experience unresolved grief due to the lack of closure surrounding the separation and the secrecy that can shroud the reasons for their loss. In *My Name is Leon*, Leon is told that Jake will be adopted by a different family, but he is not given any clear explanation as to why this separation is occurring or whether he will ever see his brother again. The ambiguity surrounding Jake's future exacerbates Leon's grief, aligning closely with Pauline Boss's concept of ambiguous loss, where the lack of closure leaves individuals in a state of emotional limbo. This unresolved grief challenges Leon's ability to reconcile his loss, reflecting the psychological and behavioural symptoms identified in studies of foster care separations. This lack of closure is reflected in the sleep disturbances, behavioural changes, and intense longing that Leon experiences, aligning with Wojciak's research on the enduring pain of ambiguous loss. As Wojciak et al. (2022) note, this form of grief is particularly

painful because it lacks the normal grieving process, leaving children like Leon stuck in an unresolved state of mourning.

One of the most harrowing moments in the novel occurs when Leon is given a racially charged explanation for the separation from his brother. A social worker informs him: “Because he’s a white baby, a white baby. And you’re not” (de Waal, 2016, 44). This blunt statement introduces a painful layer of racial discrimination into Leon’s grief, further complicating his emotional turmoil. The repetition of "a white baby" underscores the racialised nature of the adoption decision, reinforcing Leon’s sense of rejection not only from his family but also from society at large. This moment highlights how race intersects with the structures of adoption and sibling separation, compounding the emotional weight of Leon’s loss. The simplicity and coldness of the social worker’s words are shocking in their directness and the bluntness of the explanation is a stark reminder of the racial injustices that Leon faces. His grief is not only the result of familial separation but is also intertwined with a deep sense of personal alienation due to his mixed-race identity.

De Waal’s portrayal of Leon’s grief, particularly in relation to racial identity, is critical in understanding the multifaceted nature of his loss. His behaviour shifts significantly following the separation, as he struggles to cope with the pain of losing Jake. He experiences sleep disturbances, a loss of appetite, and behavioural changes, all of which are common symptoms of grief (Costello, 2020). However, unlike traditional grief, Leon’s loss is never fully acknowledged or mourned in a conventional way. The absence of formal closure leaves him with an ongoing sense of uncertainty and emotional disarray. This aligns with the concept of ambiguous loss, which is characterised by the lack of clear boundaries or rituals to help process the grief. In this sense, Leon’s grief is never fully resolved, as the mystery of Jake’s future and the lack of closure prevent him from moving on.

In the absence of traditional mourning rituals, the emotional journey that Leon embarks on is one of gradual adaptation. His foster carer, Maureen, provides him with a sense of hope, telling him: "And one day, she says, you will see your brother again, he will find you and you will find him" (de Waal, 2016, 53). This statement, though hopeful, is rooted in uncertainty, reflecting the tenuous nature of Leon's future reunion with Jake. Maureen's words suggest a resolution that is not guaranteed, yet they provide a framework of hope that helps Leon manage his grief. The promise of reunion functions as a form of emotional support, offering Leon a mental structure for coping with his ongoing loss. However, the uncertainty of this reunion underscores the enduring nature of his grief, which may never be fully resolved.

Interestingly, Leon begins to find solace in other forms of connection, particularly through a community of black people with allotments in the local area. As he nurtures the plants at the allotment, Leon is reminded of the caregiving role he once played for Jake. While watering the plants, he experiences a poignant moment where his thoughts of Jake become overwhelming: "There you are, little plant, he says, but as he's speaking he has a funny feeling. Something reminds him of Jake and he straightens up quickly as though he can hear him cry. Leon feels Jake so close that his heart begins to bang in his chest. Jake! Jake! Where are you?" (de Waal, 2016, 140). This scene underscores the persistent nature of Leon's grief, as his emotional connection to Jake continues to influence his thoughts and behaviours. However, this connection also signals a turning point for Leon, as he begins to find ways to nurture and care for others, even in the absence of his brother. Clinical research on ambiguous loss highlights the lasting emotional impact of sibling separation, particularly in foster care. According to Hooyman, Kramer, and Saunders (2021), children who are separated from their siblings may lose their primary source of emotional support and connection to their past. For Leon, the loss of Jake is particularly acute because of the roles they played in each other's lives. Leon's grief is

compounded by the lack of closure, which leaves him struggling to process his feelings in a way that is both emotionally and psychologically healthy.

My Name is Leon offers a powerful exploration of ambiguous loss through the lens of childhood grief. Through Leon's experience of sibling separation, de Waal captures the profound psychological, emotional and behavioural impacts of this form of grief. The novel provides an insightful commentary on how ambiguous loss, particularly in the context of foster care and sibling separation, can be as painful and enduring as more conventional forms of mourning. Through a careful examination of the language and narrative structure, de Waal sheds light on the complexities of grief, particularly when it intersects with race and familial separation and how children must navigate the emotional challenges of loss without the customary rites of closure. The portrayal of Leon's grief highlights the ongoing, unresolved nature of ambiguous loss, offering a poignant and thought-provoking reflection on the psychological toll of separation.

Sibling grief is again addressed in Kevin Power's 2018 coming-of-age novel, *Bad Day in Blackrock*. The narrative is focused on the aftermath of a vicious, fatal attack on a young man, Conor Harris, outside a South Dublin nightclub (Boyne, 2008). It is not until the end of the novel that we discover the unnamed narrator is, in fact, Conor's brother. The subsequent trial and media circus surrounding the death results in a delayed funeral and the narrator recounts the bitterness he feels regarding the participatory rituals and traditions. He sees the mourners as privately educated "rugby-playing" boys who are "absolutely vile" and the girls being "equally horrific" (Boyne, 2013). The older males are portrayed as more concerned about the school's image and protecting their "own". The novel shines a light on the contemporary approach to grief in the media, and how the personal and private have become a public arena:

> We all went to Conor's funeral…The funeral was a media event…It was also a rugby funeral: the Church of the Sacred Heart in Donnybrook was packed with the Senior Cup teams from five

> Dublin schools, along with their friends, families, girlfriends and former coaches. Some of the players from the Ireland squad were there… Eileen hadn't wanted this, but Brendan had said, "It was part of who he was. And people will expect it". "We're not doing this for other people," Eileen said. "Yes we are," Brendan said (Power, 2008, 97-98).

The funeral is less about the deceased and his grieving family, and more about "needless public martyrdom" (Power, 2018, 98). Bruce Buchan, Margaret Gibson and David Ellsion suggest that the distinction between public and private life is becoming less clear and subject to debate as an artificial division in an era where technology plays a pervasive role: "The camera, the lens and its magnification through various technologies […] the computer and the digital archive all importantly constitute the forensics of twenty-first-century death" (Buchan, Gibson and Ellison, 2011, 11). The narrator shows disdain for the "scrutiny of so many strangers, the intrusion of so many into what should have been a private event" and is forced to watch from the church doorway as people gathered to shake the hands of Conor's parents: "At the edges of the crowd, over by the churchyard gates, the television crews pointed their carapaced machines" (Power, 2008, 104). Conor's sibling is not afforded the space he needs to process his personal grief: "He wanted to grieve in private. But the world wouldn't let him" (Power, 2008, 98).

The boy's parents are not only coming to terms with the death of their teenage son, but they also must deal with the circumstances surrounding the death and how to navigate their liminal space: "Eileen and Brendan Harris were barely conscious of the size and scale of Conor's funeral. The two weeks between their discovery that Conor had been killed and the September morning when they were allowed to bury him seemed, to them, to have been whiled away in a torpid atmosphere of pervasive unreality" (Power, 2008, 98). The language used in this passage effectively conveys a sense of the emotional numbness experienced by Eileen and Brendan Harris following the loss of their son, Conor. The terms "barely conscious," "whiled away," "torpid atmosphere" and "pervasive unreality" all contribute to an atmosphere of profound shock and disconnection from reality and indicate how the delay in burial has frozen their grief.

Research suggests that the family survivors of murder victims process their grief in a dissimilar way to other bereavement. A prominent characteristic observed in survivors is a state of cognitive dissonance, wherein the death they confront goes beyond rational understanding. The sheer psychological senselessness of such brutality is incomprehensible, catching individuals completely off guard and unprepared for its emotional repercussions (Sanders, 1999, 186-187).

Conor's brother is conscious of the family's inability to grieve in a linear fashion and he notices that rather than mourning together, they are separated in their grief: "Brendan and Eileen Harris sat at the front of the church without their son. I remember finding it odd that, instead of sitting between his parents, Conor was lying in a wooden box draped with a Brookfield jersey, a couple of feet in front of them. I looked at the Harrises. I had never seen two people look so sundered, so fiercely apart" (Power, 2008, 100). The use of "fiercely apart" succinctly suggests the chasm that has formed between Conor's parents, following the tragedy. Sanders suggests that one of the key factors contributing to a positive outcome for families experiencing loss is their capacity to remain open and receptive to each other during times of severe emotional crisis (Sanders, 1999, 174). Children and young adults will try to match the climate created by their parents and Conor's death has caused a profound division within the family, leading to a lack of collective grieving and shared emotional processing (Sanders, 1999, 172). The deceased's sibling confirms that: "What made the funeral worse was that nobody had yet come forward with information about Conor's death" (Power, 2008, 100). The prolonged funeral arrangements, ongoing police investigation and media scrutiny compound the fragmented experience of grief. The absence of information regarding the party responsible for his brother's death further intensifies the challenges of the mourning process.

Like teenage Joe in Scarlett's *Boys Don't Cry*, the protagonist is irritated by eulogies delivered at his brother's funeral. He is disturbed that while the speakers acknowledge Conor's family's loss and suffering, they focus more on the loss suffered by his team-mates, teachers

and fellow students: “He condemned Ireland’s culture of binge-drinking, which he believed had been responsible for Conor’s death…He said what a loss Conor’s death meant for the game of rugby” (Power, 2008, 101). As the novel progresses, we discover that one speaker, Conor’s former Headmaster, was aware of who had murdered Conor:

> It turned out, you see, that even before the funeral, Pat Kilroy knew what had happened outside Harry’s on the last night of that terminal summer. Pat Kilroy knew who had killed Conor Harris. He knew as he stared at the crowd from the vantage of the pulpit. He could have pointed, from his wooden roost, at the boys as they sweated in the crowd (Power, 2008, 104).

The three young men who were responsible for Conor’s death were all at his funeral. We learn that two received communion at the service, while a third remained seated: “He too wore sunglasses. He didn’t take them off during the service” (Power, 2008, 102). Power's depiction of individuals wearing sunglasses during the funeral service could be interpreted as a potential display of disrespect or a deliberate attempt to conceal emotions by seeking refuge behind the frames of their eyewear. Retrospectively, we learn that the young man who had delivered the fatal kick to Conor’s head was one of the students who carried the coffin from the church and: “he had volunteered to do it” (Power, 2008, 105). During the manslaughter trial the narrator describes how the deceased’s family must remain in the liminal space of their grief as they attend the trial, daily: “Every day they struggled through the throng of agitated newsmen and took their seats in the gallery” (Power, 2008, 199). Unable to detach themselves from the mourning process, their “lives revolved around the trial” and they became “earnest publicists for their own bereavement” (Power, 2008, 199).

Following an overturned conviction and a trial that was “stillborn”, Conor’s sibling cannot find a closure to his grief: “After a week or two, the story died and was replaced by something else” (Power, 2008, 212-213). In this context, the author appears to establish an analogy between the demise of a media narrative and the passing of a young man. Both fade from the collective memory once the transitional space surrounding their existence ceases to be. The narrator’s grief

does not allow for such closure: “Grief is supposed to make things matter less, but now I seem so raw, I feel things so acutely… Goodbye, brother, Sorry I couldn’t do more” (Power, 2008, 226). Towards the end of the novel, it is revealed that it was Conor’s brother who had to identify his body: “It wasn’t Eileen Harris or Brendan Harris who identified Conor’s body. They found they weren’t able. Conor’s brother had to do it” (Power, 2008, 227). The trauma associated with this action is deepening his grief and preventing him adjusting to life without his sibling. He recalls the coldness of the room where the body was laid out on a hospital trolley: “They refrigerate the dead, to stop them rotting. There was the chilly, disinfected smell of hospitals, a seminal thickness in the settled air…Then I went outside and told my parents that the boy on the trolley was Conor and that he was dead” (Power, 2008, 228). The responsibility of this duty takes its toll on the narrator and, for months, he cannot sleep: “Instead there was a kind of waking coma, a visionary trance in which I saw repeated over and over the same silent drama” (Power. 2008, 228). He continues in this fugue-like state, while permanently carrying the guilt that he was not with Conor when he died.

> I didn’t really talk to my parents, which I know caused them still greater anxiety and pain. I went to the funeral and I went to the trial…but during all of this I was a ghost…mouthing the usual pleases and thank yous but absent, really hopelessly involved in some prior trauma, so that everything I did seemed belated, superfluous, even cruel – cruel to Conor, I mean, who could no longer do even the simplest thing (Power, 2008, 228).

Conor was the younger of the siblings, and the narrator experiences significant guilt due to his brother's passing. As indicated by Silverman, in situations where a younger sibling passes away, the surviving siblings often express the loss not in terms of losing a caregiver but rather as the person they once cared for. The future trajectory of these relationships remains uncertain and beyond prediction (Silverman, 2000, 155). The brothers will never experience a relationship beyond childhood and this seems to affect the narrator greatly. It must also be noted that the world of which the brothers occupied is now altered. The structure of their family

is now permanently altered and the circle of friends that the siblings grew up in is now completely severed.

In analysing literature across various genres, it becomes evident that there is minimal differentiation in how loss is depicted between historical fiction and contemporary works. Grief remains an intrinsic and unavoidable facet of human existence, unaffected by the limitations imposed by time and era. In Orla McAlinden's *The Flight of the Wren* (2018), we encounter fourteen-year-old Sally, who recently experienced the loss of both her parents during The Great Famine. Following an ecological catastrophe, the famine brought starvation and disease, leading to the tragic loss of one million lives and compelling one and a half million individuals to undertake mass emigration (Jackson, 2010, 68). The dual timeline novel reverts to 1848, where the most severely affected Irish counties have experienced a loss of approximately one-third of their population during the national disaster (Casey, 2021, 85). Sally is from King's County, which is now called County Offaly, situated in the Irish Midlands. Throughout her experiences, she has endured the heart-wrenching sight of witnessing the majority of her village succumbing to starvation. We learn that Sally has slept three nights at the site where her parents had been granted a hasty burial, without ceremony or ritual. The child is weak with hunger and yet is determined to grant her parents some sort of grave marking. She scours the "boneyard" in search of a perfect stone to place at the burial mound: "careful as any mason, weighing up and rejecting stone after stone until she found a white-grey, table smooth slab" (McAlinden, 2018, 14). Too heavy to carry, the slab is dragged by the teenager to its resting place. She notes that similar stones could be seen with some: "painted with whitewash or lime, the names of the departed" but the more recently, rushed burial sites were trench-like and unmarked (McAlinden, 2018, 14).

Sally seems distraught by the lack of ritual and tradition at the site:

> She wished that she could mark their names, Malachy and Nuala McMahon, dead as dreams, blackened and bloated, waiting beneath the stone for their next neighbour to come along and be buried at the expense of the parish…they would not be waiting long (McAlinden, 2018, 14).

She reminisces about the conventional funeral and wakes from earlier times and expresses sorrow for the absence of *communitas*. In this context, social norms were set aside to establish a transitional space where the life of the deceased was commemorated through activities like "drinking and dancing well into the late hours of the night" (McAlinden, 2018, 46).

Following the death of her parents, their remains were handled like waste and this deepens Sally's grief: "the men of the burial crew had arrived…They had not come within the walls of the cabin, but had ordered Sally to drag out, first her father, then her mother, and heave them up, stiff and brittle as kindling, onto a cart"(McAlinden, 2018, 17). Compounding Sally's grief is her eviction from the family home, which Casey explains was common practice during The Great Famine (Casey, 2021, 87). Now an orphan, she fears the future without her parents and feels: "every pain of past childhood and of the adulthood now so prematurely thrust upon her" (McAlinden, 2018, 14). The compelled hastening of her maturity presents a predicament, as there is no refuge or support available for her. Consequently, she departs Ireland and embarks on a journey to Australasia, joining the ranks of the one and a half million emigrants during that period. The children affected by The Great Famine unexpectedly had to grapple with grief. In the case of emigrants who resettled in foreign lands, their mourning was made more complex due to the absence of customary rituals and traditions. Their journey through the transitional stages of grief was fragmented and complicated.

In contemporary fiction, children often experience profound grief when they're denied the chance to attend the funerals of loved ones. Sarah Crossan's verse novel, *One* (2015), explores this idea in a unique way. When Grace loses her sister, Tippi, after their eighteen-hour separation surgery, her grief is heightened by the extreme nature of their bond - physical and emotional. As conjoined twins, their lives were entirely intertwined, both literally and

figuratively. Grace's grief is not just that of a sibling who has lost someone, but that of someone who has shared every part of her being with another person for her entire life. Crossan's decision to write the novel in verse intensifies this experience, helping to convey the depth of Grace's emotional turmoil in a way that prose might not. The novel shows us the almost symbiotic relationship the twins share, not only emotionally, but physically:

> We have
> two heads
> two hearts
> two sets of lungs and kidneys
> We have four arms as well
> and a pair of fully functioning legs
> now that the vestigial leg has been
> docked
> like a show dog's tail
> Our intestines begin
> apart
> then merge
> And below that we are one (Crossan, 2015, 11-12).

This repetition of "two" gives us an image of the twins as separate yet inseparable, both sharing the same body but each maintaining a strong individual identity. The verse format itself reflects this duality. It's fragmented, a little broken, much like Grace's experience of losing Tippi. There's a flow in the way the verses are written, but it's often interrupted; just like Grace's sense of self, now that she is no longer physically connected to Tippi.

Even though they shared their bodies, Grace and Tippi were two distinct people. They had their own thoughts, dreams and desires and, in their eyes, they were no less

"individual" than anyone else. Grace explains that, for them, their situation wasn't a "prison sentence" as some might view it:

> have it better than others
>
> who live with fused heads or hearts
>
> or only two arms (Crossan, 2015, 12).

This shows their acceptance of their shared existence, but also the belief that their bond was something special, not something to be pitied. Crossan states that her research suggested that: "in most cases conjoined twins are happy to stay together…More often than not they don't want to be separated…It's only for medical reasons that they have to be" (DeBurca Butler, 2015).

However, after the surgery, Grace is forced to face the reality that their shared life is over. When she wakes up and realises that Tippi is no longer there, it's not just a psychological loss but a physical one.

> She is not here
>
> Not beside me in the bed
>
> nor in the room
>
> at all (Crossan, 2015, 401).

She learns that while she is recovering as expected, her sister is "not doing so well" and Grace insists that she wants to be with Tippi (Crossan, 2015, 402). The girls lie together, separate, yet as one, and Grace knows she is losing Tippi. This emptiness is underscored by the simplicity of the verse, making it all the more impactful. Grace is in a hospital bed, alone, while her sister lies in a separate room. Her grief is intensified because she cannot be with Tippi when she needs her most.

When the doctor advises that Tippi has passed away, Grace is distraught: "I ache for my sister in my blood and bones/ in my limbs and my veins" (Crossan, 2015, 410). Complicating Grace's grief is her inability to attend Tippi's funeral. She is awaiting a heart transplant and is confined

to her hospital bed: “I tell Mom not to postpone the funeral/ that I’ll be many months/ and I don’t want to make Tippi wait” (Crossan, 2015, 422). Grace’s feelings of helplessness are palpable in these moments, as she is cut off from the traditional processes of grieving, denied the closure of being physically present at the funeral.

The physical separation from Tippi and the funeral rituals highlight how, despite society’s view of them as a single unit, Grace and Tippi were always two distinct individuals, both in life and in death. Even now, as Grace is left behind, she faces the painful reality of having to deal with her grief in isolation, away from the people and the body she once shared. The verse format serves to amplify this sense of isolation, with each line capturing a snapshot of Grace’s inner turmoil, each stanza a different facet of her emotional state.

Peter Jackson points out that while many children adapt well to loss, some find it harder to cope with the emotional weight (Jackson, 2015, 23). Grace’s grief is compounded by her deep emotional and physical attachment to Tippi, making the grieving process much more intense. Carol Fitzpatrick’s clinical research highlights the lack of attention given to the grief of the surviving conjoined twin, which points to a gap in literature that Crossan’s novel begins to fill (Fitzpatrick, 2000, 514). Through verse, Crossan gives us a glimpse into Grace’s experience, creating an emotional depth that might otherwise have been hard to convey.

The page where Grace repeatedly writes “Tippi?” is a perfect example of how the verse form mirrors Grace’s inner state. The repetition - seventy times - serves as a visual representation of Grace’s endless yearning, her emotional call for the sister she can no longer reach. When the final “Tippi” appears without a question mark, it signals the futility of Grace’s calling out. It’s as though her sister has become unreachable, not only physically but emotionally. This raw, repetitive longing is something many readers can relate to, as it conveys the desperate clinging to a lost loved one.

Grace's grief also takes on a more complicated form when she begs the doctor to return Tippi's heart to her:

> I want it in me
>
> I do not want to throw it away
>
> I want it in me
>
> To save me
>
> To save it
>
> To save her
>
> A little bit of her (Crossan, 2015, 412).

Here, Grace doesn't just want her sister's heart as a symbol of her love, she wants it as a part of her; something that will help keep her alive. It's not just the organ she's desperate for, but the connection it represents. This plea highlights Grace's emotional desperation and her wish to hold onto the physical bond they once had. Crossan's subtle manipulation of this imagery - Grace's own heart transplant juxtaposed with Tippi's discarded heart - creates a powerful emotional resonance. The concept of needing another heart, while Tippi's is rejected for being "not healthy enough to use" (Crossan, 2015, 412), adds to the emotional complexity of Grace's situation:

> I live that in hope
>
> That soon,
>
> Very soon,
>
> another human heart
>
> will be stuffed
>
> inside me.
>
> I live in hope
>
> that a dead person's heart will revive me (Crossan, 2015, 423).

Grace's use of the word "stuffing" may suggest that the organ will only ever be a filling, perhaps to fill the gap that is left since her sister's heart was removed from their shared body.

Four months after the surgery, Grace still feels the physical loss of Tippi. "I turn my head to the left / to let Tippi start / forgetting that I am a singleton" (Crossan, 2015, 428). Grace has to teach herself how to exist without Tippi, to live without her constant presence. And as she does, she realises she will never truly stop missing her:

> This will happen
>
> For the rest of my life:
>
> I will never remember that she has gone (Crossan, 2015, 427).

There's a subtle paradox in these words - Grace knows Tippi is gone, yet she can't imagine life without her. In this way, grief becomes not just about the past loss but about a future that is forever marked by absence. Crossan's choice to write in verse allows for an emotional depth that mirrors the complexity of Grace's grieving process. It reflects her fragmented state of mind, a mind caught between the past and the future, between memories of a shared existence and the painful reality of separation. Through this form, Grace's journey through grief feels both deeply personal and universal, as the structure of the novel mirrors the emotional rhythms of loss and healing.

In this chapter, the representation of children's grief in contemporary Irish literature has been examined, exploring the ways in which young mourners navigate the complex terrain of loss and mourning, and the rituals they engage in as part of their grieving process. Drawing upon various examples, this chapter scrutinises the involvement of children in funerary customs and highlights the ways in which their experiences of grief diverge from those of adults. The texts analysed range from novels to memoir, each providing valuable insights into the different ways children experience death, funeral rituals and the process of mourning.

Grief responses among children exhibit variations across different research studies and can be classified into three dimensions of grief according to Multidimensional Grief Theory. These include Separation Distress, which are the emotional responses to grief arising from the irreversible physical separation from the deceased; Existential/Identity Crisis which are attempts to discover significance in the loss, achieve life satisfaction and deal with disruptions in personal goals and aspirations caused by the loss and Circumstance-Related Distress, which is the way in which those who have lost a loved one react to the circumstances of the deceased's passing (D'Alton et al, 2022, 84). The children and young adults featured in the texts of this chapter are from different age brackets, socio economic backgrounds and even from different time periods.

Contemporary Irish literature provides a delicate exploration of children's roles in grief and mourning, offering insights into how cultural, historical and personal contexts shape their experiences. By portraying the liminal spaces occupied by young mourners, these narratives challenge conventional assumptions about children's capacity to process loss, while illuminating the transformative potential of their engagement with death rituals. Whether through the sensory details of a wake, the symbolic significance of attire, or the profound emotional journeys of characters, like Costello's or Scarlett's Joe, these works underscore the importance of including children in the communal and cultural practices of mourning. As we continue to examine these themes, the role of literature in shaping and reflecting societal attitudes towards death and bereavement becomes increasingly clear, offering both a mirror to our practices and a space for critical reflection on the ways we support young mourners in their journeys through loss.

Conclusion

> In the modern Irish novel, the prevalence of wakes, funerals and rituals attending the dead is indicative of an abiding cultural interest in death (English, 2017, 181).

This research was prompted by a desire to study how Irish fictional funerals are used as an opportunity for the writer to use the liminal space as an arena to add atmosphere, emotion and frequently, supplementary storylines. This research was inspired by Johnsey's observations and responses to the ICA "biddies" in Donal Ryan's *The Thing About December* (2014):

> "[They] gathered […] to pick at the tragedy like crows picking at a flungaway snack box" (Ryan, 2014, 24).

Ryan's prose challenges readers to reflect on the authenticity of communal rituals, drawing attention to the delicate balance between genuine compassion and performative empathy. This scene highlights the tension within traditional Irish values, where communal grieving has long played a central role, and the realities of modern social dynamics, which risk diluting the sincerity of these rituals. By contrasting Johnsey's raw and deeply personal grief with the actions of the ICA women, Ryan demonstrates the disconnection between individual and collective mourning. Their behaviour, depicted through his critical lens, illustrates how communal responses to loss can sometimes shift from meaningful solidarity to intrusive spectacle. This tension between the mourner and the community lies at the heart of understanding funerary traditions in Irish literature, where the rituals surrounding death continue to hold cultural significance but are increasingly complicated by modern shifts in societal expectations. The excerpt serves as a striking commentary on how grief and communal behaviour are portrayed in contemporary Irish society. It reflects the evolving role of traditional practices in a changing cultural landscape, inviting an exploration of the interplay between historical customs and the challenges of contemporary life.

This thesis has examined the representation of grief and funerary traditions in twenty-first-century Irish literature, focusing on how these narratives engage with the concept of liminality to depict the complexities of mourning. Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches and using theoretical frameworks such as van Gennep's rites of passage and Turner's concept of *communitas*, it has demonstrated how funerary rituals act as transformative spaces, shaping personal and collective experiences of loss.

This thesis has investigated the representation of funerary traditions, grief and mourning in twenty-first century Irish literature, examining how these rituals act as powerful tools for exploring identity, community and personal transformation. By analysing a diverse range of literary works, this study has demonstrated the evolving role of traditional Irish funerals and wakes in both reflecting cultural heritage and addressing contemporary issues. Each chapter has contributed to this exploration, offering insights into how these rituals shape, and are shaped by, the narratives of loss.

The introductory chapter established the theoretical foundation of this research, incorporating Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage, Victor Turner's theories of liminality and *communitas*, and contemporary grief studies. These concepts provided a framework for understanding how funerary rituals offer spaces where individuals and communities navigate loss, transitioning between personal mourning and collective remembrance.

Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007) provided a compelling case study of grief as a disorienting and transformative process. This thesis analysed how Veronica's engagement with funerary rituals uncovers buried familial trauma while guiding her towards reconciliation with the past. Enright's fragmented narrative structure reflects the fractured and often nonlinear nature of grief itself. The novel portrays grief not as a solitary endeavour but as one deeply entangled with familial histories and unresolved tensions. The funeral becomes a space where

silences speak volumes, and the tensions between memory and reality blur, creating an intricate tapestry of mourning that mirrors the protagonist's emotional journey. Veronica's ultimate confrontation with the pain of her family's past underscores how funerary rituals can serve as catalysts for both personal healing and collective reckoning, highlighting their dual role as spaces of reflection and transformation.

The rural funeral emerges as a cornerstone of community life in the works of William Trevor, John McGahern, and Donal Ryan. Trevor's *Love and Summer* (2009), McGahern's *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) and Ryan's *The Thing About December* (2014) offer rich depictions of rural communities where the wake and funeral become essential sites of communal solidarity. These narratives explore how rural traditions, steeped in history, provide frameworks for navigating grief. In McGahern's work, the meticulous rituals surrounding death reflect a deep respect for tradition, while Trevor's more understated depiction of community life shows how grief is often borne collectively through small, unspoken gestures. In Ryan's portrayal, the pressures of rural life reveal the fragility of communal bonds in a changing world. The male characters in these works offer compelling insights into how grief is navigated in environments where masculinity is often equated with emotional restraint. Whether through McGahern's depiction of quiet resilience or Ryan's exploration of vulnerability, these narratives illuminate the complex intersections of gender, grief and cultural expectation.

Ambiguous loss is another critical theme explored in this thesis, with texts such as Donal Ryan's *From a Low and Quiet Sea* (2018), Kit de Waal's *The Trick to Time* (2018) and Gillian Binchy's *Ruby's Tuesday* (2021) delving into the psychological and cultural dimensions of mourning without closure. Ryan's work, in particular, depicts the grief of families torn apart by migration, with loss magnified by the absence of physical remains or the inability to perform traditional rites. De Waal's *The Trick to Time* examines the lifelong grief associated with stillbirth, portraying the quiet devastation experienced by women who lose their children and must

navigate their grief in silence. The novel highlights how societal tendencies to overlook stillbirth as a legitimate source of grief marginalise these experiences, leaving women to create private rituals of remembrance to cope with their loss. Binchy's *Ruby's Tuesday*, on the other hand, addresses the heart-wrenching realities of women forced to travel abroad for terminations due to Ireland's legal restrictions. This enforced exile disrupts traditional mourning practices, leaving women without the cultural or familial support often central to the grieving process. Binchy's narrative underscores the isolation and disenfranchisement these women endure, while also critiquing the societal silence that compounds their pain. Together, these works challenge the boundaries of conventional mourning and bring attention to the ways in which structural and societal constraints deepen the complexities of grief. Emilie Pine's essays in *Notes to Self* (2018) provide a further dimension, capturing the ways in which ambiguous loss can shape identity and emotional landscapes. These works highlight how the absence of traditional markers of mourning disrupts the grieving process, underscoring the resilience required to navigate such losses.

The experiences of children in Irish funerary traditions are another focus of this thesis, with works such as Mary Costello's *Academy Street* (2014) and Fiona Scarlett's *Boys Don't Cry* (2021) providing intimate portrayals of grief from a child's perspective. Costello's depiction of Tess reveals the profound disorientation that follows the death of a parent, with her exclusion from mourning rituals exacerbating her sense of loss and confusion. Scarlett's narrative explores how young characters process grief through both emotional and practical engagement with death, often adopting roles that place them at the intersection of innocence and responsibility. These works underscore the importance of acknowledging children as participants in mourning practices, challenging societal tendencies to shield them from the realities of death. The emotional landscapes of these narratives reflect the vulnerabilities and

resilience of children, offering a powerful lens through which to view the impact of funerary traditions on young lives.

This study has laid the groundwork for future research in several directions. Comparative studies that examine Irish funerary traditions alongside those in other cultures could yield valuable insights into the universality and specificity of mourning practices. Further exploration of the impact of secularisation, particularly in urban contexts, would enhance understanding of cultural transitions. Research into how funerary traditions are represented in film, television and other media could broaden the scope of this analysis. Gendered perspectives on the roles of women in Irish funerary rituals and their portrayal in literature, including their socially expected modes of mourning, would be particularly valuable. The ambiguity surrounding stillbirth, miscarriage and termination presents another avenue for further study, as these forms of loss often resist traditional frameworks of mourning and closure. Similarly, the experiences of fostered and adopted children in navigating grief and identity remain an important and underexplored area of literary and cultural analysis.

Additionally, there is significant potential for further exploration of ambiguous loss in Irish literature. Many works identified during this research could not be included due to scope constraints. Examples such as Mary O'Donnell's *Where They Lie* (2014) and Brian McGilloway's *The Last Crossing* (2020), which focus on "The Disappeared" of the Northern Ireland Troubles, and Emilie Pine's *Ruth and Pen* (2023), which examines infertility, present compelling opportunities for future research. Nuala Ní Chonchúir's *The Closet of Savage Mementos* (2014) addresses the silent grief of placing a child for adoption, and memoirs such as the Wave Trauma Centre's *The Disappeared of Northern Ireland's 'Troubles'* (2012) highlight the potential for interdisciplinary exploration. These texts, combined with secondary sources such as Kenneth J. Doka's work on Disenfranchised Grief, offer rich possibilities for analysing how grief is conceptualised and represented in modern Irish narratives.

This thesis highlights the enduring significance of Irish funerary traditions in shaping narratives of grief and identity. By engaging with themes of communal solidarity, personal resilience and cultural continuity, contemporary Irish literature reimagines these rituals for a changing world. Through its exploration of mourning as both a personal and collective experience, this research underscores the critical role of funerary practices in navigating the complexities of loss and ensuring their relevance for future generations. These narratives remain vital to our understanding of mortality, identity and the human experience. It is my hope that this research will make a significant contribution to Irish studies and offer further insight into the way we place a huge importance on the transitions, rites and ceremonies surrounding death and dying, In Ireland.

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Appendices

Publications and Conferences

- Bonass Madden, M. (2025). "Burying Grief: Ambiguous Motherhood in Twenty-first Century Irish Fiction". [Upcoming Chapter in Armie, M. and Membrive, eds., V. (2025). *An Ever-Shifting Kaleidoscope: The Representations of the Irish Mammy in Contemporary Literature at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (2025)].
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- Bonass Madden, M. (2022). Presentation of current work, International Ph.D Seminar, EFACIS Summer School, Leuven. Aug 2022.
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