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# DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit

„Coping With Loss: Trauma and Healing in Cecelia  
Ahern’s *PS, I Love You* and Anne Enright’s *The  
Gathering*“

Verfasserin

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angestrebter akademischer Grad

Magistra der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, 2012

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt:

A 343

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt:

Anglistik und Amerikanistik

Betreuer:

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## **DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY**

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I confirm to have conceived and written this Diploma Thesis in English all by myself. Quotations from other authors are all clearly marked and acknowledged in the bibliographical references, either in the footnotes or within the text. Any ideas borrowed and/or passages paraphrased from the works of other authors have been truthfully acknowledged and identified in the footnotes.

Jasmin Horvath

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## **HINWEIS**

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Diese Diplomarbeit hat nachgewiesen, dass die betreffende Kandidatin befähigt ist, wissenschaftliche Themen selbstständig sowie inhaltlich und methodisch vertretbar zu bearbeiten. Da die Korrekturen des Beurteilenden nicht eingetragen sind und das Gutachten nicht beiliegt, ist nicht erkenntlich, mit welcher Note diese Arbeit abgeschlossen wurde. Das Spektrum reicht von sehr gut bis genügend. Die Habilitierten des Instituts für Anglistik und Amerikanistik bitten, diesen Hinweis bei der Lektüre zu beachten.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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First and foremost, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude and appreciation to my supervisor Ao. Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Wöhrer, whose unwavering support, encouragement and patience were decisive in getting this thesis finished. Your precious advice has certainly kept me from yielding to despair!

Furthermore, this thesis would never have found a satisfying end without the invaluable emotional support I received from family, friends, and most importantly, my dedicative and tolerant partner Christian. Thank you for sticking with me until the very end! I am indebted to all of you, but special recognition is extended to Anuradha, who was a major source of motivation and provided indispensable advice. I will certainly miss our inspirational study sessions!

Last but not least, Richard Bach's inspiring words never ceased to fill me with enthusiasm and motivation:

“We can lift ourselves out of ignorance, we can find ourselves as creatures of excellence and intelligence and skill. We can be free. We can learn to fly!” (Jonathan Livingston Seagull 17)

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## 1. Introduction

*“He who has gone, so we but cherish his memory, abides with us, more potent, nay, more present than the living man.”* (Antoine de Saint-Exupery<sup>1</sup>)

‘Death’ has ever been one of the most profoundly fascinating as well as thrilling phenomena of human existence. As the ultimate proof of having once been a vital part of the world of the living, death marks the very final transition one passes through in life. While death irrevocably ends the life of an individual, it also drastically changes the lives of those left behind. The bereaved thus need to come to terms with this most human and still largely mysterious experience and the grappling emotions that go along with it.

The present thesis aims at unravelling the diverse repercussions death and loss eventually have on the protagonists of the two Irish novels *PS, I Love You* and *The Gathering*, respectively. Both having loss and its implications as their major theme, the subsequent analysis intends to investigate the concept of bereavement in the light of both traditional and more recent theoretical approaches. In the course of the present thesis, questions of the following kind will subsequently be addressed:

- Which effect does the death of a beloved person have on the protagonists of the respective works? How do they react to loss and which attitudes to life do they expose?
- How do they seek and regain strength? Which role does the family occupy in this process?
- How are Kübler-Ross and Kessler’s *Five Stages of Grief* incorporated in the respective works?
- How can the traumatic event be transformed and become beneficial in the healing process?
- Is the theory of *continuing bonds* truthfully reflected and which means do the protagonists find to maintain their individual bond with the deceased?

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.sadly-missed.com/resources/grief\\_loss\\_quotes.php](http://www.sadly-missed.com/resources/grief_loss_quotes.php) (accessed 30 May 2012).

By employing an approach which distinctly separates the notions of loss, grief, mourning and healing, the individual mechanisms of bereavement are explicitly brought to the fore and analysed in an isolated, yet integrated manner. Chapter 2 thus begins with outlining the difficulty of comparing *PS, I Love You* and *The Gathering*, focusing on both crucial differences and similarities. Following an analytic pattern from the general to the particular, chapters 3 to 4 deal exclusively with terminological issues and the theoretical background needed in order to be able to meaningfully analyse the protagonists' journey from loss towards the final stage of healing and acceptance.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the practical application of the theoretical concepts. Starting with an in-depth analysis of loss and trauma in the two novels, chapter 5 is predominantly dedicated to disentangling the complex ramifications of loss and prominent theories of transition pertaining to the state of bereavement.

Following the objective state of loss, chapter 6 is inscribed to the personal grieving process of the two protagonists respectively, focusing particularly on Kübler-Ross and Kessler's (2007) pioneering model known as *The Five Stages of Grief*.

Chapter 7 subsequently discusses the function of grief and mourning, i.e. the public and ritualised aspects of grief. Addressing questions of traditional mourning behavior and its social limitations, this chapter particularly intends to unravel the protagonists' personal experiences of bereavement and the problem of how to transfer private grief into the social domain.

Finally, chapter 8 strives to relate the previously introduced theory to the protagonists' process of coping with the death of a beloved person. Introducing the concept of posttraumatic growth, this section particularly scrutinises the protagonists' growth potential after loss. It is argued that a positive and optimistic outlook on life can considerably alleviate the grieving process and thus facilitate a desirable healing outcome.



## **2. A Challenging Comparison: *PS, I Love You* and *The Gathering***

An interdisciplinary approach to texts, challenging as it may be, provides intriguing insights. Interdisciplinarity relies on effortful study of a wealth of different theories and methods and thus rather tends not to be straight-forward. Even less so, if the texts to be analysed, although congruent in their main themes, differ considerably in both content and style. Challenges, however, exist to be mastered, and the attempt to compare a novel by Cecelia Ahern to one by Anne Enright by applying both a literary and an interdisciplinary approach has only just begun. Even though both novels were written by contemporary Irish female authors who both employ clues as to their original sense of place, there are crucial differences in the way the theme of death and grief is presented and dealt with by their characters. In what follows, a short overview of the novels will be given in order to exemplify major differences and similarities along with their importance for the present analysis.

Starting with *PS, I Love You* by Cecelia Ahern, a young, energetic, predominantly chick-lit author directs her attention, au contraire, not on the light-hearted lifestyles and relationships of women in their thirties that are so typical for the chick-lit mode, but focuses rather on the heroine's crisis, depression and reorganisation of life after loss. With the protagonist Holly, Ahern introduces an individualised character who, after phases of deep depression, embraces the opportunity to accept positive outcomes in the aftermath of crises. Even if read unpretentiously, *PS, I Love You* still leaves the reader disconcerted, since the serious theme of death permeates throughout.

Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, on the other hand, is a postmodernist work of fiction, which employs a thoughtful and adept mother and married woman as protagonist. As Man Booker Prize winner of 2007 and sophisticated in narrative technique, *The Gathering* is not as easily digested as *PS, I Love You*. Veronica's brother Liam committed suicide at the age of 31 presumably as a

belated result of child abuse in early childhood. Accounting for their past and reprocessing painful childhood memories, Veronica slowly gains insight into why her brother Liam became mentally unstable and ultimately saw no way out other than committing suicide. Veronica's agonising journey through emotions, grief and a severely dysfunctional parental family forces her to reconsider her entire life.

The similarities displayed in both novels are self-evident. Both protagonists lose a loved one, a loss which shakes their underlying assumptions of the world and leaves them struggling to make sense of it. Additionally, the two protagonists are part of traditional Irish families (although there are grave differences as regards quality of the family structure) rooted in Ireland. Furthermore, both Holly and Veronica feel guilty for having lost their loved ones, although for different reasons. While Holly feels she could have done more for her dying husband, Veronica feels guilty because she keeps a terrible secret; one that could have changed the history of the family and, if timely revealed, might have saved Liam. Their course of grief is by no means alike; still, it can be said to have a similar outcome, namely a newly won conviction that life, irrespective of its hardships, is worth living even after having experienced a most painful loss.

Equally evident as the similarities, however, are the significant differences between the two novels. Probably the most intriguing fact about comparing the novels *PS, I Love You* and *The Gathering* in order to arrive at an in-depth analysis of bereavement as perceived by the protagonists is to display the striking differences rather than the similarities.

The major differences in structure, style and plot are as follows:

While *PS, I Love You* makes excessive use of highly emotional and colloquial language by means of dialogue and is rendered from the perspective of an omniscient third person narrator, *The Gathering* relies on a first person narrator protagonist, who reflects internal emotions and is, thus, inevitably subjective and hence not necessarily reliable. Content-wise, the major juxtaposition will be

that of conjugal versus sibling bereavement, since Holly's loss refers to her husband Gerry, while Veronica deals with her brother Liam's loss. What are the differences between these two kinds of bereavement and how do the bereaved respectively react? These questions will be tackled from chapter 5 onwards.

Another intriguing difference is the one of the family life in both novels. Both novels present traditional large Irish families with clearly patriarchal structures and values. However, while facing supportive and efficient family members in *PS, I Love You*, the reader is confronted with a dysfunctional family with a stern, authoritarian father and lack of support in *The Gathering*. Also of interest for the analysis of Holly's and Veronica's coping process is the way their loved ones passed away. In Holly's case, the untimely death of her husband was more or less expected after the doctor's diagnosis of a terminal brain tumour and she knew that due to this tumour he would have to die within a few months. This knowledge is an important factor in facilitating one's preparation for and adjusting to the impending loss and is generally known as "pre-bereavement" or "anticipatory grief"<sup>2</sup>. When death is anticipated, as Becvar (12, cf Rolland 1991) states, "the grieving process may begin even though the death has not yet occurred", which is supported by Walter's (1999: 50) view that social deaths might be as important as physical ones, since in terminal illness "the person is already lost: the family are grieving very much for a loss that has already occurred".

Veronica, on the other hand, is entirely left in the dark as a result of her brother's sudden death through suicide. This way, Veronica's process of making sense of the loss is further complicated by reprocessing Liam's past in order to find indications for the tragedy. According to Lindemann's (1944, qtd in Carr 425) study, "unexpected deaths are more distressing than anticipated death", a view that is not shared by all researchers, since empirical studies offer different findings: O'Bryant (1990-1991) maintains that anticipated deaths are less

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<sup>2</sup>"grief in anticipation of the loss of the person" (Walter 1999: 50).

stressful than sudden ones, while Sanders' (1982-1983) research reveals quite the opposite<sup>3</sup>.

Social support and networks are indispensable when facing loss. Holly, fortunately, can rely and fall back on her social networks, be it family, long-known or newly acquainted friends or co-workers. These networks and social structures help her finding back to a reorganised way of life and thus regain her poise. Furthermore, Holly overtly discloses her emotions and enters a discourse about her deceased husband with her social networks. It will be displayed at a later stage in the present thesis how vital shared and disclosed emotions in the grieving process can be<sup>4</sup>. Veronica, on the contrary, finds herself in no such situation, being socially rather isolated and without any close friends to share her emotions with. Not even her own family or husband is willing to understand the phases Veronica is going through as a result of Liam's death, which is why she decides to occupy herself with the loss without opening up to anyone.

Last but not least, there is an evident difference in tone between the two novels. Whereas *PS, I Love You* rather emphasises a positive outlook on life which is reflected in the language employed, *The Gathering* appears to be fairly negative when it comes to faith in the future and a successful grieving outcome. The overall narration maintains a rather gloomy undertone, something that is lacking in *PS, I Love You* with its undaunted optimism in a benevolent world. Not only is this tone evident on the linguistic level, but it is also reflected in the characters of Holly and Veronica; while the former maintains a confident optimistic outlook on life, the latter rather focuses on the negative side effects life have in store.

### **3. Terminology**

*"Grief...is the cost we pay for being able to love in the way we do."*  
(Archer 5, qtd in Stroebe *et al.* 2008: 5)

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<sup>3</sup>Interestingly, another group of researchers found no evident correlation between sudden/anticipated death and coping abilities of the bereaved (cf Roach & Kitson 1989).

<sup>4</sup>Pennebaker, Zech and Rimé (2001) offer a detailed account on this topic.

As death and dying inevitably have their place within the cycle of life, mourning and grief reflections have fiercely sustained their position as an indispensable protective mechanism of one's psyche. Just how much death is integral in our lives is made explicit in the following:

From the very beginning we sense the oxymoronic quality of death. Death is destroyer and redeemer; the ultimate cruelty and the essence of release; universally feared but sometimes actively sought; undeniably ubiquitous, yet incomprehensively unique; of all phenomena, the most obvious and the least reportable, feared yet fascinating. (Shneidman 10 qtd in Becvar 6)

It is of little wonder, then, that there is a myriad of far-reaching research on this topic, one that seems to captivate so many of those still living. Decades of research brought various findings and approaches to the fore, most of which will be elaborated on in the course of this chapter. While it is aimed at providing a thematic overview of the bereavement issue in a more or less lineal and chronological manner, some pioneers in the field are nevertheless especially highlighted so as to underline their break-through notions of grief work and their importance in the research field of bereavement.

Before starting with a thorough and detailed overview of bereavement research through the decades, it appears sensible to first clarify the terminology henceforth used in this thesis. Bereavement terminology has ever since been quite vulnerable to debate and critics are, to this day, not at all in agreement when talking about concepts such as grief, mourning and bereavement in general (cf Hockey 4). In order to understand the implications accompanied by loss, it is vital to clearly emphasise how it will be used in this thesis. According to Despelder and Strickland (288), loss "is the state or fact of being deprived of someone or something valued" and is "usually perceived as negative and unpleasant". Likewise held generally, Raphael (1983, qtd in Small 20) conceives loss as "the state of being deprived of, or being without, something one has had". The most pronounced deprivation one could possibly encounter is the death of a loved one and the notion of loss strongly links to the one of bereavement. Introducing the definitions in Stroebe *et al's Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice* (2001, 2008), bereavement is used as the

umbrella term for loss, i.e. “the objective situation of having lost **someone** significant through death” (Stroebe *et al* 2008: 4, emphasis added). This view, however, is challenged by those claiming that a wider definition is needed in order to “encompass a variety of additional losses across a longer time frame” (Hockey 4). A loss need not necessarily merely be constricted to a person; rather, several interdependent losses are at play when confronted with death, such as the loss of a particular way of life or certain roles formerly occupied and now void<sup>5</sup>. As Silverman and Klass (1996: 18) put forward, when losing someone “[t]he self in that role and the role itself are lost as well”. Catering for that diversity, Corr *et al.* (2000), for instance, provide a much more open view of bereavement, referring to “the state of being bereaved or deprived of something; that is, bereavement identifies the objective situation of individuals who have experienced a loss”, regardless of what nature. Marris (1975) argues along the same lines, providing an even wider definition saying that “[b]ereavement presents unambiguously one aspect of social changes – the irretrievable loss of the familiar”. Interesting from an etymological point of view, this correlates perfectly with the root to *reave*, meaning “to despoil, rob or forcibly deprive” (Simpson and Wiener 2000: 295). While bereavement is predominantly held as vague and objective, grief and mourning, on the other hand, are more specified in terms of emotions and behaviour. Although every grief is experienced and felt individually by different persons, there are nevertheless certain guidelines (which are by no means to be embraced as prescriptions how the grief course should take direction) as to how most people, at some stage or other during the grief course, express their feelings. This view to be especially cautious when it comes to generalising grief patterns for a majority of grievers is promoted by means of an intriguing analogy of the Greek mythological figure Procrustes “the Stretcher”<sup>6</sup>. Procrustes’ ambition was to forcefully fit people of different sizes into a standard iron bed, thus denying their individual needs (cf Small 19). Likewise, grievers cannot be expected to experience the same course and progress of grief at exactly the same time in a

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<sup>5</sup>Kübler-Ross and Kessler 59; Stroebe, Schut and Stroebe 2005: 50.

<sup>6</sup>Analogy taken from Small 19.

goal-oriented manner, but should, rather, take these theoretical approaches as non-committal guidelines capable of rediscovering oneself in them. Even though Kübler-Ross and Kessler (7) provide a framework to ease and assist in the grieving process, they still promote that “there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss”. Wortman and Silver (1989) argue along the same lines, accentuating the great risk of pre-modelling stages grieverers are expected and supposed to surpass during their grief experience. Still, certain definitions need to be made accessible for closer scrutiny and as a basis for health practitioners and counsellors. Returning to the question of which definitions and terminology will be used in the present paper, yet another tricky differentiation lies ahead. What exactly do the terms grief and mourning denote and how do they differ? What ways are there to successfully differentiate both of them and where do they eventually overlap?

The subjective reaction to the objective state of bereavement is defined as grief and is characterised as “the response to loss [...] [it] signifies one’s reaction, both internally and externally, to the impact of loss” (Corr *et al.* 221). Grief, as suggested by Stroebe *et al.* (2008: 5) and largely accepted in the contemporary bereavement discourse, is the “primarily emotional (affective) reaction to the loss of a loved one through death”. It thus attempts to project the internal perspective of the bereaved by focusing on inner emotional states and centring on processes that are of importance for the self. It is furthermore indispensable to acknowledge grief as a process or activity with a dynamic of its own rather than merely an inflexible “state of being” (Hockey 5).

The last item in need of clarification, namely mourning, is notoriously the most difficult to come to terms with. As opposed to grief, mourning is the social and socialised side of grief and can thus be viewed as “the public display of grief” or “the social expressions or acts expressive of grief that are shaped by the (often religious) beliefs and practices of a given society or cultural group (Stroebe *et al.* 2008: 5). It is best described in Hockey’s terms (6), who disentangles the terminological confusion by claiming that “[m]ourning can therefore be conceptualized as a site of context for the grief felt in response to a bereavement”. Mourning could then be characterised as grief finding its way to

the surface and where it is publicly expressed and regulated. The policy and policing of grief (cf Walter 1999) is a potent issue which may force mourners to behave in ways that are socially established or prescribed and culturally rooted.

Mourning used to be equated to the concept of grief so that both terms were used interchangeably without attesting any difference to the internal and external world of the bereaved (cf Stroebe *et al.* 2008). According to Stroebe *et al.* (2008: 5) the interchangeable use of the terms points to the psychoanalytic tradition which regards mourning as an “emotional reaction to loss”, a definition that would elsewhere qualify as grief. Summarising, Small (20), following Raphael (1983), puts forward a neat overview of definitions maintaining that “[g]rief is the pain and suffering experienced after loss; mourning is a period of time during which signs of grief are made visible; and bereavement is the process of losing a close relationship”. Walter (1999: xv-xvi), however, challenges this “over-neat formulation” of clearly differentiating between the aforementioned concepts, and argues for a sociological view of bereavement concepts including cultural and societal factors not only for the mourning but also for the grieving process.

Last but not least, it will prove valuable to define the process of coping and existing strategies in general in order for it to be subsequently applied to grief and mourning. As coping is a general phenomenon not only constricted to bereavement, it can be seen as “the person’s cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage (reduce, minimize, master, or tolerate) the internal and external demands of the person-environment transaction that is appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & De Longis 1986: 572). According to Folkman *et al.* (1986: 572) a distinction needs to be made between problem-focused coping (i.e. managing the problem which is responsible for distress) and emotion-focused coping (i.e. “regulating emotion”), both of which is an integral part of *cognitive stress theory*<sup>7</sup> and will be more closely scrutinised in Chapter 4.4.

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<sup>7</sup>For more information on cognitive stress theory, see Lazarus & Folkman 1984.



#### **4. Paving the Way - Bereavement Research throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Continual research in the realm of death and bereavement appeared immediately following the Second World War (Small 21), not least due to

the rapid expansion of organized sciences and societal funded research; the appearance of the mental health movement with a central focus on suicide prevention; a depersonalization of many aspects of human existence associated with new technologies; and a powerful death anxiety that has been attributed to the use of atomic weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (Benoliel 4, qtd in Small 21)

However, according to Small (21), death as an integral part of society had been accounted for even before the developments that were brought by the Second World War<sup>8</sup>. In what follows, an overview of concepts, models and approaches to grief and mourning throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be given. Furthermore, recent developments and debates in the bereavement discourse will be elicited in order to make sense of an up-to-date understanding of grief.

##### **4.1. Psychoanalytic Approaches to Grief and the Grief Work Model**

Imperative in the psychological treatment of bereavement was, first and foremost, Sigmund Freud's highly influential paper *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), centring on the concept of the *ego* and how it is inevitably attached to dear "objects", including deceased loved ones. This attachment is characterised by an investment of emotion which is also called *cathexis*<sup>9</sup>. Mourning, accordingly, "has a quite precise psychical task to perform: its function is to detach the survivor's memories and hopes from the dead" (Freud 1913: 65, qtd in Silverman and Klass 1996). Only after a successful detachment process is it possible to reinvest energy into other relationships. At the centre of psychoanalytic bereavement tradition (just as in attachment theory, see further below) lies the notion of *grief work* (*Trauerarbeit*) which informs other models of coping with bereavement such as stage models (cf Bowlby, 1980; Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2007) and Worden's (1991) task model (Stroebe, Schut and

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<sup>8</sup>Cf Tylor 1871; Frazer 1911; Van Gennep 1909.

<sup>9</sup>"investment of mental or emotional energy in a person, object, or idea", retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cathexis> Nov 18 2011.

Stroebe 2005: 49-50). The idea of having to work through painful emotions connected with loss is at the heart of adaptive grieving (Stroebe, Schut and Stroebe, 2005: 50) and has been coined as grief work hypothesis<sup>10</sup>. Resolution is seen as the ultimate goal at the end of grief work, and is only possible via “an active process of confronting thoughts and feelings associated with the loss” (Archer 2008: 52). ‘Working through’ grief is defined by Stroebe (1992: 20, qtd in Wortman and Silver 2001: 411) as “a cognitive process of confronting a loss, of going over the events before and at the time of the death, of focusing on memories and working towards detachment from the deceased”. The importance of having to process grief in various ways and thus gradually working through the loss (cf Bowlby, 1980; Parkes & Weiss, 1983) seems to be universal. Not being able to work through a loss may result in the bereaved “suffer[ing] lasting emotional damage” (Marris 29). Likewise, Rando (114) assumes that “for the griever who has not attended to his grief, the pain is as acute and fresh ten years later as it was the day after”. However, the concept of grief work is met with several shortcomings, since it “has been poorly defined, and the term is ambiguous” (Stroebe, Schut and Stroebe, 2005: 50) for encompassing both negative and positive aspects of the grief experience.

Comparing mourning and melancholia in his paper, Freud (1917: 244) suggests basic similarities between the two concepts, claiming that both exhibit symptoms like “profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love [and] inhibition of all activity”. From this point of view, mourning shares melancholic traits. However, there is one crucial differentiation to be made when considering mourning and melancholia, namely that “[i]n mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty” (Freud 1917: 246) while melancholia presents the ego as depleted. This pioneering view of grieving the dead (which, at that stage, was and still sometimes is equated, with the concept of mourning (cf Stroebe *et al.* 2008: 5)) in turn triggered appraisal as well as criticism from various angles. The process of eventually letting go and thus detaching oneself emotionally from the person once attached to is emphasised in Freud’s work and has ever since fuelled

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<sup>10</sup> For detailed analysis see Stroebe 1992.

heated debates amongst both mourners and practitioners (cf Walter 113). The assumption that “when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (Freud 1917: 245) is problematic in numerous different ways. First of all, Freud’s view disregards any possibility of the bereaved maintaining the relationship with the deceased as an option of healthy, not pathological, mourning (see theory of *continuing bonds*, Klass, Silverman, Nickman 1996; discussed further below). Furthermore, Freud’s view of severing all bonds in order to reinvest them elsewhere is seen as the one way of resolution to grief, while it is universally agreed that there is no such thing as the ultimate resolution and that every individual grieves a loss differently<sup>11</sup>. Freud’s approach to mourning, controversial as it may be, nevertheless precipitated even more research in the psychoanalytic tradition of coming to terms with loss (cf Deutsch 1937; Klein 1940) and “[shaped] subsequent understanding of healthy and unhealthy coping with bereavement” (Stroebe *et al.* 2008: 9).

Closely related to Freud’s theories with a view to mourning are both Abraham (1927) and Schafer (1968, 1976), who tried to establish a link between introjection or internalisation and the way people cope with lost objects (Klass, Silverman and Nickman 1996: 8). Already touching upon the theory of *continuing bonds*<sup>12</sup>, Abraham (1927, qtd in Klass, Silverman and Nickman 1996: 8) promoted the idea that the “mourner introjected the lost object in order to retain it”, while Schafer (1968, 1976 qtd in Klass, Silverman and Nickman 1996: 8) expressed a need to differentiate two types of internalisation, namely identification and introjection. Whereas the former mainly deals with a quite positively attributed identification process with the deceased without desperately holding on to memories thereof<sup>13</sup> (which is very much in accordance with Klass, Silverman and Nickman’s (1996) understanding of *continuing bonds*), introjection is the negative side-effect of internalising a dead person in an unhealthy and pathological manner. Interesting in this respect is Tahka’s (1984:

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<sup>11</sup>cf Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2007; Walter 1999; Stroebe *et al.* 2008, Bonanno and Kaltman 2001.

<sup>12</sup>Klass, Silverman, Nickman 1996.

<sup>13</sup>cf Volkan 1981.

18) extension of the concept of internalisation to enrich it with the so-called “remembrance-formation”<sup>14</sup>, which

represents an entirely different form of internalization: building and integrating the representation of the lost object into a remembrance of him as he was really experienced during a common period of life. Once it has been established, its later calling back to mind, reminiscing about it and dismissing it again from the mind, are invariably experienced as activities of the self taking place exclusively on the subject’s own conditions. [...] In contrast to fantasy objects possessing various wish-fulfilling functions, it includes the awareness that nothing more can be expected from it [...].

This differentiation between identification, introjection and remembrance-formation will be of use at a later point in the present thesis, distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy ways of coping with loss as represented in *PS, I Love You* and *The Gathering*.

Just as the beginnings of successive bereavement research primarily relied on psychoanalysis and its tools, the 1940s, consequently, introduced the importance of empirical research in the realm of bereavement<sup>15</sup>. Even today, Lindemann’s (1944) influential article “Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief” is an integral part of appraising the bereaved, which ushered other empirical researchers to leave their traces in the field<sup>16</sup>.

#### **4.2. Attachment Theory**

Losing a person dear to oneself presupposes a certain kind of relationship or emotional affection in order to fundamentally shake one’s assumptions of the world. Attachment theory as of Bowlby (1980) tries to account for that relationship and sketches how and why the bond between deceased and bereaved is established in the first place and in turn explains reactions of loss and depression. Having published the third part of the trilogy *Loss: Sadness and Depression* (1980), Bowlby inevitably penetrated the field of grief and mourning and thus considerably contributed to shape the bereavement

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<sup>14</sup>Which already anticipates the theory of continuing rather than breaking of bonds (cf Klass, Silverman, Nickman 1996).

<sup>15</sup>Stroebe *et al.* 2001: 9.

<sup>16</sup>cf Kraus and Lilienfeld (1959) and, most notably Parkes 1972, 1975a, 1975b.

discourse. One of the presumptions of attachment theory<sup>17</sup> is that every person ultimately seeks intimacy with certain attachment figures, especially in situations of acute distress, such as the loss of a beloved (cf Mikulincer and Shaver 89). Bowlby conceives grief as separation anxiety<sup>18</sup>, which is typically “articulated as a triphasic sequence: protest, despair and detachment” (Kauffman 312). According to Bowlby (1969, qtd in Shaver and Tancredy 74), every human being is born with two kinds of systems, namely the “attachment behavioural system” and the “caregiving [parenting] system”, which in turn are responsible for the formation of close attachments. When separation from these secure attachments occurs, acute distress is the typical response<sup>19</sup>. Continuing Bowlby’s work in the realm of attachments between caregiver and child, Mary Ainsworth (1978) thus introduced four different styles of attachment. Ainsworth distinguishes between the category of secure and insecure attachments. While secure attachments are not further subdivided, insecure attachments are split into *anxious ambivalent*, *avoidant* and *disorganized/disoriented* (cf Parkes 2001: 38). *Anxious ambivalent* attachments are characterised by “overanxious and insensitive” mothers who all but encourage their children to explore the world, thus children display severe distress when separated from their mother figure (cf Parkes 2001:38). *Avoidant* styles are exposed by children who seem quite detached from their mothers because the latter cannot seem to accept a close relationship and clinging behaviour, which nevertheless results in a covert distress (e.g. rapid heart rate) when separation occurs (cf Parkes 2001: 38). *Disorganised or disoriented attachment styles* are typically characterised by a multitude of disorganised behaviour patterns during separation. This disorganisation might be evoked by the mothers’ unresolved traumata or formerly experienced losses which are projected onto the children (cf Parkes 2001: 38). These attachment styles are of major importance for the sound study of bereavement, since they try to grapple the issue at the root and might facilitate an understanding of why bereaved adults react in ways similar to separation anxiety during childhood.

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<sup>17</sup>Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980, 1982.

<sup>18</sup>Kauffman 2001; Stroebe, Schut and Stroebe 2005; Archer and Fisher 2008.

<sup>19</sup>cf Shaver and Tancredy 2001.

Parkes (1972, 1986) supported Bowlby's theories by enriching them with empirical data. Especially well-known is his longitudinal study on 22 London widows (Parkes 1972) which, amongst other clinical observations, helped him to account for grief as

a process and not a state. Grief is not a set of symptoms which start after a loss and then gradually fade away. It involves a succession of clinical pictures which blend into and replace one another [...] numbness, the first phase, gives way to pining, and pining to disorganisation and despair, and it is only after the stage of disorganisation that recovery occurs. Hence, at any particular time a person may show one of four quite different clinical pictures. (Parkes 1986: 27)

As will be seen in the following, both Bowlby and Parkes penetrated the field of stage theories of grief as well.

#### **4.3. Stage Theories and Subsequent Modifications**

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the development of several stage theories of grief<sup>20</sup> (Littlewood 71-72), which have ever since been of particular interest to the bereaved as they usually provide a rough framework as to how most of those recently bereaved react. It is of vital importance, however, that these models are merely to be regarded as guidelines as to how one could and not how one should behave. According to Shuchter and Zisook (1993: 23) “[g]rief is not a linear process with concrete boundaries but, rather, a composite of overlapping, fluid phases that vary from person to person”, a statement that indicates the delicate status of prescribed phases in the grieving process. Weiss (2008: 34) attempted to make sense of stage theories by viewing them in the light of Weberian ideal types<sup>21</sup>, thus interpreting stage theories, like ideal types, as “conceptual devices, useful insofar as they provide a framework for theory, observations, and expectations”.

Bowlby's attachment theory (1969, 1973, 1980) not only offers insights into human bonding and the establishment of relationships, it also delineates stages bereaved persons are likely to go through after loss. The phases as identified

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<sup>20</sup>e.g. Bowlby 1980; Worden 1982; Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2007.

<sup>21</sup> „A construct or model that serves as a measuring rod against which specific cases can be evaluated”, taken from [http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072435569/student\\_view0/glossary.html](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072435569/student_view0/glossary.html).

by Bowlby (1980: 85) are *numbing, yearning and searching* for the lost person (peaking in anger), *disorganization and despair*, and ultimately, *reorganization*. Likewise, Shuchter and Zisook's (1993) model includes phases such as *shock and disbelief, somatic and emotional discomfort* and *restitution* (cf Weiss 2008: 34).

As already mentioned earlier, Parkes identified with and was very much influenced by Bowlby and his views of grief, which encouraged him to carry forward Bowlby's theories of attachment in the grief realm. It is not surprising, then, that Parkes' (1972) stage theory exhibits resemblance to Bowlby's initial stages, recognising *numbness, pining, depression* and *recovery* as relevant in the grief process (cf Small 30). Additionally, he identified the following constituents as necessary in grief work:

1. A preoccupation with thoughts of the lost person, which derives from the urge to search for that person.
2. Painful repetitious recollection of the loss experience. This 'worry work' must occur if the loss is not fully accepted as irrevocable.
3. The attempt to make sense of the loss and either fit it into one's prevailing assumptive world or modify that world accordingly (Parkes 1986: 95, qtd in Small 30)

Probably the best-known and cited stage model of modern times are Kübler-Ross' and Kessler's (2007) *Five Stages of Grief* since it enjoys a good reputation as indispensable self-help resource and serves as a valuable model for grief practitioners. In response to voiced criticism against the nature of stages in grieving, Kübler-Ross and Kessler (7) were keen to portray their stages as helpful tools only, since "[t]hey were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages", concluding that "[o]ur grief is as individual as our lives". *Denial, anger, bargaining, depression* and *acceptance* are the stages they identified as somewhat universally applicable, while still infinitely personal and individual. The stages will be dealt with extensively in the practical part of the present thesis (see Chapter 6).

As opposed to phases or stages of grief that are typically passive and simply emerge as a result of loss, task models assign the bereaved a more active and autonomous role to take part. Worden (2001: 217) characterises grief as a task

that needs to be accomplished (although not systematically) in order to be able to return to a life where living with the deceased becomes acceptable. In his *Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (1982), Worden outlines the tasks as follows:

1. To accept the reality of the loss.
2. To work through the pain of grief.
3. To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing.
4. To emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life. (Worden 1982, qtd in Small 30)

The task approach does not seem to be as inflexible and static as stages or phases in which mourners merely find themselves in during their grieving process, but rather advocates a dynamic and self-determined way of living grief. This approach, while generally approved, was not universally taken for granted, since Stroebe and Schut (2001: 388) claim it to lack “acceptance of the changed world, not just the reality of loss” and further postulate that the bereaved need to “work toward developing new roles, identities, and relationships, not just relocating the deceased and ‘moving on’”. Likewise, Rando (1993) saw certain flaws in the existing stage models and, therefore, supports an approach to grieving that relies on processes rather than tasks. The criticism Rando voiced towards tasks or stages is their apparent inability of going back and forth in a non-sequential way (cf Small 30). Moreover, a strong “reliance on end points” (Small 30) may hinder the process quality of grief, which is the reason why Rando identified the following six processes as an ameliorated version of the traditional stage model:

1. Recognize the loss.
2. React to the separation.
3. Recollect and re-experience the deceased and the relationship.
4. Relinquish the old attachments to the deceased and the old assumptive world.
5. Readjust and move adaptively into the new world without forgetting the old.
6. Reinvest (Rando 1993, qtd in Small 30)

As stage theories in general tend to be used by health practitioners and therapists as a device designed to help mourners through their loss, it has often



been dismissed as being too prescriptive. The following statement clarifies the existing criticism when it comes to stage theories:

The stage theory is descriptive in nature but has been treated as prescriptive. That is, some health care professionals have abused the theory by attempting to force patients to move from one stage to the next according to an imposed schedule. Moreover, the prescriptive view of the dying process interprets the final stage of acceptance [*referring to Kübler-Ross' five stages of death but analogously applicable to grief*] as the universally desired outcome for all dying individuals. (Samarel 1995: 94-5, qtd in Small 31)

Interestingly, it was Kübler-Ross' (7) personal concern to emphasise that the identified stages are by no means to be regarded as linear in progression and that not necessarily all bereaved persons go through all the stages. This suggests, then, that the stages might have been misused by health care professionals by misunderstanding the primary goal of assisting, not prescribed guiding, through grief.

As can be deduced from the above, all the stages, phases, tasks and processes seem to correlate in one specific assertion, namely that grief should eventually arrive at a certain end point and must be resolved in order to sustain one's mental health. Stage theories, according to Kaufmann (312) "emphasise the forward progress and goal directedness of the process", which inherently refers to a gradual end of grief over time. This view eventually aroused criticism, not least amongst Corr *et al.* (1997: 239), who maintain that

to recover from one's grief seems to suggest grief is a bad situation like an illness or disease. It also seems to imply that once one is recovered or 'healed' one is essentially unchanged by the experience. Alternatively, recovery, completion and resolution seem to suggest a fixed endpoint for mourning. If such a fixed endpoint did exist, once it was reached one would then be over and done with mourning [...]

Resolution seems to have been the key for a desirable recovery from loss; still, there are more and more voices arguing for a revolutionary and totally different approach associated with the continuing, not the breaking, of bonds (see Chapter 4.7. in this thesis).

Moreover, a matter that needs attention as well is the one of personal growth after loss which will be discussed elsewhere in the thesis (see Chapter 8.1.). In their critique of specific static end points of grief, Corr *et al.* (1997: 239) further indicate that “adaptation seems to imply that one has made the best of a bad situation, without necessarily incorporating the changes of the development of new ways of functioning that are essential in productive mourning and that may lead to personal growth”.

In what follows, a link is established between bereavement and other forms of psychological as well as physiological dysfunction. Bereavement and stress or trauma have been studied extensively over the years<sup>22</sup> and display correlations to a great degree, which is why theories originally pertaining to fields of trauma and cognitive stress are likewise applicable to grief and mourning.

#### **4.4. Bereavement and Trauma**

Cognitive stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman 1984) and trauma theory (cf Horowitz 1976; Pennebaker 1995, Janoff-Bulman 1992) are general theories usually applicable to events triggering distress such as victimisation, war, accidents and bereavement (cf Stroebe & Schut 2001: 378). According to Lazarus & Folkman (1984) bereavement is one of the events which represents stress and could thus be seen as a stressor, or, in other words, “a life event that poses demands on the individual, which could tax or exceed the resources available, thereby endangering health and well-being” (Stroebe & Schut 2001: 378). It becomes evident that cognitive stress theory might be helpful with regard to bereavement and loss, since “[b]ereavement is a global stressor” (Stroebe & Schut 2001: 378). As already outlined earlier, coping strategies especially relevant for the present purpose of analysing *PS, I Love You* and *The Gathering* thus are problem-focused and emotion-focused coping as well as strategies focusing on the interplay of confrontation and avoidance. While problem-focused coping usually aims at changing bothersome situations for the better, emotion-focused coping deals with administering emotions accompanying a stressful situation (cf Billings & Moos 1981; Lazarus &

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<sup>22</sup> Horowitz 1983, 1986; Janoff-Bulman 1992; Lazarus & Folkman 1984; Kaltman & Bonanno 2003.

Folkman 1984; Stroebe & Schut 2001). Stroebe & Schut (2001: 379) claim that during bereavement emotion-focused coping might be more effective because “the deceased cannot be brought back”, at the same time, problem-focused coping might be worthwhile when tackling issues such as reorganising one’s life without the deceased. When it comes to the interplay between confrontation and avoidance as a coping strategy, it needs to be emphasised that this is not a matter of either-or; rather, various stressors are likely to be encountered at various times during the bereavement process (cf Stroebe & Schut 2001: 380).

Similar to cognitive stress theory, trauma theory is concerned with the manifestation of perturbing life events and may thus be likewise applicable to bereavement<sup>23</sup>. Most noteworthy about studies in trauma with regard to bereavement is Horowitz’ (1983, 1986) work on *stress response syndromes*, Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) *assumptive world theory* (dealt with in the following section) and Pennebaker’s (1995) book *Emotion, Disclosure and Health*, dealing with the positive effects on traumata if emotions are overtly disclosed and socially shared. Relating these theories to the current interest of analysing *PS, I Love You* and *The Gathering* in terms of effective coping will be of particular importance in the subsequent practical part.

#### **4.5. Psychosocial Transition**

Losing a loved one typically shatters the foundations of the bereaved, including their formerly taken for granted views of the world. As one attempts to make sense of a loss, worldviews typically change and need to be readjusted to the new situation. As already introduced above, Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) *assumptive world theory* facilitates an understanding of the hardships one faces after a crisis as shattering as bereavement after loss. Janoff-Bulman (1992: 6) suggests three universal “fundamental assumptions”, namely: a) benevolence of the world, b) meaningfulness of the world and c) self-worth. The *assumptive world theory* purports that events such as trauma and loss carry the power to shake the basis of one’s world and self and thus need to be successfully adjusted to in order to “[revise] worldviews so that they may remain somewhat

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<sup>23</sup>cf Stroebe&Schut 2001, Horowitz 1986, Pennebaker 1995.

positive, yet incorporate the loss” (Davis 2008: 310). According to Janoff-Bulman (1992: 318), there seems to be an oscillation between retaining positive views of the world while integrating the loss into this framework. In Janoff-Bulman’s words,

after traumatic life events, survivors’ fundamental assumptions are less positive than they had been previctimization. They have been stripped of illusions and they know that tragedy can strike any time. Yet, their new assumptive worlds, reconstructed over time, are typically not wholly negative and threatening. Instead, they are generally positive, but allow for the real possibility of misfortune. (Janoff-Bulman 1992: 318, qtd in Davis 2008: 310)

This view already points to a highly relevant issue dealt with at a later point in the present paper, namely posttraumatic growth (see Chapter 8.1.).

Partially following Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) reflections on assumptive worlds, Parkes (1996: 90 qtd in Stroebe and Schut 2001: 386) accounts for the crucial step one inevitably needs to make in order to adjust to loss as follows:

When somebody dies a whole set of assumptions about the world that relied upon the other person for their validity are suddenly invalidated. Habits of thought which have been built up over many years must be reviewed and modified, a person’s view of the world must change [...] it inevitably takes time and effort.

According to this approach, adjustment to loss is reached through “a gradual changing of assumptions” (Stroebe and Schut 2001: 386), also termed as “assumptive world”. Viewing loss as a psychosocial transition entails “old identities and ways of understanding the world [which are] gradually given up and replaced with new identities and ways of understanding the world” (Davis 2008: 309). After a change or modification of these assumptive worlds is completed, adaptation to loss will be much more easily available. In other words, the changes taking place “are gradual and involve incorporating and reinterpreting the past rather than giving it up” (Parkes 2001: 41), a view that seems to correspond to a large extent to Klass, Silverman and Nickman’s (1996) theory of *Continuing Bonds* (see Chapter 4.7.)

#### **4.6. Two-Track Model and Dual Process Model**

Differentiating between two tracks, Rubin (1981, 1992) offers a new perspective on grief in that he consciously separates outcome or reaction to bereavement (Track 1) from the ongoing attachment, the “relational bond”, to the deceased (Track 2)<sup>24</sup>.

Similar in the attempt of differentiating two distinct variables is the dual process model (henceforth abbreviated DPM). It was developed by Stroebe & Schut (2001: 394-95) as an “attempt to integrate existing ideas rather than an altogether new one”. As already mentioned earlier, grief work alone is not capable of unravelling the complex processes at work when coming to terms with loss and has thus been criticised from various angles within the bereavement discourse. As Stroebe and Schut (1999) have discovered, grief work in isolation merely accounts for one particular way of coping with bereavement, namely from a *loss-oriented point* of view. The DPM, however, encompasses the oscillation between what Stroebe and Schut (1999) have termed *loss-orientation* versus *restoration-orientation*. While *loss-orientation* denotes the “bereaved person’s concentration on and processing of some aspects of the loss experience itself”, *restoration-orientation*, on the other hand, rather focuses “on secondary stressors that are also consequences of bereavement” (Stroebe & Schut 2001: 395). Special emphasis is put on the fact that both orientations are of equal importance and that they represent “confrontation versus avoidance [...] as dynamic and fluctuating and also as changing over time” (Stroebe & Schut 2001: 395). Oscillation between confrontation and avoidance as well as loss- and restoration-orientation is seen as the most important component in the DPM, as it seems to be indispensable for an adaptive coping process (cf Stroebe & Schut 2001: 395). A model like this facilitates an understanding of grief as a complex process which tends to be in conflict between past- and future-oriented reflection and activity.

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<sup>24</sup> cf Rubin & Schechter 280.

#### 4.7. New Perspectives – The Emergence of *Continuing Bonds*

*Finishing, letting go, resolving, working through, getting over* – all of these presumptions no longer prevail for the theory at hand. The theories already elaborated on above mainly promote a sense of relinquishing one's ties with the dead in order to meaningfully move on with one's life. This view of independently moving on and forgetting about the relationships with the deceased is in line with a modernist credo which encourages individualism and independent lifestyles<sup>25</sup>. Analogously, a view of grief in the modernist sense demands "goal directedness, efficiency, and rationality" (Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen and Stroebe 32), features that purportedly ask for resolving grief in order to arrive at some point of closure. In what Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996) present as the theory of *continuing bonds*, a new way of regarding relationships with the deceased is emphasised; one that not only accounts for the very personal and complex soil one treads when grieving but also one that actively encourages healthy interaction with the deceased without irrevocably breaking any bonds. In other words, Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996: 22) challenge existing presumptions about the resolution of grief, especially the conviction that severing bonds is necessary in order for the bereaved to move on. Bereavement research widely acknowledges the need of the bereaved to successfully retain attachments with the departed as a new way of healthy adjustment to loss (Attig 2000; Klass, Silverman & Nickman 1996; Klass & Walter 2001; Field 2006).

As death is a life-changing event, grief, likewise is a dynamic process which needs to be adjusted to. This adjustment, in the view of Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996) is arrived at not by severing bonds with the dead, but rather by incorporating a vivid and living image of the dead into the life of the bereaved. Similarly, the construction of a relationship with the deceased is consciously established and dynamic in nature<sup>26</sup>. By approaching bereavement as a loss of relationships, the continuing bonds theory stands in for adjusting to living life with grief, not without it by completely resolving it. As Playwright Robert

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<sup>25</sup> cf Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen and Stroebe 32 ff.

<sup>26</sup> cf Silverman "Continuing Bonds" <http://www.deathreference.com/Ce-Da/Continuing-Bonds.html>.

Anderson elucidates, “[d]eath ends a life, but it does not end a relationship, which struggles on in the survivor’s mind toward some resolution which it never finds” (Anderson 77; qtd in Klass, Silverman, Nickman 1996: 17).

Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996: 18) claim that relationships are of major importance when dealing with loss, as loss typically revolves around relationships and assigned roles within a family system or community. They further maintain that it is impossible to make sense of a loss “without recognizing what is lost [...] [since] what is lost is more than the person; it is also a social role” (Klass, Silverman, Nickman 1996: 18).

Attachments, as Rosenblatt (50) views it, “endure, and [...] some losses are so big and so painful that one cannot ever get to a place where grief has ended”. Rosenblatt (cf 1983, 1996) maintains a rather radical view within the bereavement discourse that grief is never fully worked through but rather tends to recur over a lifetime as there is no clear-cut end to grief as such.

Most intriguing seems to be the question of how such bonds are continued in a meaningful way. According to Klass and Walter (2001: 435), a considerable fraction of the bereaved feels the need to maintain bonds in the following manner:

- a) Sensing the presence of the dead
- b) Talking with the dead
- c) The dead as moral guides
- d) Talking about the dead

It is evident that for the novels under scrutiny, all of the above hold true. Holly and Veronica feel a lingering presence of their lost loved ones, which cannot be dismissed as mere hallucinations<sup>27</sup>. A profound analysis of the protagonists’ means of maintaining their relationships with the deceased, however, will be provided in the practical section of the present thesis.

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<sup>27</sup>Klass and Walter (2001: 436) are eager to point out that the term *hallucination* “is of recent Euro-American origin and no self-respecting anthropologist [...] would use it to refer to experiences reported [...] while fully awake and not under the influence of drugs” and thus should not be used in this context.

#### 4.7.1. Bereavement and Biography - A New Model of Grief<sup>28</sup>

Displaying similarities with the theory of continuing bonds and acclaimed as a revolutionary way of accounting for bereavement is Walter's *A New Model of Grief* (1996). Dealing with bereavement in a non-traditional manner, Walter outlines a model that introduces the importance of biography, maintaining that "[w]e are who we are in part because of who [the deceased] was, and we are denying reality if we try to leave [the deceased] entirely behind" (Walter 1996: 9). One of the most important aspects of this new model of grief is the way talking about the dead can positively ease the coping process. According to Walter, the key to deal with loss best might not merely be "internal dialogues with a deceased person" (cf Stroebe *et al.* 1992: 1210; Rosenblatt and Meyer 1986) but "external dialogues with others who knew [the deceased]" (Walter 1996: 13). Emphasising free individualism, Klass and Walter (2001: 444) highlight that "[w]e construct our communities, and within them we construct our meanings and our own pantheon of ancestors". Walter (1996:11) demonstrates that continuing relational bonds is not viewed as defective mourning and points out that by conversational practice, the "dead live on [...] without impairing the functioning of the living". Moreover, he is eager to quote Marwit and Klass' (1995, qtd in Walter 1996: 11) assigned roles for the dead, claiming them to be important as a) role model, b) "as giving guidance in specific situations", c) "as clarifying the values of the survivor" and last but not least, d) as a "valued part of the survivor's biography". It seems then that this new model of grief not only promotes an accumulated way of accounting for the biography of the deceased, but also argues for an important part of one's own biography by actively incorporating the deceased into the life of the bereaved.

This notion of the bereaved talking to the deceased in an animated manner more than just pertains to the novels under discussion. Both Holly and Veronica retain ties to their deceased loved ones by maintaining animated dialogues and seeking moral guidance in serious matters. What Walter (1996) eventually aims at, however, is not the living talking to the dead, but rather the living talking

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<sup>28</sup>Walter 1996.



amongst each other about the deceased and thus establishing a life narrative, or biography, which no longer seems to be fragmented as each member of the bereaved adds an important component in the meaning making process of deceased. Walter (1996: 14) furthermore indicates the notion of the last chapter, which is “written after death by the survivors as they too go over the life lived and, separately or together, make sense of it”. It will become evident in the following chapters that both Holly and Veronica sample their deceased loved ones’ last chapter by reminiscing and conversing about their lives.

#### **4.8. The Myths of Coping With Loss<sup>29</sup>**

Following prevalent theories of grief, there are strict societal expectations as to how proper grieving should be carried out. Many of the aforementioned theories altogether add up to an image of grief that is normative and prescriptive, which has been met with fierce resistance by some theorists. Wortman & Silver (1989, 2001) have compiled a list of so-called *myths of coping with loss*, whereby they challenge deeply rooted assumptions of the grieving process and point towards a certain arbitrariness in their application. The list they produced comprises of five myths<sup>30</sup>:

- 1) The expectation of intense distress
- 2) Viewing the failure to experience distress as problematic
- 3) The importance of “working through” the loss
- 4) The necessity of breaking down attachments
- 5) The expectation of recovery

This most intriguing view exposes several shortcomings of prevalent theories on grief and mourning. It offers a different picture of the reality of grief and reveals that typical bereavement theories should not be taken for granted, as individuals grieve in their own unique way. What appears to be most irritating for Wortman and Silver is the general belief that if none of these “myths” apply to the griever, this may be indicative of some pathological behaviour and might trigger types of complicated grief such *absent, delayed* or *chronic grief*. *Absent grief*, according to Stroebe *et al.* (2008: 7), “occurs when an individual shows little or no sign of grieving early in bereavement” while *delayed grief* is characterised by a belated,

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<sup>29</sup>Wortman& Silver’s (1989, 2001) phrasing.

<sup>30</sup>Originally reproduced as of Wortman& Silver 2001.

but very intense grieving process. *Chronic grief*, on the other hand, “is characterised by long-lasting presence of symptoms associated with intense grief” (Stroebe *et al.* 2008: 7). As Wortman and Silver (1989, 2001) were eager to demonstrate with existing data, bereaved individuals not always show signs of typical stages towards resolving grief and still remain physically and mentally healthy without displaying pathological behaviour. Concluding, they emphasise that

it is important to identify beliefs about coping with loss that are widely held in the culture and to subject them to careful empirical scrutiny [...] [but at the same time hope] that the profound variability that exists in Western culture in response to loss will ultimately come to be acknowledged, so that bereaved individuals will be met consistently with compassion by those whom they encounter. (Wortman & Silver 2001:424)

Having outlined the main constituents of bereavement research over recent decades, it will be of major interest to link the theory above with aspects of the process of coping with loss in the novels under discussion. A special effort will be made to trace the protagonists’ individual path through their grief, while observing whether phenomena such as stages and continuing bonds as outlined above are internalised and reflected by the protagonists.

## **5. Journey Through Loss and Trauma**

While the previous chapters were primarily focused on the research aspect of bereavement and its theories, the present section aims at giving circumstantial text-immanent evidence that aforementioned theories and methods prevail in the given novels under discussion. In what follows, an exhaustive comparison will be presented between the nature as well as type of loss *in PS, I Love You* and *The Gathering*, respectively.

### **5.1. Till Death Doth Us Part? – Spousal Loss in PS, I Love You**

As will be seen in the course of the present analysis, spousal or conjugal loss is an entirely different form of bereavement from sibling loss, since the relationships that have been fostered during one’s lifetime are decisive in one’s

grief and healing process. As marriage is a relationship that altogether seems to be the closest in life, the distress following loss is naturally more intense than that of merely fleeting acquaintances. This section will thus elaborate on the institution of marriage in general and how the special bond between spousal partners affects the grieving process, before turning the attention to the hardships of widowhood and how Holly seeks to find her place within this entirely new situation.

The institution of marriage is symbolic of an intense bond that is shared by two people who joined due to an inner drive of spending their entire lives together. This powerful bond is exemplary of not just spending two lives together as one, but of complete trust and devotion towards one another. A happy marriage, in other words, consists of two individual and independent people who choose to live one shared life as a monogenic couple. Sharing one's life with another person irrevocably means unconditional support and caring for each other. According to definitions in some dictionaries<sup>31</sup>, marriage traditionally refers to the "the state of being united to a person of the opposite sex as husband or wife in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law". Rather traditionally held, Christensen (3) accounts for marriage as "an institutionalized mating arrangement between human males and females" which represent a "precondition of family organization". It seems that for most people in a love relationship, marriage poses the ultimate step to cement ties which otherwise remain fairly loose and not legally regulated.

Losing a "soul mate", as Holly labels her relationship with her husband Gerry, Holly struggles to find meaning in a world that is bereft of the only person capable of complementing her. The notion of soul mates is said to have its roots in at least two different sources. One, a speech delivered by Plato (427-347 BC), introduces the idea of four-legged, four-armed and two-headed creatures that have been split in half by Zeus out of fear of their power<sup>32</sup>. As a

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/marriage>.

<sup>32</sup> Cf Plato's *Symposium*.

consequence, the creatures had to spend their lives searching for the other half complementing them. Another theory traces the origin of the notion of the soul mate in the realm of old Jewish tradition. Derived from the Yiddish word *bashert*, the notion of the soul mate in Jewish tradition refers to “any kind of fortuitous good match, such as finding the perfect job or the perfect house, but it is usually used to refer to one's soul mate”<sup>33</sup>. Relating this to the current interest, it is obvious that Holly and Gerry seem to be the perfect match for each other. Just as soul mates originally defined two parts of one soul complementing each other, in *PS, I Love You*, Holly realises that without Gerry, she “just felt as though she was missing a vital organ from her body” (PS 9).

The relationship of spouses is characterised by enduring commitment to one another. In order to meaningfully analyse the impact of loss in marriage, it is necessary to shed light on the nature of roles within a relationship or marriage. Typically, spouses maintain manifold roles during their relationship which need to be relocated in the event of death. If a loved one is lost, not only the person will be dearly missed but also the roles he or she has fulfilled so far (cf Kübler-Ross and Kessler 58 ff). As Becvar (167) points out, “a marital partner is a confidante [...] [and a] person with whom we may feel safe enough to reveal our innermost thoughts, feelings and fears”. Disregarding the emotional side of every marriage, there is a pronounced physical attitude as well, since “a spouse is a lover, a sexual partner” (Becvar 168), one with whom intimacy is shared. Clearly, Holly and Gerry, being self-proclaimed soul mates, lead this kind of marriage. What is probably most upsetting for Holly after Gerry's death is the lost sense of security, since a “spouse is [...] someone whose very presence creates a sense of security and with whom one may share an enduring emotional bond” (Becvar 168). Although this emotional bond may not be altogether broken by death, the sense of security is usually evoked by physical presence, something that Gerry's lingering spirit alone is incapable of doing for her.

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<sup>33</sup><http://www.jewfaq.org/marriage.htm>, accessed 6 Jan 2012.

### 5.1.1. Holly as the Bereaved Wife – Adjusting to Widowhood

Transitions are usually a painstaking process - hardly ever is it easy to pass from one state into another and it always takes effort and time. Especially adjusting to new life situations such as widowhood is a demanding task that needs conscious consideration. Parkes' (1996) theory of *psychosocial transitions* and Janoff-Bulman's (1992) theory of *assumptive worlds* are vital in analysing successful transitions from one to another stage of life. Life, dynamic as it is, unfortunately does not only bear bright facets and thus forces every individual to cope with transitions that ask for complete adjustment to a yet alien and often frightening situation. Even though the death of a spouse seems to be fairly predictable, especially when viewed in the light of 'till death doth us part', Holmes and Rahe (1967, qtd in Becvar 170) claim that "losing a spouse requires more adjustment than any other life event".

Putting the aforementioned theory to test, it will be of importance to analyse Holly's way from loving wife and twin-soul of Gerry towards an independent individual that feels once again able to be secure and strong in a world without the physical support of her husband. Even though Gerry is not physically with Holly any longer, his spirit seems to guide her through tough situations and their bond is all but relinquished, as will be seen in Chapter 6.1.5.1.

Holly's painful realisation of Gerry's premature death first made itself felt by physical sickness. Thinking about Gerry no longer dwelling amongst the living, leaves Holly at a loss, until she realises that "[p]anic took over" and "[b]ile rose in her throat [...] [until] she collapsed to her knees before the toilet" (PS 1). Somatic symptoms (i.e. "relating to the body, especially as distinct from the mind"<sup>34</sup>) are by no means uncommon in the grieving process and exemplify the manifestation of pain. Since body and mind are interlinked systems<sup>35</sup>, emotional

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<sup>34</sup>Retrieved from <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/somatic> Nov 16 2011.

<sup>35</sup>Cf <http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/prevention-wellness/emotional-wellbeing/mental-health/mind-body-connection-how-your-emotions-affect-your-health.html> Nov 16 2011.

wounds such as loss of a loved one are inextricably connected to bodily symptoms like getting sick or collapsing.

Silverman (1988: 200) points to the essential notion that “[t]he widowed don’t recover; rather they make an accommodation to their new situation”. This view is important, since it already reflects the spirit of continuing bonds as introduced earlier. The transition into widowhood is a weary one and adjustment to the new situation seems impossible, not least because “[a] way of life is lost as well and the widowed cannot reconstitute their lives or themselves as they were before” (Silverman 1988: 201). Holly, who repeatedly stated that Gerry was a part of her, will never be able to recover from her husband’s death and rejoin her former life, since she herself is a changed person after Gerry’s loss. Pursuing a new sense of self, Holly first and foremost needs to confront her situation now void of Gerry. Interestingly, as well as aggravating for Holly, “women tend to derive more of a sense of identity from their spouses than do men” (Becvar 171), pointing to the difficulty of Holly discovering her own personality and character independently, without Gerry. Understanding who she now is presupposes that she gets to the bottom of her part in their marriage and how Gerry helped defining Holly. That this is by no means an easy undertaking becomes apparent in the following passage, when Holly expresses that

[s]he had truly believed that her purpose in life had been to meet Gerry and enjoy all their days together for the rest of their lives. What was her purpose now? Surely, she had one [...] (PS 275)

Exactly finding this new purpose in life is the task that she is confronted with after Gerry’s loss; a task that, at first glance, seems impossible since Holly’s life “just seemed so...nothing and so pointless” (PS 274) without Gerry. As Holly seems to be primarily defined by her marriage to Gerry, what she loses after Gerry’s death is not only her husband; she now needs to mourn her lost self as well (cf Silverman 1988: 204). Silverman (1988: 206) even goes so far as to claim that “[i]f being a wife is central to one’s identity at the time when this role ceases, the woman can find herself, figuratively speaking, without a self”. The lost self refers to the role of the deceased spouse in defining the widow, in this case Holly. There is plentiful evidence in the novel that Holly identified herself

primarily as Gerry's wife, not as Holly, the independent woman. She realises that "[w]hen [Gerry] was alive she had lived through him, and now he was dead she was still living through him" (PS 468). Furthermore exemplifying Holly's apparent dependence on Gerry is made visible by saying that "she knew that she really needed him more than he needed her [...] [s]he needed to be needed" (PS 35). With every loss, there comes an alteration of the systems one has come to know and taken for granted. The psychosocial transition that occurs immediately after the death of a beloved person has already been dealt with elsewhere in the paper, and it strongly links to the notion of personal growth<sup>36</sup> (see Chapter 8.1.) in the face of crisis. This transition can be seen as an opportunity for an evolving self (Kegan 1982, qtd in Silverman 1988: 203). Concluding, Silverman (1988: 219) emphasises that "widowhood can be seen as a developmental stage involving profound changes in how the widowed see themselves", an experience which enlightens and broadens the mind.

For Holly, this painful realisation of proceeding from her familiar world view into a new reality is exemplified by the important act of acknowledging the loss, sorrowfully observing that

Gerry was gone and he would never be back. That was the reality. She would never again run her fingers through his soft hair, never share a secret joke across the table at a dinner party, never cry to him when she got home from a hard day at work and just needed a hug, she would never share a bed with him again, never be woken up by his fits of sneezes each morning, never laugh with him so much her stomach would ache, never fight with him about whose turn it was to get up and turn the bedroom light off. (PS 1)

Reliving all those moments in her life with her husband makes Holly realise all the more how lonesome she feels without him, how desolate her life without her soul mate will take course. Agonisingly, she seems to accept the fact that "[a]ll that was left [of Gerry] was a bundle of memories, and an image of his face that became more and more vague each day" (PS 1).

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<sup>36</sup>cf Schaefer & Moos' 2001 paper on "Bereavement Experiences and Personal Growth".

### 5.1.2. Death as a Result of Fate – Anticipatory Grief

*“Who is prepared to die? Who has lived so fully that they are not threatened by their imaginings of nonexistence?”*(Steven Levine 1982: 5, qtd in Becvar 74)

Elsewhere in this thesis (see Chapter 2), attention has been drawn to the important distinction between anticipatory and sudden grief as regards the course as well as the outcome of grief. Anticipated death, as opposed to sudden death, gives the dying as well as the bereaved a precious gift – time to sort one’s affairs both practically and emotionally. Gerry and Holly had a modest plan – living life to the fullest as a couple, which has ever since seemed obvious for all their friends since “[t]hey were best friends, lovers and soul mates, destined to be together” (PS 2). However, fate bestowed Gerry with an incurable brain tumour at his young age. As Kastenbaum (2007, qtd in Kastenbaum 2008: 75) claims, cancer is marked by “pain, anxiety, body damage and distortion” that is generally signified by an “insidious attack by an enemy from within”<sup>37</sup>. When Holly first learnt about Gerry’s brain tumour and his fairly short life expectancy, she could not believe that a thus far healthy man would die due to a “tumour growing inside his brain” (PS 2). When Gerry’s condition gradually worsened, Holly “had been terrified to leave him, even to answer the door [...] just in case that was the time he chose to leave her” (PS 34), thus savouring any possible minute of their life together. Holly’s constantly idealised late husband Gerry went through an intense phase of illness before eventually passing away. For all parties involved, this constituted a case of preparing for the inevitable farewell-process and being spared the shocking situation of sudden death. Not only Gerry was able to sort his affairs and be reconciled with death, but also his social environment, which constitutes an important aspect of coming to terms with death and making sense thereof. Realising that Gerry and Holly would not, as initially planned, grow old together, sheds some light on the attitude of young settled couples who would naturally do anything to stay as youthful as possible, which is reflected in the following passage: “How presumptuous they both were never to consider growing old as

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<sup>37</sup>Taken from Kastenbaum’s (2007: 96) table printed in *Death, Society and Human Experience*.



an achievement and a challenge [...] [a]geing was something they wanted so much to avoid" (PS 3).

Returning to the question of how Holly's fundamental view of the world is shaken and how she gradually begins to cope with the shattering of her assumptive world will be central in the following section. Similar to Janoff-Bulman's (1992) *assumptive world theory*, Bowlby (1969, 1973 qtd in Janoff-Bulman 5) refers to *working models* which are a useful means of constructing the world. Similarly, Marris (1975 qtd in Janoff-Bulman 5) proposes so-called *structures of meaning* as "basic principles that are abstract enough to be applied to any event we encounter and thereby make life continuously intelligible". No matter what the label, all of the above theories offer a starting point of how meaning may be constructed and gradually changed after pivotal life events, or as Janoff-Bulman (5) refers to it, as "a conceptual system, developed over time, that provides us with expectations about the world and ourselves". As already mentioned in Chapter 4.5., the most basic underlying assumptions of the world are a) "[t]he world is benevolent", b) "[t]he world is meaningful" and c) "[t]he self is worthy" (Janoff-Bulman 6). Adapting this theory to Holly's situation after Gerry's death, it appears evident that the above views are seriously shattered. Holly does not seem to be able to consider life as wholly benevolent anymore, since her beloved late husband was taken from her prematurely and most importantly, purely by fate. No longer does Holly seem capable of regarding the world as "safe [...] rather than [...] malevolent [and] hostile" (Janoff-Bulman 7), since this apparently safe world could not save Gerry from his incurable cancer and subsequent death. Having lost her faith in the benevolence of the world, Holly furthermore appears to struggle with the second underlying assumption, namely that the world is meaningful. Janoff-Bulman (8) maintains that the majority of people "believe events in our world are meaningful, that they 'make sense'"; however, when Holly faces her future devoid of Gerry, there does not seem to be much meaning left in her own microcosmic world. Interestingly, there is a popular belief that "deservingness determines which events affect which people" and that the "goodness of the

individual becomes a primary factor to be considered in determining his or her lot in life” (Janoff-Bulman 9). That this notion seems to hold true for Holly when considering Gerry’s premature death is manifested in her commenting on his lifestyle, saying that Gerry was “[b]y no means [...] the healthiest man on the earth, but he was healthy enough to... well, to live a normal life” (PS 2). Considering Gerry’s lifestyle, thus, it becomes clear that brain tumours of this kind appear to be arbitrarily evoked by fate, and there was no way whatsoever for Gerry and Holly to foresee this event. Even so, there appears to be a popularly held conviction that there is a correlation between leading a good life and being rewarded by fortune and vice versa. This reward-system of bad deeds being punished and good ones rewarded seems to be deeply rooted in people’s minds. This is all the more aggravating for Holly who is left to “[wonder] why on earth Gerry’s number had been called so early in his life” (PS 35). The third underlying assumption, the self-worth, recognises people as being “good, capable, and moral individuals” (Janoff-Bulman 11). It seems that this conviction is not as heavily shattered as the former two, since Holly needs to maintain her own self-worth in order to make meaning of the transitory world she is facing. Although she had just lost her husband, Holly maintains her positive posture and acknowledges that “[t]here was a slight chance she could make it without him” (PS 68), thus presenting her undaunted optimism in life, which seems to run like a red thread throughout the novel. As Janoff-Bulman (70) points out, “the adjustment of survivors rests largely on whether they experience profound disillusionment and despair or, ultimately, minimal disillusionment and hope”. The term *survivor* is used to describe both Holly and Veronica even though their lives have not been directly endangered. Rather, *survivor* here points to a person “who has encountered, been exposed to, or witnessed death, and has himself or herself remained alive” (Lifton 117, qtd in Janoff-Bulman 56). Returning to the question of disillusionment, in Holly’s case, it first seems as if she will never be able to overcome the loss of her husband, which can be viewed as a normal reaction in spousal grief. However, it soon becomes apparent that Holly makes an effort to realign her reality and let optimism and hope reign over anxiety and depression. In Janoff-Bulman’s theoretical

approach, then, this would point to Holly adjusting rather quickly and well since her overall optimistic attitude and hope considerably facilitate her painful journey through loss.

Just as the shattering of existing assumptions poses a crisis to the self, so does the rebuilding of new assumptions and world views. Survivors need to progressively find benevolence, meaning and self-worth in their newly constructed views of the world. Janoff-Bulman (117) suggests that it is essential to “arrive at a new, nonthreatening assumptive world, one that acknowledges and integrates [the survivor’s] negative experience and prior illusions” and further argues that these new convictions and beliefs are by no means “consciously ‘willed’” but rather to be considered as “natural products of [...] the human organism”. Therefore, in Holly’s case, the recovery of shattered assumptions and the subsequent re-organisation thereof is an unconscious task that necessitates time and patience. The process of rebuilding assumptions can be divided into three categories<sup>38</sup>. The first one, *appraisal with others*, allows survivors to directly compare their situation with that of other victims and thus draw conclusions. The second strategy involves reflecting on the self and its role in the victimisation process, with occasional patterns of self-blame. The third and last strategy seems to be the most important one for the present purpose. It allows survivors to reflect on positive outcomes following traumatic events, which closely links to the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth (discussed in detail in Chapter 8.1 in this thesis) and the process of finding positive meaning in the face of crisis. Janoff-Bulman (118) maintains that these reappraisal processes “locate and create evidence of benevolence, meaning, and self-worth in the very events that first challenged and shattered these illusions”. So by directly confronting the traumatic experience, or, in Holly’s case, Gerry’s premature death, one might be able to re-establish positive views of the world and the self. Holly’s constant struggle between shattered world and a yet slightly muffled optimistic attitude in adjusting to loss is illustrated in the following passage:

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<sup>38</sup>Taken from Janoff-Bulman 118.

[...] although she had gone to bed full of optimism, and excited about the prospects that lay ahead of her, she was struck afresh by the harsh reality of how difficult every moment would be. Once again she awoke in an empty bed to a silent house, but there was one small breakthrough. For the first time in over a month, she had woken without the aid of a telephone call. She adjusted her mind, as she did every morning, to the fact that the dreams of her and Gerry being together, which had lived in her mind for the past ten hours, were just that: dreams". (PS 22)

## **5.2. Sibling Loss in *The Gathering***

After having exemplified the main constituents of conjugal bereavement in *PS, I Love You*, the notion of sibling loss in *The Gathering* will be presented and contrasted to spousal loss. A thorough analysis of the nature and relationship of siblings as such is not included in the present discourse, as there is hardly any sound theory on sibling bereavement (Rando 1988, qtd in Becvar 130). However, Bank and Kahn's (1982) *The Sibling Bond* was an early attempt to portray the complex relationship siblings innately retain throughout their lives. In order to grasp the full implications of sibling loss, it will be of importance to highlight the special relationship between siblings, which is often regarded as pivotal<sup>39</sup>, as stated by Bank & Kahn:

[T]he sibling bond is a connection between the selves, at both the intimate and the public levels, of two siblings; it is a "fitting" together of two peoples' identities. The bond is sometimes warm and positive, but it may also be negative. Thus, for example, rivalrous siblings who hate each other can be considered to be "bound" if their identities have any influence on one another. Through the sibling relationship, one gets the sense both of being a distinct individual and of constancy through knowing a sibling as predictable person. Even when the relationship is uncomfortable, brothers and sisters derive a sense of a familiar presence, however upsetting. (Bank & Kahn 15-16)

As can be deduced from the above, there are certain congruencies between the sibling and spousal bond, especially the notion of soul mates. The "fitting together of two peoples' identities", however, is done on one's own accord and volition between spouses, whereas siblings have little choice but to accept their brother or sister as an integral part of the family circle.

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<sup>39</sup>cf Bank & Kahn 1982.

### 5.2.1. Veronica as the Bereaved Sister

In *The Gathering* one is confronted with a pair of siblings who remain strongly mentally connected even though they may be geographically separated. Veronica's relationship to her brother Liam is characterised by ambiguity, complexity and, above all, loyalty and an immense sense of mutual understanding. After all, Liam was "someone [she] knew in [her] bones" (G 53). There is a slight hint at the quality of their relationship when Veronica states that "there were only eleven months between [her] and Liam [...] sometimes [she thinks they] overlapped in there, he just left early, to wait outside" (G 11). This statement hints at an almost twin-like status of the two, which is not surprising given the fact that she has always been "the one who loved him most" (G 23). The sibling love that they shared is also reflected in the seemingly trivial places they used to go together:

It was a romantic scene, walking along this avenue of orange leaves, so I would have been thinking of Tanner or Joe Ninety or whoever it was that week: I would have been thinking of the unknown man I was destined to love. Instead of which I was stuck, in all this beauty, with my brother. (G 171)

This passage subversively hints at the quality of their sibling bond as regards love and devotion. This suggests that the man Veronica would always be destined to love is her own brother, Liam, which ultimately makes it all the more aggravating for her to lose him to suicide.

That Veronica's and Liam's sibling bond did not break away after having left their parental house was their individual choice. Veronica reflects upon this as follows: "Usually, people's brothers become less important, over time. Liam decided not to do this. He decided to stay important, to the end" (G 28). Even though he travelled the world and did not get in touch with any of his family, Veronica still sensed this powerful bond between her eleven months elder brother and herself. Usually, siblings exhibit rivalries and quarrels; however, "Liam never fought with [Veronica] [because she] was his sister [...] [she] was on his side" (G 122). Although their mutual love does not seem to be fully and consciously acknowledged while Liam is still alive, Veronica realises just how

much she loves her brother only after he is gone. That their relationship was somewhat ambiguous as well can be seen in their conviction that siblings ultimately need to let go of one another, displayed in the following: “So I left him and he left me. What else are siblings supposed to do?” (G 126). Growing up inevitably requires certain concessions. Raising one’s own family and establishing oneself as a mature individual may imply the neglect of other established ties. Whenever Liam left the place, however, “he wanted to have something of [Veronica] with him [...] He wanted to keep the connection” (G 126). Even though their relationship as siblings might have been disrupted, it surely was by no means endangered to break entirely, since Veronica and Liam shared a highly precious mental bonding across time and place. This intense sibling tie, naturally, adds up to Veronica’s pain after Liam’s suicide. As already emphasised in previous chapters on the phenomenon of *continuing bonds*, Bank & Kahn (271) underline that “death ends only a life: it does *not* end a relationship”. This seems to pertain to Veronica and Liam, since she is increasingly unable to deal with the unresolved loss and needs to remain mentally connected to him. Cain *et al.* (1964, qtd in Bank & Kahn 271) further point to sibling loss as “the senseless arithmetic of adding newly warped lives to the one already tragically ended”. In order to fully understand the grieving patterns of surviving siblings, it first needs to be specified of what nature the relationship between the pair of siblings was. According to Bank & Kahn (84), there are altogether eight ways of identifying with a sibling, all of which have been grouped into three categories for matters of simplicity:

- a) *Close identification*, in which each person feels great similarity and little difference with a sibling.
- b) *Partial identification*, in which each person feels some similarity and some difference with a sibling.
- c) *Distant identification*, in which each person feels great difference and little similarity with a sibling.

It has already been pointed out that Veronica’s and Liam’s relationship is somewhat ambivalent, but when it comes to the above patterns of identification, it seems rather straight-forward that Veronica’s and Liam’s sibling relationship is one of *close identification*. Typically, *close identification* patterns are characterised by processes of “twinning”, “merging” and “idealizing” (Bank &

Kahn 85), all of which seems to pertain to the relationship between Veronica and Liam. The way Veronica viewed Liam, however, is most intriguing. There is evidence in the novel that Veronica, indeed, portrays a way of merging or identifying with her brother Liam, as exemplified in the following: “There is the hint of my brother’s smile in my own mirror, a tone of voice I sometimes hit” (G 66). It seems as if Veronica strongly identifies with her brother’s physical appearance as well as with his voice and manners. There is one instance in the novel, however, which might point to the sibling pattern of *distant identification* as well, although it could also be attributed to adolescence and its obvious challenges. When Veronica does not know the reason for Liam’s onetime arrest by the Gardai, she continuously questions him about it, wondering whether it could have been rape. Veronica senses that

the gap that opened between [them] was the gap that exists between a woman and a man – or so [she] thought, at sixteen – the difference between what a man might do, or want to do, sexually, what a woman might only guess at. (G 170)

All things considered, however, the above quote seems to be an exception, with the rule being that Veronica and Liam constantly understood and felt to be close to each other.

Interestingly, Veronica senses Liam’s presence throughout the novel, engaging him in conversations and imagining him responding. This appears to correspond to Bank & Kahn’s (283) notion of “phantom limb” experiences; the “phantom sibling” has come to define “[t]he survivor literally [believing] that the sibling lives, despite evidence to the contrary”. This is further clarified by adding that “[s]iblings who merge, mirror, and twin with each other [...] are particularly vulnerable, because the loss of the object *feels* like a loss of self” (Bank & Kahn 283). Thus, by losing Liam (who appears to have had twin-like status), Veronica becomes especially vulnerable because she experiences a shattering loss of her own identity as mirrored by Liam.

Of particular interest in the realm of sibling grief, especially with regard to losses such as suicide, is the notion of *disenfranchised grief*. *Disenfranchised grief*

represents grief that “has gone unrecognized, is marginalized, or has gone unsupported” (Stroebe *et al.* 2008: 16), as in cases of particularly stigmatised death circumstances like suicide (Doka 233). Relating this to the current interest, the grief Veronica experiences after her brother’s suicide is not only stigmatised due to the mode of death but also because sibling grief as such is still not as widely acknowledged as the loss of other, more established relationships such as spouses and children. Becvar (130), quite tellingly, phrases this phenomenon as the “overlooked loss”, referring to Rando’s (1988) observation that siblings have widely been under neglect in the study of bereavement. This is made evident in the following passage:

Losing a sibling is particularly difficult because the other people in our family are considered the primary mourners. When we lose a brother or sister as a child, all the attention is focused on our parents and we feel invisible in our sadness. When we lose a sibling as an adult, the sympathy is offered to the spouse and children of our sibling. Our own loss is very wrenching, and yet there may be no acknowledgement of it. (Bouvard & Gladu 104, qtd in Becvar 130)

Moreover, Doka (229 ff) proposes his own typology of *disenfranchised grief* by introducing three major categories including a) unrecognised relationships, b) unacknowledged loss and c) excluding the griever. Additionally, he is apt to include the circumstances of death and the personal way an individual grieves as potent factors for disenfranchised grief. In *The Gathering*, then, Veronica’s relationship to her brother Liam seems to be unrecognised when considering the extent they both felt connected to one another, which inevitably amounts to a lack of acknowledgement of her painful loss.

Losing a brother felt to be like a twin may trigger a crisis that needs an enormous amount of adjustment. Just like Holly in *PS, I Love You*, Veronica finds herself in a state of transition from her old assumptive world towards a new, adapted understanding of which. Interestingly, however, Veronica predominantly moves within the realm of *negative victim disillusionment* as conceived by Janoff-Bulman (1992), which describes her as a person who finds it hard to see positive glimpses and hope in the aftermath of crises.



### 5.2.2. Premature Death as a Result of Suicide

A sudden death in the family may be powerful enough to shatter one's life. If this sudden death, however, is additionally combined with violence, this may evoke even stronger pain and incomprehensibility. Earlier, attention has already been drawn to the crucial distinction between sudden and anticipated death. In the case of suicide, which is more often than not portrayed as "a sinful act"<sup>40</sup> [...] that is indicative of weakness or madness" (Kastenbaum 1986, qtd Becvar 54), this suddenness of death is usually mixed with social stigma, guilt and rejection (Becvar 54-55). The bereaved may be at a loss as regards the motivation for this hopeless act and may struggle their entire lives to find meaning in a family member committing suicide. Socially, this way of leaving the world is often stigmatised (cf Kübler-Ross & Kessler 183), and "[s]ome religions do not allow suicides to be buried on hallowed ground or religious services to be held" (Starhawk, Nightmare, & The Reclaiming Collective 263, qtd in Becvar 54). Terminologically, suicide is defined as

[t]he taking of one's own life [as] the result of a complex interaction of psychological, sociological, environmental, genetic, and biological risk factors. Suicide is neither a disease nor the result of a disease or illness, but rather a desperate act by people who feel that ending their life is the only way to stop their interminable and intolerable suffering<sup>41</sup>.

According to sociologist Emile Durkheim (43), one needs to differentiate between two distinct types of death when discussing suicide. The death which arises as a result of hallucination cannot be equated with the death of a "sane person who strikes while knowing what he is doing" (Durkheim 43). Thus, deaths which are brought about by drugs, alcohol or other mind-altering and influencing substances cannot be analysed in the same terms as conscious and deliberate actions which are sanely carried out. The question whether Liam was completely sane and conscious at the time of the suicide is not explicitly answered; however, Veronica offers a clue as to his drinking habits in the following: "Was he pissed when he died? Probably. And now, what tide runs in his veins? Blood, sea water, whiskey. He was a maniac on whiskey. He

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<sup>40</sup>cf Alvarez 1970, Murray 1998.

<sup>41</sup>Retrieved from <http://www.deathreference.com/Sh-Sy/Suicide.html> on Dec 13 2011.

probably thought he was swimming to fucking France” (G 55). Even though he may have been drinking beforehand, the procedure of drowning himself in the Brighton sea seems to have been carefully considered and planned. Veronica recalls three facts related to her brother’s drowning: “The first is that Liam was wearing a short fluorescent yellow jacket when he died [...] The second is that he had stones in his pockets. The third is that he had no underpants on under his jeans, and no socks in his leather shoes” (G 141). These facts ultimately help Veronica realise that her brother’s suicide was not merely an impulsive act out of desperation, but that it was indeed carefully planned and “fully organised” (G 141). The jacket he wore was designed to facilitate a quick retrieving of the dead body; the stones, rather self-explanatory, employed in order to guarantee a successful finishing of the act; and the lack of underwear probably suggests a way of cleansing his body<sup>42</sup>. This act of careful and conscious planning correlates with Durkheim’s (44, italics originally used) understanding of suicide as “*all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result*”.

In *The Gathering*, the events that lead to Liam’s suicide are of a rather complex as well as bewildering nature. The first-person limited narrator Veronica, who is inevitably subjective and thus unreliable as regards the consistency and verity of her narration<sup>43</sup>, at first seems incapable of recalling the dubious events of their childhood, in which Liam was sexually abused by Lambert Nugent, a friend and admirer of their grandmother Ada Merriman. Only after an intense phase of coming to terms with her and her family’s past is Veronica able to recall the events as they actually happened, although much of the truth is still open to debate. For instance, Veronica is not completely sure whether she, too, fell victim to Lambert Nugent’s sexual coercion, which becomes evident in the following passage: “I remembered a picture. [...] I am eight. [...] I am holding [Lamb’s] old penis in my hand. [...] It comes from the very beginning of things and I can not tell if it is true” (G 221-22).

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<sup>42</sup>cf „He probably thought, as the cold water flooded his shoes, cleansing thoughts” (G 142).

<sup>43</sup> See passages like „I am not sure if it really did happen” (G 1), “I need to bear witness to an uncertain event” (G1), “It is possible that [I am] imagining it all”, or “Did this happen?” (G 99).

The process of making sense for Veronica and her family is further complicated by the fact that Liam did not leave a note declaring his motivation and reasons for prematurely ending his life. According to Kübler-Ross and Kessler (1983), it is not quite clear whether it is advantageous to have a farewell letter explaining the reasons, since “[t]hose who did not receive a note wish desperately for any clue into their loved one’s psyche” while “[t]hose who are left with notes find them lacking answers, or find that the answers are too late to act upon”. Since Liam had always been quite an enigmatic character, it is probably fitting that he did not leave a farewell note for his family and friends, thus forcing them to come up with their own conclusions. Veronica, upon trying to look for reasons, first blames Liam’s boundless adoration for liquor, until finally admitting that “Liam was sick, in his head” (G 175). It dawns on Veronica that there is not always a straight-forward explanation for everything, thinking that “there are little thoughts in your head that can grow until they eat your entire mind [...] they are like cancer, there is no telling what triggers the spread, or who will be struck, and why some get it and others are spared” (G175). However, there seems to have been quite a precise motivating factor for Liam to drown himself, which will be subject of the following chapters.

Yet another issue of primary concern is the one of guilt and shame in dealing with suicide. As Kübler-Ross and Kessler (1983) are quick to point out, “guilt is about what you think you did” while “shame is about who you think you are”. This is of particular importance to the family of Liam, the Hegartys, since they struggle with accepting the fact that one of their kind committed suicide. Kübler-Ross and Kessler (1983) furthermore exemplify the deeply rooted pain suicide evokes in families, wondering: “Could anything cause you more social shame than having a suicide forever brand your family as dysfunctional?”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Private conversation between a mother and Kübler-Ross & Kessler (1983).

### 5.3. Introducing Trauma

Since the notion of trauma features dominantly in both novels, it seems fruitful to introduce the theme as reflected in *PS, I Love You* and *The Gathering* respectively. Bereaved persons regularly fall victim to traumata and often can neither make sense of nor control the present world anymore. It is due to the overwhelming conceptual overlap between victims of trauma and the bereaved that a myriad of literature<sup>45</sup> exists relating to trauma as a result of life-shattering loss. Trauma pushes individuals to the edge of what is bearable. It forces victims to fully consider the extremities and terrors of life. Losing a loved one, especially in forceful and sudden ways, falls into this life-altering category as well. The life as formerly experienced all of a sudden vanishes and is brutally replaced by an insecure, instable view of the world where none of the previously held assumptions are valid anymore.

Special attention within this context will be directed to the character of Veronica, since she is the one who is confronted with an extremely shocking, brutal and abrupt loss by means of suicide. As already mentioned elsewhere in the present thesis (see Chapter 5.1.2.), sudden losses have a tendency to be more shattering than expected ones. However, also Holly is fundamentally shaken after her husband's death, which leaves her especially vulnerable while the reader remains quizzical whether she will ever find happiness again.

As Herman (33) maintains,

[t]raumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe.

When traumatised, one's physical and psychological resources seem depleted; one's once held view of the world no longer prevails, and any certainties in life one had become accustomed to all of a sudden appear to be void. Hence, the

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<sup>45</sup>For a concise overview see Horowitz' influential *Stress Response Syndromes* (1986), and particularly Herman's chapter 9 in *Trauma and Recovery* (2007).

theories of trauma and those of one's assumptive world (see Janoff-Bulman 1992 and Chapter 5.1.2.) are closely related.

It is especially vital for the present analysis to distinguish between two forms of trauma which will subsequently appear again and again in this thesis. Trauma experienced during childhood and trauma experienced during adulthood can hardly be equated. Therefore, an effort will be made to clearly differentiate the way Liam had been sexually abused during childhood and the way Veronica was both traumatised in her childhood (because she witnessed the abuse) and after Liam's tragic sudden death. Herman (96) is eager to point out the differences between these two forms of traumata, maintaining that "[r]epeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed, but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality". This way, Liam's experiences in his childhood already crucially marked the course his future life would take, while Veronica, traumatised after loss, struggles with her already existing personality and schemata of the world.

### 5.3.1. Liam's and Veronica's Traumatic Childhood

*"[...] and Liam, in his anger, would change the world" (G 170).*

Child abuse is one of the gravest traumatic events, grave enough to extend well into adulthood and powerful enough to completely destroy a life. For Veronica, Liam being both a victim of sexual abuse and suicide exacerbates her way of making sense of his as well as their family lives. Long enough, Veronica has been unable to probe the causes of Liam's suicide, until she gradually begins to reprocess their childhood in their grandmother's house. Painfully, Veronica is forced to discover truths she long attempted to deny, clarifying that "[t]he past is not a happy place"(G 233); it seems equally aggravating for her to accept the fact that this abuse probably led her brother to take his own life. Veronica recalls that one "might call it a crime of the flesh, but the flesh is long fallen away" (G 1). She is aware of the fact that it is up to her to tell her brother's story in order to process his death and their childhood trauma. Slowly, Veronica begins to understand that "[t]he seeds of [her] brother's death were sown many

years ago” and that “[t]he person who planted them is long dead [...]” (G 13), thus referring to Lambert Nugent’s crucial role in shattering Liam’s world by sexually abusing him. Her feelings of guilt in that matter are almost unbearable – for she was the only witness to the gruesome act and could or even should have told her family that a trusted friend of her grandmother’s is a child molester. As a child, Veronica was not yet capable of understanding this “crime of the flesh” (G 1), but as she grows older she gradually realises the gravity of her concealment:

Now I know that the look in Liam’s eye was the look of someone who knows they are alone. Because the world will never know what has happened to [Liam] and what [he carries] around as a result of it. Even your sister – your saviour in a way, the girl who stands in the light of the hall – even she does not hold or remember the thing she saw. (G 172)

Only when “the world around [Veronica] changed” (G 172), implying the shift from formerly concealed to publicly announced waves of child abuse in all areas of life, Veronica begins to grasp Liam’s fate.

As Herman (51) further maintains,

[t]raumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim’s faith in natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis.

In the case of Liam, faith in a secure and safe environment has been gravely shattered the moment the trusted acquaintance Lambert Nugent demanded the unspeakable. Veronica, after years of silent concealment, finally finds strength to disclose the truth, stating that her brother’s death “[requires her] to deal in facts. It is time to put an end to the shifting stories and the waking dreams. It is time to call an end to romance and just say what happened in Ada’s house, the year that [she] was eight and Liam was barely nine” (G 142). It takes an enormous lot of energy for Veronica to speak the truth, while at the same time acknowledging herself that what she saw in the year of 1968 in her grandmother Ada’s house was real and not mere imagination. Veronica recounts the ineffable event as best, it seems, as her memory serves her:

What struck me was the strangeness of what I saw, when I opened the door. It was as if Mr Nugent's penis, which was sticking straight out of his flies, had grown strangely, and flowered at the tip to produce the large and unwieldy shape of a boy, that boy being my brother Liam, who, I finally saw, was not an extension of the man's member [...] but a shocked [...] boy of nine, and the member not even that, but the boy's forearm, that made a bridge of flesh between himself and Mr Nugent. His hand was buried in the cloth, his fist clutched around something hidden there. They were not one thing, joined from open groin to shoulder, they were two people that I knew, Mr Nugent and Liam. (G 143-44)

When Veronica finished recalling the atrocious tale, it strikes her as probably being "a false memory, because there is a terrible tangle of things that [she has] to fight through to get to it, in [her] head [...] [a]nd also because it is unbearable" (G 144). This adds up to Veronica's image of being a highly unreliable narrator whose memories are blurred and not easily accessible because of longstanding suppression and because the events happened more than twenty years previously. Also, it reflects that she "can only bear witness to her inability to access fully her traumatic memory or achieve complete interpretative mastery over her past" (Harte 194).

Liam, at only nine years of age, is yet incapable of realising the atrocity of the act. Only years after the deed, at 39, his past seems to have overhauled him with such intensity as to completely question his existence and ultimately forced him into suicide. Herman (52, emphasis added) accounts for this phenomenon as follows:

Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that **sustain life**. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong **more to the dead than to the living**.

Clearly, Liam's self has been fundamentally damaged after the sexual abuse. Probably already feeling more dead than alive, he sought a way out of his confused misery by drowning himself in the Brighton sea.

It could also be argued that not only Liam but also Veronica might have been traumatised by the atrocities that happened in the house of their grandmother, since her terrifying tale, more often than not, is accompanied by frequent lapses of memory. This, as Herman (34, emphasis added) observes, is not uncommon, since “[t]he traumatized person may experience intense emotion but **without clear memory of the event**, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion” and, particularly, that “[t]raumatic symptoms have a tendency to become disconnected from their source and to take on a life of their own”. It seems that Veronica’s inability to clearly recall the abusive act serves as a protective mechanism saving her the intense emotional processing effort of bygone days and events. Also, it appears to be the case that the unspoken of abuse lies so heavily on Veronica’s conscience as to render her preoccupied with nothing but this event. This way, the traumatic memories do take on a life of their own, as Herman puts it, and usher her towards the ultimate revelation – namely that her brother had been sexually abused while she was watching. Closing the cycle, Veronica gradually begins to understand that the abuse was the tragic cause for Liam’s suicide, saying “I add [the sexual abuse] into my brother’s life and it is crucial; it is the place where all cause meets all effect, the crux of the X” (G 224).

While Liam’s trauma, quite evidently, pertains to the physical, Veronica’s traumatic injury is rather based on witnessing and observing than active bodily experiencing. While Liam was the victim of physical abuse, Dell’Amico (62) recognises Veronica as Liam’s “co-victim”, injured by witnessing her brother’s affliction. It needs to be emphasised, as Herman (2) points out, that

[w]itnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic of trauma. It is difficult for an observer to remain clearheaded and calm, to see more than a few fragments of the picture at one time, to retain all the pieces, and to fit them together. It is even more difficult to find language that conveys fully and persuasively what one has seen.

While it seems that Veronica’s role had been reduced to that of a mere witness and observer of the abuse, it is, however, hinted at that she might have been sexually abused by Lambert Nugent as well, although she remains unable to



recall precisely what happened during her childhood. Even though she has 'only' been witness to the abuse, her reactions to it are nevertheless somatic, which is manifested, for instance, in her "profound alienation from sexual desire, copulation, and procreation [...] since Liam's suicide" because "all life, all love, has been tainted by the effects of her traumatic witnessing" (Harte 195). Veronica's intense bodily reaction is far from surprising, since "[t]he intermingling of mind and body is apparent in traumatic memories that remain in the body, in each of the senses, in the heart that races and skin that crawls whenever something resurrects the only slightly buried terror" (Brison 42, qtd in Harte 195). This is also evident in Veronica's refusal of sexual contact with her husband Tom, whom she characterises as desiring her "annihilation" (G 145). Veronica's early encounter with sexual abuse, paired with Liam's death, seems to have convinced her that she "will not sleep with him, not for a good while yet, and perhaps never again", illustrating her "refusal to climb in beside [her] husband a month or so after Liam died" (G 37).

In order for Veronica to be able to fully recognise her loss, she needs to revisit pivotal events in her childhood and thus acknowledge her traumatic injury. This way of reprocessing her past can be claimed to be of a scriptotherapeutic nature (cf Harte 191). Scriptotherapy, as Hyland-Russell (503) maintains, "acknowledges a centuries-old belief in the healing power of language and is indebted to Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer's work to relieve physical and psychological symptoms of trauma through 'catharsis'<sup>46</sup>". Veronica's initial endeavour to eventually turn to writing as a means of therapy and coping with her loss is evident from the very opening of the novel onwards:

I would like to write down what happened in my grandmother's house the summer I was eight or nine, but I am not sure if it really did happen. I need to bear witness to an uncertain event. I feel it roaring inside me – this thing that may not have taken place. I don't even know what name to put on it. I think you might call it a crime of the flesh, but the flesh is long fallen away and I am not sure what hurt may linger in the bones. (G 1)

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<sup>46</sup>i.e. "emotional release [...] linked to a need to release unconscious conflicts", retrieved from <http://psychology.about.com/od/cindex/g/catharsis.htm>, Feb 26th 2012.

By trying to formulate a narrative in which her traumatic memory can thus be integrated, Veronica advances her own healing of the events she had to witness almost thirty years ago. Following Harte's (191) undertaking of relating Veronica's scriptotherapy to Pierre Janet's (1925) work of memory, it becomes obvious that Veronica's struggle to reach through to her trauma can be viewed as "the action of telling a story" (Janet 661, qtd in Harte 191). By telling her story, Veronica thus "[recovers] autobiographical wholeness" (Harte 191) and is able to relate more consciously to the death of Liam and its causes. By means of her narration, Veronica arrives at a point where she understands that the answers to her questions lie in the past, and remarks that "[y]ou know everything at eight, but it is hidden from you, sealed up, in a way you have to cut yourself open to find" (G 147). It is this cutting open that is crucial for Veronica's course of grief. If she remains unable to account for her and Liam's past, she will never be able to fully acknowledge and overcome Liam's death. According to Harte (195), it was "Liam's suicide [which] has become the metaphorical knife" to cut open Veronica's memory and silence. Up until Liam's death, Veronica recalls her life as follows:

I was living my life in inverted commas. I could pick up my keys and go 'home' where I could 'have sex' with my 'husband' just like lots of other people did. This is what I had been doing for years. And I didn't seem to mind the inverted commas, or even noticed that I was living in them, until my brother died. (G 181)

Reality, it seems, strikes her exactly at the moment when she grasps the implications of her brother's suicide. It is then that she begins to reassess not only her own and the Hegarty clan's past, but tries to place the abuse on a larger, national scale. Thinking about her own childhood, Veronica admits that "children in those days were of little account" (G 235-236) and recalls that her father "used to hit his children all the time" (G 226). That children were treated this way eventually facilitated Lamb Nugent's inclination to abuse, "and he did what he liked with the children passing through" (G 235) because he was "safe in the knowledge that no child's allegation could trump an adult's denial" (Harte 198). This also relates to Veronica's Uncle Brendan, who, as a child, had been sent to St. Ita's psychiatric hospital where physical and sexual abuses more

than likely occurred. Thinking back to a visit to the now closed psychiatric hospital and burial ground with her grandmother Ada, Veronica realises that “Brendan’s bones are mixed with other people’s bones; so there is a turmoil of souls muttering and whining under his clothes, they would come out in a roar, were he to unbutton his fly; if he opened his mouth they would slop out over his teeth” (G 216). Pointing to the nation-wide wave of child abuse, it seems obvious that Uncle Brendan as well as the other residents of the psychiatric ward, fell victim to a national trauma. This vaguely suggests parallels to the controversial “Magdalene Laundries”, which were installed all over Ireland from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to offer housing to what was regarded by society as fallen women, i.e. “women who had been raped, sexually abused, were single mothers, or were considered [...] flirtatious” (Dell’Amico 67). Understanding that the system of past days was in itself abusive, Veronica conceives that she needs to tell “[t]he truth. The dead want nothing else (G 156). Dell’Amico (59) even goes so far as to claim that “in *The Gathering*, the probing of national identity occurs through an invocation of the child abuse that has been shown to have been commonplace in post-Independence Ireland”, thus rephrasing the undisclosed ordeal Liam and numerous other children in Ireland had to go through by placing it on a national scale.

## **6. The Grieving Process**

While the previous section made an attempt at exemplifying the general phase of loss with the accompanied shattering of assumptive worlds with broad theories that have subsequently been applied to the protagonists under scrutiny, it will now be of major importance to shed light on the protagonists’ internal perspective of bereavement. As already pointed out in an earlier chapter (cf Chapter 3.), grief gives the universal and broad concept of bereavement quite a unique and individualised emotional face. Just as there is no universal way of responding to loss, “[t]here is no correct way or time to grieve” (Kübler-Ross & Kessler xi), which is why grief, as opposed to

standardised and publicised mourning (see Chapter 7), has come to denote a distinctive personal experience differing from individual to individual. This personal experience as reflected by Holly and Veronica respectively will be the subject of the subsequent sections.

Interestingly, there are various instances of self-referential grief in the two novels under discussion. This points to the fact that both protagonists, Holly as well as Veronica, are aware of their own state of grieving, which is an important step on the way of acknowledging and accepting a loss. Holly, for instance, refers to her own transitional state in the following manner: “Had it completely slipped [her friend’s] Denise’s mind that Holly was still a **grieving widow** and that life just wasn’t fun for her any more?” (PS 279, emphasis added). At times, Holly even recognises the nature of her grief and after having gone through an intense phase of initial grieving admits to herself “I’m all grieved out” (PS 20). Likewise, Veronica indicates her grief in numerous different ways, mostly by employing mighty, powerful, and often disturbing images: “It is a confusing feeling – somewhere between diarrhoea and sex – this grief that is almost genital” (G 7). Veronica seems to be confused at the intensity of her grief and often reacts ambivalently to it. She accepts the fact that she “will do all this in deference to a grief that is biological, idiot, timeless” (G 11).

### 6.1. Applying Kübler-Ross’& Kessler’s<sup>47</sup> Five Stages of Grief

In an earlier chapter (see Chapter 4.3.), the main objectives of Kübler-Ross and Kessler’s (2007) *The Five Stages of Grief* as a stage model have been emphasised as “tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling” (Kübler-Ross & Kessler 7), without patronising the griever into ready-made categories. Grief, above all, is one of the most private and individual sentiments. The stages elucidated by Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2007) are by no means to be considered as prescriptions, but as non-binding guidelines in facilitating the coping process.

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<sup>47</sup> 2007, adapted from Kübler-Ross’ *Five Stages of Death*.

In the following, the individual stages will be consecutively analysed in an in-depth manner by linking them to the novels and their protagonists under discussion. It will be of major importance to highlight the two protagonists' individual grief reactions and how they correlate with the *Five Stages model* by Kübler-Ross and Kessler.

#### 6.1.1. Denial

As the very first stage, *denial* fulfils an especially vital function. As Kübler-Ross and Kessler (10) are eager to point out, "the first stage of grieving helps us to survive the loss". As a means of necessary survival, it operates as a most basic and indispensable mechanism to preserve the mental stability of the grieving person. By simply denying a given fact, the mind is given a rest from the exceedingly difficult task of processing life's vicissitudes. *Denial*, in its most fundamental form, is thus employed as a means to lessen the emotional pain that seems impregnable immediately after a loss. It needs to be emphasised, however, that what is denied is not the actual death of a loved one, but rather that he or she may never participate in any of the established routines of life and partnership. It is much more a matter of not being able to *believe* the fact that a loved one no longer resides amongst the living than of denying the death proper (Kübler-Ross & Kessler 8).

Kübler-Ross and Kessler's phase of *denial* exhibits strong similarities to stage models of other theorists<sup>48</sup>, most importantly to the notion of shock and numbness (e.g. enumerated by Parkes 1986), which usually accompany the *denial* process. Similarly, dreaming may be an integral part of the denial process, since the inability of embracing reality yet ushers some griever into the realms of illusion and dreams (cf Kübler-Ross & Kessler 9).

Likewise of interest is the apparent congruence of the stage of *denial* with the world all of a sudden becoming meaningless (cf Kübler-Ross & Kessler 10). This is very much in accord with Janoff-Bulman's theory of the *assumptive world* and

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<sup>48</sup>cf Chapter 4.3. for more information.

how it may be shattered after loss<sup>49</sup>. As loss can be an event strong enough to exceed our mental capacities, *denial* can be viewed as a “way of letting in only as much as we can handle” (Kübler-Ross & Kessler 10). Otherwise, our mental system would continually run fear of being overpowered as a result of acknowledging too much of a given painful reality. In what follows, the first stage of grief will be applied to the novels’ characters Holly and Veronica in order to highlight accordance with or deviance from the stage description.

#### 6.1.1.1. Holly

In *PS, I Love You*, the character of Holly does not primarily seem to be preoccupied with overt feelings of denial, but with an intense sense of guilt. Holly, above all, feels she could have done more for her dying husband. With what has been coined as survivors’ grief, Holly directs irrational feelings of guilt at her husband’s death. Survivors’ grief is “generally applied only to those bereavement experiences that occur in the context of catastrophic events or situations wherein the death of another person [...] is perceived as especially untimely or unwarranted” (Despelder & Strickland 221-222). An “especially untimely” death of her husband Gerry would, therefore, more than qualify Holly for experiencing survivors’ grief.

As Kübler-Ross and Kessler (8 ff) observed, numbing and (day-)dreaming (in the sense that the death per se might have been a dream) seem to be integral parts of the *denial* stage in the grieving process. While Holly is not actively denying Gerry’s death, she is all the more vulnerable to numbing and dreaming about her late husband. After Gerry’s death, Holly gradually “seemed to be living outside of her body, numb to everything but the pain in her heart, in her bones, in her head” (PS 12), which clearly exemplifies the state of indifference she is caught in. Numbing to the pain, which otherwise might exceed Holly’s mental capacities and psychological resources, eases her way through the initial phase of shock. Numbing moreover appears to help her through

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<sup>49</sup>cf Chapters 4.5.and 5.1.2.

seemingly adamant obstacles in life, including following her daily routine as she knows it, which becomes apparent when she realises that “she had become numb to all those irrelevant problems in life” (PS 275). Similarly, Holly attempts to trick her conscience by continually asking herself whether Gerry really passed away, or whether it was all just a horrible dream. Realising the sharp pangs of reality, however, Holly needs to accept the fact that her husband’s death was anything but illusion. Illustrating Holly’s ambivalence in acknowledging Gerry’s death, she accepts that “[s]he so desperately wanted him back that she was imagining all kinds of crazy things” (PS 14) and that, after all, “she had been daydreaming again” (PS 11).

Towards the end of the first stage of *denial*, Kübler-Ross and Kessler (11) maintain that “[t]he finality of the loss begins to gradually sink in” and a slow acceptance of the death and its circumstances is gradually beginning to take place. For Holly, this moment sets in when she receives the envelope with Gerry’s ten left-behind letters for her to be strictly opened every month. With this evidence that he is indeed gone, Holly is able to proceed in processing his death and its circumstances, without trying to escape into the rescue of her imagination.

#### 6.1.1.2. Veronica

Veronica’s way through the first stage of *denial* seems similar to Holly’s at first glance. However, there are crucial differences to be considered, as the mode of death and the relationships of the protagonists are both of an altogether different nature. As Veronica lost her brother Liam to suicide, *denial* seems to be even more pronounced since she had no opportunity whatsoever to prepare for it and might, as a result, question the reality of the loss even more than is the case with Holly and her anticipation of Gerry’s death. Likewise, since Veronica lost a brother who was geographically separated from her almost all adult life, she might need longer to adjust to a loss she is not confronted with on a daily basis since they did not share a household or live in each other’s vicinity.

When appointed with the task of presenting the news of Liam's death to her mother, Veronica realises that her mother has a hard time accepting the death, which prompts Veronica into musing: "[n]o wonder she doesn't believe me. I hardly believe it myself" (G 12). Furthermore, Veronica struggles with accepting the fact that her brother no longer exists by actively disavowing the void he left behind: "It never happened, Liam never died, it is all the same as it ever was" (G 176). By denying his being forever gone, Veronica is given more time to process the death on a full scale. Veronica's moment of finality sinking in begins the moment she needs to make concrete decisions in her brother's funerary proceedings.

#### 6.1.2. Anger

As one of the most highly emotive and emotionally-loaded feelings, *anger* fulfils manifold roles in the grieving process. *Anger*, as Kübler-Ross and Kessler (11) phrase it, "does not have to be logical or valid". Moreover, they point to the fact that the second stage in the grieving process does not have any prescribed addressee; rather, grievors are angry with several independent individuals at once, including oneself and the deceased (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 11). After the transition of the first stage, *denial*, into the second one, *anger*, gradually has taken place, other highly emotive sentiments may be evoked as a result thereof and thus *anger* is often mingled with "feelings of sadness, panic, hurt, and loneliness" (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 12), all adding up to the emotional pain one is confronted with after loss. That this stage is especially important in the grieving process is exemplified by Kübler-Ross and Kessler's (16) following conviction: "Anger affirms that you *can* feel, that you *did* love, and that you *have* lost". It is, in other words, the ultimate proof of life and its painful hardships.

##### 6.1.2.1. Holly

It seems to be the case that Holly, unlike Veronica, does not particularly fall victim to the emotion of anger all too much after Gerry's death. There are only slight instances which might point to an emotional outburst of anger with regard



to Gerry's death; for instance, when Holly is required to collect Gerry's death certificate, the painful reality of her loss strikes her. It dawns on her that "[s]he shouldn't have to be there" (PS 36) picking up her young husband's death certificate. Furthermore, Holly realises the wrongfulness of the whole situation, thinking "[i]t didn't seem fair" to call Gerry this early, "[b]ecause it just wasn't fair" (PS 36). All things considered, Holly does not direct her anger at Gerry's person and why he left her at so early an age, but rather gets angry at the unfairness of life and how her friends seem to be insensitive to her current situation. Kübler-Ross and Kessler (15) report that anger can give the griever a structure:

Then you get angry at someone, maybe a person who didn't attend the funeral, maybe a person who isn't around, maybe a person who is different now that your loved one has died. Suddenly you have a structure – your anger toward them.

When Holly learns that her two best friends Sharon and Denise are leading a happy life, she gets bitter. As Denise is about to marry her boyfriend and Sharon is expecting a baby, Holly painfully realises that "[e]veryone else's life was moving on except hers" (PS 287). Gradually, she discerns that "[s]he was jealous of them and their good fortune", and, in accordance with Kübler-Ross and Kessler's theory of directing the anger toward particular persons, also realises that "[s]he was angry with them for moving on without her" (PS 290). It is not merely the fact that her friends were moving forward, however, but also the fact that Holly herself was still stuck in the same desperate situation, wishing Gerry to be alive and well again. With this hopeless rumination of the past, Holly thus directs a certain amount of jealousy towards her best friends, although she knows that this is the least appropriate reaction she could possibly display. Finally understanding that the grieving process requires an inner perspective on the self without outside distractions, Holly realises that although "[s]he was being jealous, bitter and incredibly selfish [...] [she] needed to be selfish these days in order to survive" (PS 307).

Even though anger seeps through again and again during Holly's coping process, it is not excessive. This apparent lack of overt and excessive anger might be indicative of Holly's overall disposition of cherishing the positive and

worthwhile facets of life. Even though she falls into depression after her painful loss (as will be elaborated on in Chapter 6.1.4.1.), she nevertheless does not allow anger to guide her path through grief. What is remarkable, however, is the way Holly seems to employ the feeling of relief instead of anger. This, as Kübler-Ross and Kessler (31) phrase it, can be seen as “the calm *after* the storm”. Moreover, they are keen on elucidating that “relief is the recognition that the suffering has ended, the pain is over, the disease no longer lives” (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 31), which is exactly why Holly does not seem to be excessively angry at Gerry’s death but rather feels grateful that her husband’s suffering has finally ended, as seen in the following: “She was just thankful that, after months, his suffering was over” (PS 35). Furthermore, Holly “felt relief – relief that [Gerry’s] pain was gone, and relief that she had been there with him to witness the peace of his passing” (PS 35). It is interesting that the relief of ending Gerry’s illness triggers other moments of life which Holly feels grateful for. For instance, “[s]he felt relieved to have known him, to have loved him and to be loved by him, and relief that the last thing he saw was her face smiling down on him” (PS 35).

This feeling of relief is often accompanied by feelings of guilt, since relief after a loved one’s death is not socially accepted or acknowledged. Kübler-Ross and Kessler (31) also point to this fact, maintaining that relief may “feel out of place, out of step, and is often considered wrong”. What is socially expected, rather, is the more natural expression of anger after having lost a dear person.

#### 6.1.2.2. Veronica

At first incapable of acknowledging her feelings to herself, her family and friends, Veronica gradually begins to sense an anger all the more excruciating. Since she cannot confide in anyone amongst her family and openly disclose her emotions regarding her brother’s death, she is forced to go through them all by herself. This is most easily done by simply bottling up the anger until it finally breaks free. Veronica is not only angry that her brother died at so young an age, but is moreover reminded of all the siblings she has lost to death over time:

So I am in rage with every single one of my brothers and sisters, including Stevie, long dead, and Midge, recently dead, and I am boiling mad with Liam for being dead too, just now, when I need him most. (G 10)

As can be seen in the above quote, Veronica's anger is also directed at the siblings still alive, for Veronica is left alone with all the funerary preparations, while her eight remaining siblings hardly feel responsible for their dead brother Liam. It is her who needs to prepare all the funerary procedures because her family members admit that "[Veronica is] the one who loved [Liam] most" (G 23). Moreover, the anger Veronica senses is also directed at Liam himself, since he will not be able to offer her support. This is interesting with respect to Holly's way of employing anger, since she would not consider being angry at her dead husband for having died, but rather directs her anger towards others.

Since *anger* "is a necessary stage of the healing process" (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 12), it is especially important for Veronica to free the anger that resides within her in order to gradually heal. According to Kübler-Ross and Kessler (16), anger can also be "turned inward on [oneself]", which is typically characterised as guilt. As guilt is an especially prominent theme in *The Gathering* and particularly pertaining to Veronica, it does by no means seem surprising that there are numerous passages in the novel pointing to its importance with respect to Liam's death. The Hegartys' family credo had always been the same: *Don't tell Mammy*. When Veronica struggles to bring up the courage to tell her mother what happened with Liam, her sister Bea gives her "a dark look, full of blame", leaving Veronica wondering: "Like it is all my fault" (G 25). So Veronica is not only burdened with the guilt of not having been able to foresee Liam's suicide as a result of child abuse, but also with a breaking of the family creed "*Don't tell Mammy*".

### 6.1.3. Bargaining

The stage of *bargaining* is, above all, thoroughly characterised by a pronounced indulgence in wishful thinking, usually headed by fundamental questions such

as “if only...” and “what if...” (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 17). The third stage of finding the meaning of grief through loss is thus a helpful tool for the griever to bridge the gap between the world of the lost loved one and the harsh reality one is facing.

#### 6.1.3.1. Holly

For Holly, the *bargaining* stage appears to be a means of reconstructing the possible future she and Gerry could have had if only he had not died so young. While Holly tends to use the third stage in a future-oriented manner, Veronica, as will be seen below, ruminates the past and is thus obsessed with rendering pivotal events in her and Liam’s life undone. This future-orientation is manifest in Holly’s continual forging of alternative realities in which Gerry is still by her side. Often carried away by this chain of thought, Holly seems to be able to bear and handle the tragic situation of having lost her soul mate just a little better by employing illusions to temporarily cling to. This difference in orientation suggests a link to an already introduced theory, namely that of Stroebe & Schut’s (1999) *Dual Process Model* (see Chapter 4.6.). As outlined earlier, this model argues for an oscillation between remembering the loss and focusing one’s attention on future processes and that this oscillation can be equated to the one of confrontation and avoidance (cf Stroebe, Schut, and Stroebe 50-52). This orientation towards loss and restoration, respectively, fits into the realm of bargaining, since it illustrates Holly’s dynamic development from a highly loss-oriented state at the beginning of her grieving towards a successively prominent restoration-orientation, only to gradually sink into a loss-oriented state in the fourth phase of the stage model (see Chapter 6.1.4.1.).

Within bargaining, there is a prominent amount of regrets. What Holly frequently tries to alter are the things she once said to Gerry and would now like to take back. It pains her to realise that once said and done, certain things are not retractable anymore:

She chastised herself for walking away from him when she should have hugged him, when she held grudges for days instead of forgiving him,

when she went straight to sleep some nights instead of making love to him. She wanted to take back every moment she knew he had been so angry with her and hated her. She wished all her memories were of the good times but the bad times kept coming back to haunt her. (PS 138)

It is Holly's painful task as part of the grieving process to realise that she will not be able to alter the past and that it "had all been such a waste" (PS 138).

#### 6.1.3.2. Veronica

The stage of *bargaining*, as reflected by Veronica, is much more elaborately employed than in *PS, I Love You*. There is clear evidence as to why Veronica is a pronounced bargainer when it comes to Liam's death, since she has ever since blamed herself for it. The "what if" question bears a vital importance for Veronica, since she secretly knows that she could have been the one to change Liam's fate by telling the truth about Lambert Nugent and the hideous details of 1968. Thus, Veronica, once again, is confronted with a highly developed sense of guilt as to her brother's suicide. As the bargaining aspect of grief raises the question of responsibility, Veronica again and again wonders whether she can really be held responsible for Liam's actions. Guilt, as Kübler-Ross and Kessler (17) hold it, can be considered "bargaining's companion", hence it is no surprise that these two strong conceptions seem to overlap in Veronica's case. Not only the guilt and responsibility play an important part in Veronica's bargaining process, but also the way Veronica admits to herself that she had betrayed Liam. By not confiding in anyone about Liam's sexual abuse, Veronica accepted the fact that Liam would take this secret to the grave. Veronica, however, openly declares that she has long before taken to betray her brother Liam. Since she could not bring herself to believe him when he was ostensibly beaten by his father, Veronica declares: "If I am looking for the point when I betrayed my brother, then it must be here, too. I looked at the raised flesh on his cheek and I decided not to believe him, if there was any 'believing' to be done" (G 166). This incident might have branded Veronica never quite to believe him anymore, which would account for her inability to recall whether the dubious abuse truthfully occurred.

#### 6.1.4. Depression

Of all the stages previously introduced, *depression* appears to be the most obvious and replicable one as regards societal expectations and policies. Society and close individuals expect the grieving person to go through an intense phase of *depression*, since this is usually a reliable sign that the grieving person is actually suffering the loss, which in turn is a presupposed token for the normalised grieving process. As such, this seems to be one of the socially prescribed ways<sup>50</sup> of how tragic events such as premature loss are to be projected on the outside. While the phase of *bargaining* is primarily characterised by future-oriented wishful thinking, the stage of *depression* forcefully carries the griever back to the present, non-illusionary state of irrevocable loss (cf Kübler-Ross and Kessler 20). By being confronted with the harsh reality of never being able to revive the deceased by fanciful illusions, harsh depression is evoked in the griever. *Depression*, in a highly crushing way, confirms the reality of the loss. Even though it may be an intense emotion perceived as never likely to entirely vanish, it is of vital importance that this kind of depression is by no means considered a mental illness (cf Kübler-Ross and Kessler 20). Rather, it is seen as a necessary and adequate reaction to a life-shattering experience such as bereavement. As Kübler-Ross and Kessler (21) are apt to point out, “depression is a way for nature to keep us protected by shutting down the nervous system so that we can adapt to something we feel we cannot handle”. By “shutting down”, the griever is granted a most precious item, namely time to adjust to a seemingly overwhelming situation powerful enough as to subdue one’s entire mental capacities. The vital aspect of the fourth stage is that fighting the depression will only deteriorate the grieving process. Rather, *depression* needs to be fully acknowledged and experienced, as it may be considered as cleansing the griever (cf Kübler-Ross and Kessler 22). Additionally, as paradoxical as it might sound, *depression* also entails positive outcomes. Worthwhile for the present purpose is the way *depression* might foster personal growth by exploring the depths of one’s soul (cf Kübler-

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<sup>50</sup> For more information on the policy of grief, see Chapter 7.1.3.

Ross and Kessler 24). The aspect of personal growth in the aftermath of crises will, however, be an issue of a different Chapter (see Chapter 8.1.).

#### 6.1.4.1. Holly

For Holly, the instances of “slowing and shutting down” to her environment are obvious from a very early stage onwards. She apparently feels the need to isolate herself from the steady pace of her life and that of the people around her, which is why she withdraws from any social or public undertakings. Holly desperately wants to protect herself from calls, visits and conversations which might tear open the wound she so painstakingly tried to conceal. Gradually, Holly begins to understand why she is in need of isolating herself: “She didn’t want to hear the truth. She didn’t want to hear how she had to get on with her life; she just wanted...oh, she didn’t know what she wanted. She was content to be miserable. It somehow felt right” (PS 16-17). As already pointed out, Kübler-Ross and Kessler (22 ff) cherish this conviction of the grieving being rightfully depressed, as they have been bereaved of a vital part of their lives. This is also why close relations of the bereaved should not attempt to cheer up the griever and dismiss feelings of depression, since this would inevitably amount in a state of disavowal of one’s own emotions (cf Kübler-Ross and Kessler 24).

Holly’s way through depression is primarily characterised by a pronounced self-neglect. Not only does she neglect her own body and appearance, she also neglects her social networks and family members, who are all eager to help her through this difficult time. Even though this is an important part of grieving, Holly herself “felt embarrassed by her lack of care for the house and for herself” (PS 17). As her friends get increasingly worried about Holly not leaving the house or answering phone calls, they try to intervene with her personal way of exercising stage four of the grieving process. This way of not being able to acknowledge Holly’s depression and sadness is heavily criticised by Kübler-Ross and Kessler (24), who claim that every “mourner should be allowed to experience his sorrow”, without being forcefully dragged out of it.

According to Kübler-Ross and Kessler (22), after some time the depression seems to be muffled and not as prominent as before. However, it is likely to recur as time passes, which reinforces the general idea that the stages are not fixed categories with a clear-cut endpoint but rather flexible as regards recurrence. This oscillation between seemingly feeling better and being crushed by depression is also reflected by Holly: “Days went by when she felt so happy and content, and *confident* that her life would be OK, and then as quickly as the feeling came it would disappear and she would feel sadness setting in again” (PS 137). Remarkable about the character of Holly, however, is the unbroken optimism she holds within, irrespective of the tragic situation she is caught in. After moments of intense crisis, there is bound to occur some change for the better. Holly represents a character who tries to see through all the negative aspects of life in order to arrive at a positive view of things. This said, Holly “would fall into days of deep dark depression; then finally build up the strength to be positive and to snap out of it for another few days” (PS 138).

One of the gravest situations in *PS, I Love You* is apparently the one at Lanzarote, where Holly and her two best friends, Denise and Sharon, have been sent to vacation by Gerry. Far away from the familiar environment at home, one might guess that Holly would be able to relax a little after her arduous journey through grief. However, a specific incident during this vacation hints at Holly’s depressive state and allows the reader insight into her permanent struggle between fighting and surrendering. The moment when Holly would have liked to surrender is one of major importance, because it would have made possible a reunion with Gerry in eternity. As Holly and her friends went into the sea on their air mattresses, they slowly drifted farther and farther away from the shore until they panicked at the possibility of drowning. It was this crucial moment of possible death that triggered Holly’s train of thought:

Holly had reacted unusually out there in the water and it bothered her to think about why she had. After the initial panic of thinking she was going to die, she’d become feverishly giddy as she’d realised that if she did **she would be with Gerry**, that she didn’t care whether she lived or died. (PS 268, emphasis added)



While being reunited with Gerry in death does seem to be a tempting idea, Holly, shortly after this alarming confession, realises that “[t]hose were selfish thoughts” and that “[s]he needed to change her perspective on her life” (PS 268). Even though Holly gets weak from time to time, she still does not give up fighting, as the above quote clearly indicates. Even though life’s hardships have temporarily overwhelmed Holly, she has no intention to give up her life but rather chooses to actively work on rebuilding it after the tragic loss by incorporating Gerry’s eternal memory in her reality.

#### 6.1.4.2. Veronica

In contrast to Holly’s coming to terms with the fourth stage, Veronica’s phase of depression strikes as much more self-destructive. By considering Liam’s death, Veronica discredits her own self-worth, saying that “[t]here is something wonderful about a death, how everything shuts down, and all the ways you thought you were vital are not even vaguely important” (G 27). Indifferent to life, it seems, Veronica is convinced that her being alive or her being dead does not make much of a difference; neither to her, nor to her environment. Liam’s death evoked a sense of introspection in Veronica, who now perceives herself as well as her family much more consciously than was previously the case. Veronica’s grief heavily shakes her fundamental views of the world, and she begins to question, almost philosophically, some basic concepts of the world as she knows it, as seen in the following:

And what amazes me [...] is not the fact that everyone loses someone, but that everyone loves someone. It seems like such a massive waste of energy – and we all do it [...]. We each love someone, even though they will die. And we keep loving them, even when they are not there to love any more. And there is no logic or use to any of this, that I can see. (G 28)

As can be deduced from the above, the underlying criticism is directed at the fundamentally human quality of everyone loving someone. Veronica’s solution to this problem is, apparently, to completely ban mutual human affection, so as to be spared the shattering grief that accompanies the loss of a loved one. To Veronica, love seems to be an illogical concept. Likewise, grief seems to be

equally irrational. To her, intense grief would not have a chance to occur if the relationship to the deceased was not fostered with love in the first place. Nevertheless, she allowed Liam to become an integral part of her life, which is why she will have to go through a grief which reflects and acknowledges this close relationship.

Sadness and depression are often attempted to be drowned with alcohol and other substances. By consuming alcohol, one might feel as if able to outrun the full impact of depression. However, as Kübler-Ross and Kessler (22) clarify, “[s]eeking a way out of depression feels like going into a hurricane and sailing around the inside perimeter, fearful that there is no exit door”. Veronica, desperately trying to numb her pain with the appealing qualities of alcohol, is caught in the trap of escaping her depression. Voicing her desperation, Veronica declares “I try not to drink before half past five, but I always do drink – from the top of the wine bottle to the last, little drop” and that this would be “the only way [...] to make the day end” (G 38).

Veronica’s desperation after Liam’s death and her depressive mood are also presented in a rather terrifying and alarming manner. Echoing the mature literary tone of the novel, Veronica voices an elaborate claim: “I feel the future falling through the roof of my mind and when I look nothing is there. A rope. Something dangling in a bag, that I can not touch” (G 39). The rope that is addressed might point to her vulnerable state which might favour considering self-induced harm or death. The fact that it is out of her reach, that it is not for her to touch the rope, reveals Veronica’s inner drive to live rather than die.

#### 6.1.5. Acceptance

The final and hardest part of the grieving process is the one of fully accepting the loss. It is necessary to point out that acceptance is not about liking a situation; rather, it is an essential part of learning to live with a situation as demanding as bereavement. Interestingly, Kübler-Ross and Kessler (25) claim that the stage of *acceptance* can be equated with healing. However, this

appears to be a slightly problematic notion, since *acceptance* seems to be one of numerous different stations on the way towards healing. Healing is, in a way, the overall process as well as striven for aim. If *acceptance* were the same as healing, the previous four stages would seem to be discredited to be of relevance for the healing process. Moreover, as the authors of the *Five Stages* maintain, the stages are not fixed but rather dynamic in their recurrence – if healing was the ultimate stage, there would hardly be any going back and forth between the other four stages. Once healed, one would expect not to return to former stages on the way to that ultimate healing. This is why the equation of acceptance and healing does not seem to be wholly valid. Moreover, since the present thesis is divided into sections such as loss, grief, mourning and healing, it seems necessary to differentiate between the two concepts of acceptance and healing, as the latter will be allocated a separate chapter in which an effort will be made to exemplify the manifold facets of healing and how social support systems, belief systems and other psychological factors facilitate the process.

#### 6.1.5.1. Holly

Arriving at the final stage of *acceptance* is a weary process. For Holly, who remained in a quite intense stage of *depression* and heartily allowed an open display of her feelings, *acceptance* seems to be, first and foremost, partially induced by Gerry's ten left-behind letters for her to obey. It is through these letters that Holly is able to cling to her husband just a little longer, savouring every single message she receives and worshipping their emotional value. Holly is aware of the fact that the person who last touched the envelope with the letters was Gerry, and she realises that this last "memory [...] would have to last her a lifetime" (PS 31). With the list Gerry left behind, Holly feels a newly won confidence in mastering her life without Gerry's physical presence, although he would never quite cease to exist, because "ever since she had begun opening the envelopes [Gerry] didn't feel dead to her" (PS 92). As each letter appoints Holly a certain task to fulfil, she feels responsible to obey Gerry's last wishes in order to respect his legacy. This way, she never seems to run out of motivation to change her life for the better, since many of Gerry's letters, directly or

indirectly, give impetus for Holly to healthily adjust from the tragic loss and pursue future goals. One of these life-altering as well as enhancing tasks to be fulfilled by Holly is her pursuit of a challenging new profession. By having found a job Holly is finally able to identify with and care for, one of the many steps towards acceptance seems to have been accomplished. Returning to a regular work-routine helps Holly freeing her mind from unhealthy rumination and generally heaves her out of prolonged depression. With her new job, Holly finds a reason to get out of bed in the morning, and more importantly, gets a new perspective of her future in the long run.

Although seemingly paradoxical, a highly important method for Holly to accept Gerry's death is through talking both to him and about him. While talking to Gerry reinforces her enduring relationship with him, talking about him with others seems to bear a kind of therapeutic value. Reconstructing Gerry's life through conversation seems to help the bereaved family and friends through the painful loss. Moreover, it affirms the personality of the deceased, so as to cherish substantial character traits which should be memorised. This correlates with Walter's (1996) break-through theory of bereavement and biography. What Walter (1996: 7) sharply criticises in his paper is the way the suggested 'working through grief' hypothesis fails to account for the life and biography of the deceased. Rather, it focuses almost exclusively on internal feelings of the bereaved. However, Walter's *New Model of Grief* (1996)<sup>51</sup> argues for an inclusion of the biography and thus the character of the deceased in the grieving process and dismisses the notion of completely relinquishing the ties to the late loved one. Talking about the deceased, at least in Western society, still seems to be a taboo topic (cf Walter 1996: 9). At the same time, the deceased maintain certain roles in the minds of the bereaved, and even though this seems to be an abstract notion, "[t]he idea of an active inner representation of a valued deceased individual seems to be a concept readily and naturally available to many people" (Marwit and Klass 292). This seems to be equally true of Holly. Especially Marwit and Klass' (1995, qtd in Walter 1996: 11) study

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<sup>51</sup> For more information, see chapter 4.7.1.

of assigned roles for the deceased<sup>52</sup> is helpful in this respect. Holly, for instance, rather assigns the role of *giving guidance in specific situations* as well as *clarifying values of the survivor* to her deceased husband. With the letters he left her, he can be said to guide her through demanding situations in life and since Holly often considers what Gerry would do in certain situations in her stead, he seems to have occupied a role as a guardian angel.

Yet another highly important step for Holly to finally accept her loved one no longer being physically present is the issue of clearing out Gerry's clothes and personal belongings. This emotional and personal process is, quite naturally, difficult for Holly, who up until now desperately tried to cling to anything Gerry ever touched or possessed. What is most painful for her at this stage is the fact that the reality of the clothes and possessions inevitably points to the fact that the deceased is no longer a vital part of that reality (cf Kübler-Ross and Kessler 133). By embracing this emotional endeavour, Holly admits to herself that without Gerry, his possessions do not have any value any longer. It is interesting to trace Holly's changing mindset as regards Gerry's possessions. During the stages of *denial*, *anger* and *depression*, Holly tends to wear his clothes so as to feel close to him, which is why she "never intended to wash" his garments because "[s]he wanted [them] exactly as Gerry had left [them]" (PS 17). However, Holly's attitude gradually changes until she feels comfortable enough to part with Gerry's belongings. This is primarily evoked by one of Gerry's letters telling Holly it is necessary to let go of physical possessions, reassuring her that "[y]ou don't need my belongings to remember me by, you don't need to keep them as proof that I existed or still exist in your mind" (PS 140). Considering the advice as Gerry's personal permission to part with his possessions, Holly starts this agonising endeavour:

It was an emotionally draining experience. It took her days to complete. She relived a million memories with every garment and piece of paper she bagged. She held each item near to her before saying goodbye. Every time it left her fingers it was like saying goodbye to a part of Gerry all over again. (PS 141)

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<sup>52</sup> As illustrated in Chapter 4.7.1.

When finished, Holly realises how grateful she is to have Gerry's letters guide and support her during arduous moments like this (cf PS 141). Knowing that she will not be able to get any of the belongings back once she parts with them, she takes the opportunity to farewell them adequately, at the same time realising that "[s]he had to do this alone" (PS 141) without support from family or friends. Going through the things generates a variety of happy as well as sad memories. Holly concludes the depletion by commenting that "[w]ithout [Gerry] they were just *things*" (PS 142), while at the same time acknowledging and understanding the therapeutic value of revisiting his belongings in order to eventually accept the loss.

Holly's journey from loss, through grief and mourning, towards healing is characterised by typical ups and downs. This is not unusual given the fact that loss affects individuals a lifetime, and more importantly, because the stages are not fixed but dynamic in their recurrence. Holly, even though discouraged at times, always finds a way to see life's positive aspects, although they may be, at times, overshadowed by tragedies. Even though she lost her husband and soul mate, Holly firmly believes in a good and benevolent world. Although this view of the world had temporarily been shaken, it was not entirely broken, which is why Holly is able to extract strength from tragic life events. That she still carries the inner drive to meaningfully live her life is evident in the following: "She was tired of just existing; she wanted to live" (PS 140), but regaining one's strength and confidence takes time and effort. Holly recognises that every depression needs to have an ending, as exemplified in the following:

It was time to open all the windows and air the house, to free it of the ghosts of the winter and dark days, to get up early [...] and look people in the eye and smile and say hello instead of [...] ignoring the world. It was time to stop hiding in the dark and to hold your head up high and come face to face with the truth. (PS 139-140)

Discovering the delicate and newly won admiration of nature, Holly "[revels] in the new brightness of life" (PS 140). Acknowledging that truth, namely that

Gerry is truly gone, opens her heart for new acquaintances and relationships to be forged.<sup>53</sup>

#### 6.1.5.2. Veronica

As opposed to Holly in *PS, I Love You*, Veronica in *The Gathering* did not have the valuable opportunity of bidding the loved one goodbye before the tragic suicide. This might be an indication as to why Veronica's struggle for acceptance seems to be considerably more difficult than is the case with Holly, who was present during Gerry's death and could thus support him during his final hours and bid him farewell.

Veronica's journey through acceptance is a troublesome one; not only does she find it much harder to accept the fact that Liam is gone, she also struggles with a much more negative predisposition towards life and her future than does Holly in *PS, I Love You*.

For Veronica, the ultimate stage of *acceptance* is primarily induced by her reprocessing the past, above all her witnessing the terrible event that happened in 1968 in her grandmother's house in Broadstone. Only by telling and re-experiencing the traumatic event of their childhood days with their grandmother and Lambert Nugent, Veronica is able to reconcile with the past and her already dead brother. She feels that Liam deserves to be remembered not as a maniac who tragically fell victim to alcohol and suicide, but as a young man trying to come to terms with how Lambert Nugent succeeded in breaking his normal course of life. That not telling the truth lies heavily on Veronica's chest is evident in her statement of "*I never told Mammy the truth. I never told any of them the truth*" (G 207). Veronica, although hesitantly, has always been convinced that there might be "other [i.e. more important] things to be revealed" (G 207), that Liam's experience was not worth reporting. However, when Liam had killed himself, Veronica was confronted with waves of guilt and understanding that the event had indeed been decisive in how Liam's life should take course. Likewise,

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<sup>53</sup> This aspect will be exhaustively dealt with in Chapter 8.2.

the other siblings of the Hegarty clan seem to have been involved in at least knowing about Lambert Nugent molesting children, but none of them dared to speak the truth. Bea, one of the Hegarty sisters, at one point emphasises rather angrily “[w]hat use is the truth to us now?” (G 208), thus conceding that while it must have been a terrible experience for Liam as a child, it still remains an unalterable fact of past days. Veronica is, however, very well aware of the fact that she “[owes] it to Liam to make things clear” (G 233) and that she will have to reveal the abuse in order for Liam to rest in peace. Just about to entrust her mother with the hard facts about Liam’s abuse, Veronica grapples with how to phrase the significant revelation and in the end fails to do so. What she would have liked to say, but could not bring herself to, however, is as follows:

the year you sent us away, your dead son was interfered with, when you were not there to comfort or protect him, and that interference was enough to send him on a path that ends in the box [i.e. coffin] downstairs. (G 213)

Instead of revealing the truth to her mother, she spares her the additional emotional upheaval that would overwhelm her even more than having to host a wake for her son.

Concluding the practical application of Kübler-Ross and Kessler’s *Five Stages of Grief*, it appears striking that the novels’ protagonists indeed do not follow the stages in a linear manner; rather, the occurrence of the individual stages varies considerably, with both Holly and Veronica revisiting the phase of depression again and again, since even though one might have accepted a loved one’s death, it is nevertheless valid to experience occasional pangs of depression. Juxtaposing Holly and Veronica as regards their individual experience of the *Five Stages*, it is intriguing that Veronica, on the whole, is strongly inclined towards a negative view of the world and her grief, believing that her brother’s death had only marked the beginning of her world falling apart. This is also reflected in Veronica letting anger dominate the entire grieving process; the anger is not only directed at herself, but Liam, her husband, the situation of being bereaved and, ultimately, the world. Holly, on the other hand, strikes as having a much more positive mindset as regards her future, as reflected in the



plans she continually forges out in order for her to be able to live, not as restored before Gerry's death, but rather as incorporating Gerry's memory forever in her reality. While both Holly and Veronica display critical moments capable of endangering their safety (Holly almost surrendering to drowning in Lanzarote; Veronica not being able to touch the dangling rope), the drive to live is, however, chosen over death, which is a precious revelation in the course of one's grief.

## **7. The Mourning Process**

Following the pattern from internalised to externalised grief, the chapter on mourning constitutes the next logical point of analysis. As already outlined in Chapter 3, mourning can be characterised as a “psychological response to death or any other loss and **the expression or communication** of this response” (Kauffman 311, emphasis added). This display of the response to loss as reflected by the protagonists of the novels discussed will be of major concern in the present chapter. It is aimed at juxtaposing the differences as well as similarities in the novels under discussion in order to elucidate traditional and expected behaviour within mourning. As mourning is more often than not socially as well as culturally determined, this chapter also aims at deviant forms of mourning, and at demonstrating how this affects the ultimate outcome of grieving. Additionally, attention will be drawn to specific Irish mourning rituals as portrayed in *PS, I Love You* and *The Gathering*, so as to bring to the fore the importance of the inherent sense of place pertaining to the novels.

Bereavement theorists usually view mourning as a process typically “understood to be the mourning **ritual**” (Kauffman 311, emphasis added), which is to be strictly separated from personal sentiments of grief, and in turn suggests that mourning is more affiliated to outward behaviour and actions than to emotional grief responses. As Kauffman (312) further points out, “mourning is a process of reckoning with loss and death”. As an outlet of processing the death of their loved ones, Veronica and Holly need to surpass this stage of

mourning in order to arrive at the ultimate phase of healing (cf Chapter 8. in this thesis).

Since mourning is considered the public display or exhibition of grief (cf Rando 1993 qtd in Kauffman 311), an effort will be made to subsequently point out instances of traditional and/or deviant mourning patterns, along with the notion of the policing (i.e. regulation) of grief (cf Walter 1999: 119ff) and what place society occupies within this discussion.

## **7.1. Death Rituals**

As an integral part of the mourning process, death rituals are designed to externalise certain unified routine ways of behaviour in the case of death and transport the inner feelings of grief on the outside. Attempting a definition of the notion “death ritual”, Reverend Samuel G.F. Brandon suggests it to be “any of the ceremonial acts or customs employed at the time of death and burial”<sup>54</sup>. An overview of traditional mourning as well as of the customs portrayed in both *The Gathering* and *PS, I Love You* will be exemplified in the following.

### **7.1.1. The Irish Tradition of ‘The Wake’**

As a “vigil or watch kept over a deceased person prior to burial” (Lysaght 472), the wake is a traditional element of the burial ritual in many societies. Above all, it is seen as a social gathering celebrating and commemorating the deceased. Usually, the social aspect of wakes includes the notion of revelry and distinct hospitality towards the guests of the gathering. This is, above all, manifested in a pronounced supply and consumption of alcoholic beverages paired with festive meals for those guests who have taken up lengthy journeys in order to wake the deceased (cf Lysaght 473). Furthermore, since the wake is at times also referred to as a “quasi-festive occasion”, entertainment is usually provided for in the guise of enjoyable games, storytelling, dancing and singing (cf Lysaght 473). The churches in the Europe of former days did not particularly

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<sup>54</sup>Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/154596/death-rite>, Feb 12<sup>th</sup> 2012.

embrace this idea of “carnavalesque-type of behaviour” (Lysaght 473) in the context of death, thus dismissing wakes as manifestations of unruliness and impiety (cf Connolly 612). As Grainger (132) aptly states, the “funeral wake is one of the least understood of human social traditions”, which adds up to the picture of the wake being an enigmatic event with more than one purpose. There are two quite distinct ways of accounting for the function of the wake: while there are those who clearly argue for it to portray a celebration in order to “anaesthetize the bereaved” (cf Clare 7), or as Grainger (132) puts it, “conviviality called upon to reinforce solidarity”, others are of the conviction that wakes are actually designed as a proclamation, not a disguise, of death (cf Grainger 132). Still others (cf Connolly 612) argue that it is seen as an “assertion of continuity and vitality in the face of mortality”, thus providing more of a positive purpose for the social gathering for a deceased. The second dominant element in the traditional wake procedure is lamenting the deceased<sup>55</sup>. Along with the aspect of merry-making and revelry, lamenting completes the picture of the wake as a multi-faceted, multi-emotional celebration for the deceased.

Since the tradition of the wake has always featured dominantly specifically in the Irish context, it is not surprising that quite characteristic Irish peculiarities developed over time. In its traditional sense, the main purpose of the wake in Ireland was “to honour the dead person and so to avert his or her wrath at having died” (cf O’Suilleabhain qtd in Grainger 133). More specifically, the wake in the Irish context has come to denote “an attempt to heal the wound of death, and to do final justice to the deceased while he was still physically present” because “[a]fter the burial, the opportunity to do so would be absent” (O’Suilleabhain 172 qtd in Grainger 134). It is obvious, then, that the Irish wake was intended to both honour and to do justice to the lost loved one by engaging in ritual games and merry-making. The ritual wake-games (comprised of as many as 130 as listed by O’Suilleabhain)<sup>56</sup> included, for instance, clearly

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<sup>55</sup>cf Grainger <http://www.deathreference.com/Vi-Z/Wake.html>, Feb 12<sup>th</sup> 2012.

<sup>56</sup>cf Evans 290.

indecent and perverse notions as reflected in a game called ‘Drawing the Ship out of the Mud’, in which men displayed themselves in “a state of nudity” (Evans 291). Many of the wake games have been presented in this rather impious and perverted light, and it has been accounted for as a “welcome outlet [...] of repressed feelings” (Grainger 135). As Grainger further (135) points out, the Irish wake presents itself in the midst of a reality that has lost its order; it is thus “symbolic of a world [...] reduced to disorder” and expresses “personal and social chaos”. This inherent chaos is then transported and expressed in the nature of the wake games.

## **7.2. Mourning as Reflected in *The Gathering***

Having explored the major grief aspects of *The Gathering*, attention will now be turned to the official and public face of grief. As such, mourning fulfils the role of stating outwardly that one has suffered a loss and that it is adequately mourned. However, exactly this notion of adequate mourning is a problematic one, since prescribed ways of mourning do not necessarily meet the needs of the individual mourners. Societal expectations require the mourner to follow certain paths or stages of traditional mourning, while deviations from the norm are usually frowned upon (cf Walter 1999: 120ff).

Unlike *PS, I Love You*, *The Gathering* proffers several traditional mourning customs to be scrutinised, above all the tradition of the Irish wake. According to Irish tradition, Liam’s venue of suicide is indeed a meaningful one, since the Irish traditionally believe “that souls [leave] the bodies with the turning of the tide” (Delaney 169). Since Liam’s death occurred in the sea in Brighton in Britain, the very first important step according to funeral tradition is to retrieve the body and safely bring it “home”, i.e. where one’s roots and family dwell. As can be seen in the following, Veronica is the one to make all the funeral arrangements:

I ring the bereavement people in Brighton and Hove from Mammy’s phone in the hall [...] There is the coffin to consider, of course, and for some reason I already know that I will go for the limed oak – a decision that is up to me, because I am the one who loved him most. (G 23)

Not only does Veronica feel responsible for the technical aspects of the funeral, like arranging the transfer of the corpse, but she also takes up the role of death messenger, ringing up family members to tell them about the shattering news of Liam's suicide. When Veronica is on her way to pick up the body from Brighton, she seems uncertain as to the meaning of her journey, seemingly wanting to conform to established rules without calling them into question: "Here I am [...] on my way to collect my brother's body, or view it, or say hello to it, or goodbye, or whatever you do to a body you once loved. *Pay your respects*" (G 41). Veronica's apparent confusion after her brother's death is clearly evident. What seems to particularly bother her, at this early stage of mourning, is her family's expectation that due to her special relationship to Liam, it is her responsibility to meet the expenses of the funeral arrangements, as becomes evident in her exclaiming "*I'm fucking paying for it*" (G 43). It appears that she is not fully aware of the therapeutic value of managing the funerary preparations, but tries to align with what is socially expected of her to do in the position of the most loved sister.

Another customary tradition when a beloved one dies is talking fondly about his or her qualities. When Veronica deals with the funerary arrangements, she, in a manner of foreboding, contemplates what her relatives would say about Liam, thus shaping an ongoing image of him:

Oh! He was desperate – that is what we will say. He was a terrible messer. He was always full of it. He just couldn't get it together. He had a good heart. He was all there. He was the best of company, we will say. Oh! But the wit. He had a tongue in his head, there's no doubt about that! But he was very sensitive. It was a sensitivity thing with Liam. You wanted to look after him. (G 44)

Putting together individual impressions of the deceased is an important part of the coping process, since it largely contributes to the way people remember the dead (cf Walter's *New Model of Grief*, Chapter 4.7.1. in this thesis). Veronica concludes that Liam "was not able for this world" (G 44), thus alluding to Liam's delicate personality, which might have driven him into suicide. When the day of the actual wake approaches, it becomes evident that certain socially prescribed

norms are not entirely fulfilled in the Hegarty house. First of all, a traditional Irish wake would open its doors to any person wishing to pay their respects, while at Liam's wake, only close family members and neighbours were invited. Long journeys are usually taken up by geographically distant family members, who would be well nourished afterwards with a substantial meal and liquor (cf Lysaght 473). Ita, one of the Hegarty siblings, for instance, travelled all the way from Arizona in order to pay her respects to her dead brother Liam. The fact that there is no or hardly any alcohol provided for the mourners is highly unusual, since alcohol has always been quite a substantial traditional part of the longstanding merry-making tradition of Irish wakes. Veronica, upon the fact that no alcohol is provided, thinks it is rather unsurprising that only few neighbours came to the wake, and remarks that "[w]ho'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?" (G 192). Therefore, it is of little wonder that Veronica and her siblings continually search the house for any alcohol to be served and consumed.

Clinging to Irish customary tradition, the Hegartys were convinced that Liam's corpse must not be left alone in the room. This superstitious belief originates from ancient times and survived far into the nineteenth century, when "bodysnatchers were constantly on the prowl looking for corpses which they sold to medical schools" (Delaney 174). It is no surprise, then, that one of the Hegartys is constantly "on duty [...] in case a mourner should be left indecently alone with the corpse, in case the corpse should be left indecently alone" (G 193). Moreover, following Irish traditional wake customs, Liam had been properly dressed "in a navy suit with a blue shirt – like a Garda" (G 193), as the dying traditionally "[wished] to be laid out in proper garments" (Delaney 172). Liam's coffin was placed in the far end of the room, surrounded by "candles [...] on high stands" (G 193), which corresponds to the traditional custom of lighting candles and surrounding the corpse with them (cf Delaney 173). A glimpse of the traditional merry-making and funeral games is still upheld in *The Gathering*, when later that night the siblings "all moved in there [to Liam's corpse] and played cards" (G 218).

When Liam's funeral approaches, the Hegarty clan, neighbours and friends all gather at the church to pay their last respects. Veronica, upon observing the guests for Liam's mass, remarks that "[s]uicides always pull a good crowd. People push in: they clog the doors and sidle along the back benches, gathering on the rim of the church: they turn up on principle, because a suicide has left everyone behind" (G 240). To her great surprise, one very special guest arrived for Liam's funeral – his ex-girlfriend Sarah, with whom he once went to live in Mayo. Veronica realises that, all of a sudden, she "[feels] very Irish as [she reaches] out to take her hand in both [her] hands, to thank her for making the journey, to welcome her in and allow her to grieve" (G 241). When Veronica is forced to face the finality of Liam's death at church in the midst of all her relatives, friends and neighbours, she is once again confronted with the harsh pain of having lost a loved one and how this pain is inevitably linked to the Hegarty trauma:

I make my way up to the top of the church and am drowned in the emotion, whether love or sadness, that floods my chest. [...] My head twists away from whichever side of the church is more interested in my grief, only to show it to the other side. Here it is. The slow march of the remaining Hegartys. I don't know what wound we are showing to them all, apart from the wound of family. Because, just at this moment, I find that being part of a family is the most excruciating way to be alive. (G 243)

Clearly under distress, Veronica appears to be overwhelmed with the attention she receives for having lost her twin-like brother. At church, the Hegartys are expected to "[shake] five hundred people's hands" (G 245) even though Veronica does not know most of them personally. She is bothered with the way they seem to pretend compassion in an almost hypocritical way, thinking that they are just "apologising for the fact that someone you love is dead, when the world is full of people you don't [love]" (G 245). Crushed once again by the intensity of her own grief, Veronica compares herself to old meat – "pawed, used, loved, and very lonely" (G 244). Coming in pangs, Veronica seems to be overwhelmed with the human emotions that are clear indications of being alive. It appears that she does not particularly take the public grief for Liam seriously; mostly, she resents traditional and socially expected conduct by others,

dismissing it as feigned: “the Mass and the stupid old priest and Ernest’s few words from the altar” (G 244). Veronica clearly wishes her grief to stay private, and is embarrassed by others watching her in this very personal state. Approaching a closure of Liam’s funeral, Veronica, rather ironically, remarks that “[w]e do the whole thing. We follow the box out down the aisle again [...] It’s a heady business, burying the dead” (G 245-46). Veronica concludes the whole process by remarking that although “[t]here isn’t a dry eye in the house” (G 248), she “[has] never been to a happier funeral” (G 248).

Going through the important phase of mourning, Veronica is allowed an explicit expression of her grief in the public realm, even though this seems to overwhelm her at times. As grieving is most effectively done in the presence of the family, Veronica finally seems able to stop concealing her true emotions as regards Liam’s death in front of the other Hegartys. She particularly takes the opportunity of gathering for the wake and the funeral in order to talk about Liam as a means of self-therapy with a focus of healing the wound of unresolved loss. Still, the fact that her very private and thus deeply concealed grief all of a sudden became publicly apparent utterly bothers and confuses her.

### **7.3. Social Regulation of Grief as Reflected in *PS, I Love You***

While the ritualised mourning process, above all the wake and funerary rite, is explicitly portrayed as part of the Irish community in *The Gathering*, *PS, I Love You* does not describe specific funeral rites. Still, it provides valuable insights into how the griever, in this case Holly, is viewed and assessed by members of Irish society. The policing of grief (cf Walter 1999) is a vital part in the mourning process; as such, it is crucial in demonstrating how the grieving person’s emotions are regulated within a society appreciative of norms. According to Walter (1999: 120), Emile Durkheim was the key figure in the movement of regulating what he called “the passions”, which is equivalent to the notion of *emotions*. Walter (1999: 120) further points out that Durkheim’s “passions cannot be left to run their course without social regulation”, which is exactly why “all societies have rules for how the emotions of grief are to be displayed and



handled” (Walter 1999:120). Grief can thus either be over- or under-regulated. An over-regulation of grief, for instance, may particularly refer to the emotional aspect of displaying grief, such as the expectation that emotions should be suppressed and that others assume the griever to have already overcome the loss (Walter 1999:122). Under-regulation, on the other hand, typically refers to the inability to express grief due to a lack of “guidance and knowledge about grief” (Walter 1999:124).

In Holly’s case, these socially prescribed, normative regulations force her to repress her genuine feelings. She is required to fulfil the societal expectations. While she does meet the expectations set out for a grieving widow early on in the novel, it seems that social norms considerably inhibit her healing process. In the beginning, when the pain of losing Gerry is still excruciatingly fresh, she seems to conform to what society expects of a newly widowed woman, indicating that “[her] eyes were tender and puffy from crying all through the night” (PS 3), “she had fallen into fitful sleep” (PS 3) and would not leave the house for days. However, by means of an exceptional optimism and outlook on life (cf Chapter 8.2. in this thesis), Holly soon attempts to feel comfortable about being happy again, although the occasional feeling of guilt comes to the fore. When Holly feels ready to leave the house again in order to enjoy herself, this is considered inappropriate by Gerry’s parents, whom she meets during dinner with her friend Daniel. Immediately misled by the circumstance of Holly going out with another man so short a time after her husband’s death, Gerry’s parents react with utter disbelief and dismay. They assume that by going out with another man, Holly must already be over their son’s death. Gerry’s parents expected Holly to be miserable, while Holly is left with the question of “why did they have to see her the one time she was happy?” (G 379). The inner confusion pertaining to grievers brought about by social norms is reflected by Holly constantly contemplating what bystanders might think of her behaviour as a widow. Holly finds it hard to accept that “she shouldn’t be enjoying herself because it didn’t feel right, but it had felt so right at the time...” (PS 379), a fact that drives her into utter bewilderment. While Holly is exposed to statements like

“[y]ou’re supposed to be enjoying your life” (PS 415), she does not seem wholly convinced at the value of truth as to most of the well-meant advice. When “[t]rying to be positive” (PS 446) at the ball with her friends, Holly is met with uncertain scepticism when appearing at public events and enjoying herself, thinking that “[p]eople are being very nice and all by offering me their sympathies but I feel like I’m back at his funeral again” (PS 450). As can be deduced from the above, Holly’s grief seems to be largely over-regulated; others claim unduly that they know better how she should feel in her course of grief, which in turn makes Holly feel insecure about her own emotions. Once again, it needs to be emphasised that grief cannot be generalised; it is a deeply personal and individual emotion that eludes categorisation. When prompted by her friends that Holly may not have talked enough about her deceased husband, the following passage illustrates an important instance of the policing of grief:

‘I [Holly] don’t know how to talk about him’. She paused again. ‘I don’t know whether to say “Gerry was” or “Gerry is”. I don’t know whether to be sad or happy when I talk about him to other people. It’s like if I’m happy when I talk about him, certain people judge and expect me to be crying my eyes out. When I’m upset when talking about him it makes people feel uncomfortable.’ (PS 258)

While it is Holly alone who needs to find a way to feel comfortable about grieving her loss publicly, her friends clearly have their own notions about what might be appropriate grieving behaviour and wish to aid her in this matter. She seems highly irritated when it comes to the display of her emotions; still, she is intent on sharing her grief with the loved ones around her.

In juxtaposing the mourning behaviour in both *The Gathering* and *PS, I Love You*, it is evident that the former puts considerably more emphasis on the traditional funerary processes still to be found in modern Ireland. By doing this, a deeply rooted sense of place is established along with Ireland’s longstanding customs and traditions as regards death. *PS, I Love You*, however, rather highlights the emotional struggle of the protagonist Holly in order to illustrate that loss is, above all, a deeply individual and personal experience which, when publicly displayed, may be utterly confusing. Deviant forms of mourning

behaviour may be frowned upon, while the griever is left to wonder how to best conform to established rules and still mourn individually.

## 8. The Healing Process

*“The world loves closure, loves a thing that can, as they say, be gotten through. This is why it comes as a great surprise to find that loss is forever, that two decades after the event there are those occasions when something in you cries out at the **continual presence of an absence**”* (Anna Quindlen, qtd in Becvar 266, emphasis added)

As the ultimate point of the present analysis this chapter will elaborate on the difficult process of eventually healing the wound of loss. How will Holly and Veronica succeed in incorporating their lost loved ones in their present realities and still not live in the past? This chapter will, thus, deal with questions considering how the protagonists manage an outlook on their future without the physical presence of their loved ones, which support they receive from their social networks and other aspects which may facilitate the path towards a process of healing and personal growth.

According to Kübler-Ross and Kessler (25), “[h]ealing looks like remembering, recollecting, and reorganizing”, a notion that adequately sums up the mechanisms at work during the healing process. Of particular importance is the reorganising aspect, since remembering and recollecting alone might emphasise an accentuating of the past too much, while putting too little weight on the future. Within healing, it needs to be emphasised that “[w]e must try to live in a world where our loved one is missing. In resisting this new norm, at first we may want to maintain life as it was before a loved one died [...] however, we see that we cannot maintain the past intact”, rather, “we must readjust” (Kübler-Ross & Kessler 25).

Terminologically, there are crucial discrepancies as regards the appropriate label for healing and recovery. According to Janoff-Bulman (169), bereavement researcher Weiss dismisses the term *recovery* as a term for healing, and promotes more adequate terms such as *adaptation* and *accommodation*.

Therefore, these terms will be favoured over *recovery* in the following analysis. Approaching a gradual adaptation, Weiss (1988: 44, qtd in Janoff-Bulman 170) introduces a list of what he calls “reasonable expectations” with regard to effective functioning after loss:

1. Ability to give energy to everyday life.
2. Psychological comfort, as demonstrated by freedom from pain and distress.
3. Ability to experience gratification – to feel pleasure when desirable, hoped-for, or enriching events occur.
4. Hopefulness regarding the future, being able to plan and care about plans.
5. Ability to function with reasonable adequacy in social roles as spouse, parent, and member of the community.

As will be shown in greater detail in the character-based analysis of this section, the effective functioning scale is successfully implemented by Holly; Veronica, however, does not yet seem able to identify with all of the above expectations.

An intriguing part of the healing process is the notion of growth that may arise following severe life events such as bereavement. Due to its importance to the novels under discussion, the issue of growth and its implications for Holly and Veronica will be dealt with individually in the following section.

### **8.1. Posttraumatic Growth, or ‘Whatever Does Not Kill Me Makes Me Stronger’<sup>57</sup>**

As already pointed out earlier, traumatic events may trigger a substantial crisis of the self (cf Chapter 4.5.). While this crisis may be devastating at the beginning, it might as well be accompanied by overwhelmingly positive changes to one’s character in the long run. In their eponymous book, Tedeschi, Park and Calhoun (2) refer to the phenomenon of “posttraumatic growth” (henceforth abbreviated PTG) as “an opportunity to build a new, superior life structure almost from scratch” following traumatic events such as loss of a loved one. It is, therefore, often considered as the “antithesis of posttraumatic stress disorder” (Tedeschi, Park & Calhoun 3). Interestingly, the notion of growth

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<sup>57</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, retrieved from *The Concise Dictionary of Foreign Quotations* 133.

following adversity is centuries old and might have its roots in Egyptian mythology, when the phoenix got inflamed and ascended from its ashes again (cf Tedeschi, Park & Calhoun 4). PTG is often equally labelled as “positive psychological changes” (Yalom and Lieberman 1991), “perceived benefits” or “construing benefits” (Calhoun & Tedeschi 1991; McMillen, Zuravin & Rideout 1995; Tennen, Affleck, Urrows, Higgins & Mendola 1992), “thriving” (O’Leary & Ickovics 1995) and “stress-related growth” (Park, Cohen & Murch 1996), since the present discourse offers no universal consensus as to which term is most appropriately used (cf Tedeschi, Park & Calhoun 2). Sticking to Tedeschi, Park & Calhoun’s (3) label of PTG seems most reasonable, since it emphasises that “persons experiencing this phenomenon have developed beyond their previous level of adaptation, psychological functioning, or life awareness”, thus indicating inherent growth. Moreover, the term of PTG enables an analysis of growth as happening in extremely negative and unwanted life events (cf Tedeschi, Park, Calhoun 3), therefore discrediting the term “thriving” as altogether too positive a label for highly distressing and traumatic events. It is of major importance to emphasise that PTG largely corresponds to the theory of assumptive world views (Parkes 1971, Janoff-Bulman 1992), since a more crucial shattering of world beliefs eventually fosters the emergence of growth as a result of rebuilding one’s assumptive world (cf Calhoun, Tedeschi, Cann & Hanks 132).

After having exemplified what PTG *is*, the question of *when* and *how* it actually occurs yet remains to be scrutinised. According to Nerken (1993, qtd in Schaefer & Moos 2001: 147) growth typically emerges “when bereaved individuals grieve actively, confront their loss, and attempt to understand it through self-reflection”, and thus largely reminds of Freud’s grief work model of active confrontation (cf Chapter 4.1. in this thesis). This growth is evident, above all, through “increased empathy, self-awareness, and self-confidence” (Schaefer & Moos 2001: 147). Tedeschi, Park & Calhoun (10ff) distinguish three major types of typical growth outcomes: 1) *Perception of Self*, including, for instance, self-reliance; 2) *Interpersonal Relationships*, such as a heightened sense of compassion and emotional expressiveness; and 3) *Philosophy of Life*,

including appreciation of life and spiritually as well as existentially enhanced perspectives on life. A slightly different taxonomy is offered by Calhoun, Tedeschi, Cann & Hank (127-128), who identified similar, but more definite changes to personality and extended the above list to include *new possibilities* (i.e. everything “new” in the lives of the bereaved, such as new roles to be acquired or new experiences to be made). Similarly, Davis (311) points to positive changes after loss as including appreciation for life, not taking things for granted, being closer to family and friends, and a general sense of being stronger and more self-confident<sup>58</sup>. The most intriguing aspect of Davis’ (2008) conclusions with regard to PTG is the conceptual distinction he draws between three different profiles of growth. Differentiating between *benefits*, *personal growth* and *gaining insight*, Davis (318) introduces three profiles linked to PTG. While *benefits* can be considered as mere “by-products of experiencing adversity” such as superior social qualities (Davis 318), *personal growth* (also referred to as *sustained PTG*) refers to “significant and sustained positive changes in major commitments and life goals” and relies on active processing (Davis 319), i.e. changes in roles and life purpose, or increased self-confidence. *Insight*, on the other hand, pertains to the self and relies on introspection (Davis 320); it might thus not be realised by observers (i.e. “I have gotten to know myself better”).

Outlining the healing process as well as how PTG occurs with the protagonists of *PS, I Love You* and *The Gathering* will be subject of the character-based analysis in the subsequent sections.

## **8.2. Holly – Optimism Prevails**

Considering Holly’s path towards gradual healing and acceptance of a life without her husband, this section will elaborate on how she succeeds in finding strength and how she is able to rediscover joy in her life after having gone through a most devastating loss. Moreover, a major part of this section will

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<sup>58</sup>cf Calhoun & Tedeschi 1989-1990; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson 1998; Davis, Wohl & Verberg 2007; Edmonds & Hooker 1992; Nadeau 1998.

focus on Holly adopting PTG and how this is expressed in *PS, I Love You*. Moreover, Holly's everlasting relationship to her deceased husband will be elaborated on in the context of the *continuing bonds theory* (cf Chapter 4.7. in this thesis).

Earlier, it has been argued that Gerry's ten letters left-behind are of vital importance for Holly's healing course. The letters, which have assured the function of her personal "Ten Commandments" (PS 458; PS 467), facilitate Holly's process of coping with the loss of her deceased husband by establishing a bond unlikely to ever get entirely broken. Guiding her through her initial phases of painful grief and despair, the letters usually hold some kind of task to be fulfilled by Holly. The very last letter thus prompts Holly to accept a new love in her life, a proposition she would never before have taken into consideration. Gerry, in a way, designs the course Holly's future should take by guiding her with his monthly messages. Since he foreshadowed that Holly would desperately cling to their mutual past, Gerry takes the initiative by suggesting new opportunities and experiences to be made by Holly without feeling like betraying her dead husband. According to Lopata (1979, qtd in Moss & Moss 169), "[t]here is some evidence that widowed persons decide not to remarry in order to respect, to preserve, and not to betray their ties with the deceased spouses", which is probably what Holly had in her mind, too. Likewise, it seems to be the case that "men may be reluctant to date widowed women because of the tendency of the latter to idealize their deceased spouse and the inability of a new partner to compete with such perfection" (Lopata 1996: 152, qtd in Becvar 180). When confronted with Daniel, her new suitor whom Holly merely regards as one of her best male friends, she determinedly insists: "I'm married! I love Gerry!" (PS 465), thus displaying her unbroken alliance and solidarity with her dead husband. Moreover, she defends Gerry by declaring that "Gerry is *not* a piece of paper" (PS 466). Prompted by Daniel what she is going to do after Gerry's monthly letters have stopped giving her advice and guidance, Holly simply replies "I'll just live my life" (PS 458), doubting whether she will be able to fully succeed in this endeavour.

Social networks such as friends, co-workers, but above all family, are of high importance in facilitating the healing process after loss<sup>59</sup>. As Schaefer and Moos (1998: 110) point out, “people who experience more severe stressors, and those who have more prior personal and social resources, are likely to obtain more social support” and conclude that these social resources are directly linked with the phenomenon of growth. A study carried out by Zemore and Shepel<sup>60</sup> (1989, qtd in Schaefer and Moos 1998: 110) resulted in the verification that social support indeed fosters an ameliorated sense of adaptation to different kinds of crises. This claim is backed up by the fact that having more social resources is a clear indicator for approach coping<sup>61</sup>, which in turn results in superior adjustment to stressors (cf Schaefer & Moos 1998: 110). Holly, luckily able to rely on close and tightly knit social systems, draws a lot of her strength from the interaction with her social environment. Sensing that Holly is in utter distress after Gerry’s death, her mother Elizabeth more than once provides her with comforting words, advice and physical proximity. The intact family system of the Kennedys offers Holly the opportunity to open up, both verbally and physically, to her dear loved ones in a way that is favourable for her course of grief. Mentioning Gerry in family conversation breaks with the taboo notion of not talking about a lost loved one. Another source of comfort seems to be Holly’s close brother Jack, whom she always shared a special connection with. It was Jack, after all, who had helped her through the arduous task of bidding farewell to Gerry’s belongings. When Holly notices that Jack steadily withdraws from comforting her concerning Gerry’s death, she at first seems hurt and disappointed, declaring that “[y]ou let me down, Jack” (PS 482). Jack, however, reveals his inability to deal with Gerry’s death and at the same time admires Holly’s strength in processing and confronting her painful loss.

Even though her family provides a healthy environment to release her grief, Holly seems to have found two especially important persons outside the family

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<sup>59</sup>cf Nadeau 2001, 2008.

<sup>60</sup>Study on women with breast cancer.

<sup>61</sup>As opposed to avoidance coping, cf Folkman&Moskowitz 2004.



realm, whom she is willing to take valuable advice from. Above all, Holly appears to have deep respect for her new boss at work, Chris Feeney. Having gone through the loss of his spouse as well, he has a very special connection with Holly and frequently tries to give her his view on things and thus positively influences her:

‘Some people go through life searching and *never* find their soul mate. They *never* do. You and I did, we just happened to have them for a shorter period of time than we hoped for. It’s sad, but it’s life! So you go to this ball. Holly, and you embrace the fact that you had someone whom you loved and who loved you back.’ (PS 433)

Another highly important role in her life is taken up by Daniel Connolly, a sincere friend and listener. Being single himself, he takes up the role of Holly’s companion to social events and establishes a strong bond to her. In conclusion then, it is obvious that Holly benefits from the social environment which helps her through her crisis. Unlike Veronica in *The Gathering*, Holly is part of “a stable and cohesive family [which] is a critical stress-resistance factor that may enable adults [...] to confront life crises and prosper in their aftermath” (Schaefer & Moos 1998: 111).

That Holly experienced growth out of the painful crisis she had to go through is evident, among other factors, in her newly won and conscious appreciation of life (which is a clear indication for PTG, as outlined above). Holly appreciates every moment with a new eagerness; she realises that “[s]he had been given a wonderful gift: life” and, remembering her wonderful time with Gerry, comes to understand that “it’s what you [do] with it that [counts], not how long it [lasts] (PS 497). This clearly corresponds to the aspect of Tedeschi, Park & Calhoun’s (1989) changes in *philosophy of life*, including a greater appreciation of life. Holly feels confident when looking into her future, a revelation which would not have been this easy a few months earlier:

She had enjoyed every second of her life with Gerry, but now it was time to move on. Move on to the next chapter of her life, bringing wonderful memories with her, and experiences that would teach her and help her mould her future. Sure, it would be difficult [...] But it didn’t feel as difficult as it had been a few months ago, and in another few months it would be even less difficult. (PS 497)

As can be inferred from the above, Holly takes Gerry's memory as an impetus for her to live happily; as a positive influence helping her mastering the path that lies ahead of her. Although Holly has officially bid farewell to Gerry and his non-recurring letters (cf PS 468), she will always carry him with her, symbolically by means of her wedding ring. Accepting that she sooner or later will have to make new commitments in life, Holly gives in to meeting new men, while at the same time realising that any new relationship in her life will be tainted by Gerry's memory. This notion of triadic relationship<sup>62</sup> is by no means unlikely, since widows are inclined to constantly idealise their late husbands, which has been referred to as "husband sanctification" (Lopata 1996: 151) and is not merely a means of idealisation. Rather, it serves a multitude of functions, such as "[washing] out unpleasant memories of the past" and thus "purifying the deceased in the memory of the survivors" (Lopata 1996: 151). Even though Holly might be open for new relationships, she still does not need to break the ties with Gerry entirely, since the notion of triadic relationships typically includes a simultaneous "letting go" and "holding on" (Moss & Moss 165). In accordance with Holly's path of grief, Glick, Weiss and Parkes (1974, qtd in Moss & Moss 169) discovered that

widows who moved toward remarriage generally waited a year to begin to date in response to a personal sense of loyalty to their relationship with their deceased spouse and also in response to social disapproval for remarriage too soon after the death.

With Gerry's letters approaching an end, Holly feels ambiguous about letting new people in her life. However, the very last letter tells Holly explicitly not to be afraid of falling in love again (PS 468), an advice which seems to ease her guilt and remorse when thinking about a future with another man. It appears that Holly's epiphany is employed in the epilogue of the novel, when she ponders on her extraordinarily difficult year in which she met both loss and support, tears and laughter, weakness and, most importantly, strength:

[Holly] thought about what she had learned, who she once was and who she had now become. She was a woman who had been given advice from a man she loved, who had taken it and tried her hardest to help heal

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<sup>62</sup>cf Moss & Moss 1996 for an extensive overview on triadic relationships of widowed individuals.

herself. She now had a job that she loved and felt confident within herself to reach for what she wanted. (PS 502)

Making new experiences is all part of the growth taking place after a traumatic crisis<sup>63</sup>, and it is evident that Holly has succeeded in growing beyond her former self: [S]he was a woman with a million happy memories, who knew what it was like to experience true love and who was **ready to experience more** life, more love and make new memories (PS 503, emphasis added).

Thus, comparing Holly's healing progression with Weiss' steps of successful adaptation to loss (see p.86 in this thesis), an optimistic healing outcome may be anticipated, since all of the requisite expectations, but especially 1. *Ability to give energy to everyday life*, 4. *Hopefulness regarding the future* and 5. *Ability to function in social roles* seem to be sufficiently fulfilled.

Her undiluted optimistic attitude substantially facilitates Holly's adaption to loss. Moreover, dispositional optimism is an indicator of the likeliness of growth after shattering events<sup>64</sup>, because "[w]hen optimists confront life crises, they tend to rely on coping strategies that are more apt to promote favourable outcomes; in turn, these outcomes may foster personal growth (Moos & Schaefer 1993, qtd in Schaefer & Moos 1998: 114). As an optimist, Holly "might be more inclined than pessimists to extract a sense of benefit or gain from adversity" since her positive view of the present may foreshadow an optimistic outlook on the future (Tennen & Affleck 68). An explanation for this might be found in the fact that optimists tend to cope in a non-passive, problem-oriented way (Tedeschi & Calhoun 1995, qtd in Tennen & Affleck 71). As optimists are constantly trying to see positive glints in even most negative experiences, they invest effort and can be said to try harder than pessimists in the face of adversity (O'Leary & Ickovics 1995, qtd in Tennen & Affleck 71). Taken together, these insights suggest that Holly's faculty clearly allows for a linear progression of sustained growth after a shattering loss.

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<sup>63</sup>cf Calhoun, Tedeschi, Cann & Hanks 128.

<sup>64</sup>cf Moos & Schaefer 1990, Tedeschi & Calhoun 1995, Thompson 1985.

### 8.3. Veronica - An Ambiguous Case

This section will reveal Veronica's individual journey towards healing and accommodation to the loss of her brother Liam. Gradually approaching a healed self, Veronica's credo seems to be one of complete incorporation of her brother Liam's memory in her present reality. This is apparent, for instance, when she claims "I do not think we remember our family in any real sense. We live in them, instead" (G 66). That this tradition is now to be continued with Liam is the natural consequence of a life inadvertently linked with her almost twin-like brother. By accepting that she can live through her family, dead or alive, Veronica is given the precious realisation of strong Irish family ties; a realisation that gives her strength and confidence when looking ahead into her new future.

Initially fostering a generally negative attitude towards life and having a sinister outlook on the future, Veronica seems to have been content with the role of the miserable and depressed sister of her favourite brother Liam. Wallowing in self-pity appears to be her own peculiar way of feeling comfortable with facing her devastating loss. Finding herself in a somewhat dysfunctional family system, she seems to struggle with finding solace and comfort within her own family (her husband Tom, and her two daughters Emily and Rebecca) as well as her broader family (her mother and siblings). Ambiguous emotions plague her, as when she, for instance, exclaims: "God, I hate my family, these people I never chose to love, but love all the same" (G 259). This is in stark contrast to Holly's family in *PS, I Love You*, who all have a very strong sense of solidarity and confidence in one another. Veronica, on the other hand, views her family in a highly dysfunctional light and blames her fertile mother, above all, for its disintegration:

I have not forgiven [mother] for my sister Margaret who we called Midge, until she died, aged forty-two, from pancreatic cancer. I do not forgive her my beautiful, drifting sister Bea. I do not forgive her my first brother Ernest, who was a priest in Peru, until he became a lapsed priest in Peru. I do not forgive her my brother Stevie, who is a little angel in heaven. I do not forgive her the whole tedious litany of Midge, Bea, Ernest, Stevie, Ita, Mossie, Liam, Veronica, Kitty, Alice and the twins, Ivor and Jem. (G 7)

Veronica thus views her mother as the beginning of Liam's demise, as well as a problematic future for all other siblings, including herself. Of all her siblings, Veronica only ever had a special connection with Liam. This is also why she still feels his presence long after his death. Often, she finds herself talking to Liam, waiting for him to reply, until she realises that he is actually no longer around them, which all the more underlines the importance of the *continuing bonds* approach to grief. It seems that after Liam's death, Veronica ponders her family dynamics much more actively, presumably in a fashion to unravel the mysteries that lie around Liam's character. Bank & Kahn (293) account for this phenomenon as follows:

The death of a brother or a sister, of no matter what age, forces the group of siblings to reorganize their roles and relationships to one another and their parents. Under certain circumstances, the death jolts the surviving brothers and sisters into being alert, sensitive, and actively concerned as never before.

While this might be the case with functioning family dynamics, defective families such as the Hegartys presumably follow other mechanisms. Even though the death of Liam might have shaken every member of the Hegarty family, it does not particularly seem to be the case that they grow closer towards one another. It seems, then, that Veronica's healing is not prompted by a stable family environment (as is the case with Holly in *PS, I Love You*), but on the contrary, by confronting the traumatic past inherent to the Hegarty clan. In order to fully adapt to her loss, Veronica has been assigned a specific task to fulfil - telling Liam's story and thus unravelling the dark practices taking place at Broadstone, which have in turn ruined Liam's confidence in a benevolent world. The most significant revelation setting forth her healing is evident in the following:

I know what I have to do – even though it is too late for the truth, I will tell the truth. I will get hold of Ernest and tell him what happened to Liam in Broadstone, and I will ask him to break this very old news to the rest of the family (but don't tell Mummy!) because I can not do it myself, I do not have the arguments for it. (G 259)

The importance of this revelation is somewhat attenuated when considering that she is not able to tell the truth herself, which would bear a much more significant therapeutic value on her way to loss accommodation. Assigning her

brother Ernest with this task does not provide her with the necessary confrontation she needs to encounter in order to truly heal. In order to fully overcome her traumatic past and the loss of Liam, she needs to personally testify her traumatic experience, as subsequently outlined by Felman (Felman & Laub 204, qtd in Harte 201):

To testify is thus not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others: *to take responsibility* – in speech – for history or for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal, in having (nonpersonal) validity and consequences.

Even though Veronica might take the responsibility of revealing the secret to her brother Ernest, she lacks the strength to disclose the secret to their mother, who, it may be assumed, probably knew of the happenings in Ada's house anyway but chose to repress them. Therefore, viewed in the light of PTG, the question of whether Veronica truly became a stronger woman after the death of her beloved brother cannot be clearly answered. Harte (202) claims Veronica's "testimonial act" of telling her brother Ernest the truth is "incomplete" because her verbal "disclosure remains deferred". As Bank & Kahn (271) suggest, "[t]he dead sibling's legacy can be a force for sickness and stagnation or, under beneficent circumstances, can serve as an inspiration for maturation and creativity". The extent to which Veronica might have creatively matured is questionable, since she heavily relies on old and familiar ways and does not seem intent on changing them completely. According to Davis (319), substantial changes after crises are, ultimately, "reflected in what one does, not merely in how one thinks about things". Veronica, in her predominantly passive manner, does not seem to be the woman to change her life completely due to a crucial life crisis, but rather observes the situation passively, waiting for new options to incidentally occur. This behaviour is in stark contrast to Holly, who, it seems, is a proactive participant in understanding that her choices and mindset can indeed have a positive impact on her future life.

One very specific encounter seems to have made a crucial impact on Veronica and thus clearly shapes her further phase of healing as it indicates a moving on

towards a future without her beloved brother Liam. Rowan, Liam's hitherto unheard-of son, fills Veronica with a new motivation towards living and forces her to rethink her responsibilities in life. Mustering her nephew for the very first time, Veronica realises that Rowan has her "brother's blue eyes" (G 242), a fact which immediately makes her yearn to touch him. Having "the Hegarty eyes" (G 246), Rowan transfixes the whole family. It is obvious that Veronica, fascinated by the most powerful evidence of Liam's existence, his own blood and flesh, already makes plans for a future including her nephew Rowan. Wanting to "induce this child into [her] arms and, after a while, kiss him, or inhale him" (G 242), Veronica has finally found a reason to move forward and think of her future life, not only for her own sake, but also for the sake of her husband and daughters. Giving her strength to focus on the living, rather than on the dead, Rowan plays a crucial role in Veronica's healing process. Veronica seems to be obsessed with the child the minute she first set eye on him; she knows that "[i]t's Liam. To the life." (G 245), which makes her "yearn for him [...] [her] skin wants him" (G 244). Incorporating the saying of "the soul is healed by being with children"<sup>65</sup>, Veronica seems to be able to see momentary glimpses of life as bearing positive value again. Regarding Rowan as Liam's legacy, she finds new energy to fill her days with. Even though Liam is dead, Veronica feels close to him, since part of him will live on in his son Rowan. According to Harte (202), Rowan represents an attempt at making amends for the past, being "a new child for the new millennium – innocent, inviolable, and wholly without a stain or stigma", paving the way for a completely "anointed future".

That Veronica's life is shattered after she had heard of Liam's death is undisputed, but does she exhibit the same growth in character as Holly does in *PS, I Love You*? As already outlined earlier, for growth to actually occur, the essentials of one's life need to be fundamentally challenged<sup>66</sup>. Taken from the notion of "seismic events"<sup>67</sup>, Tedeschi, Park & Calhoun (2) offer an adequate

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<sup>65</sup>Fyodor Dostoyevsky, retrieved from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/here-there-and-everywhere/201102/30-quotes-healing>.

<sup>66</sup>cf Davis 313.

<sup>67</sup>cf Calhoun 1996, referring to events that trigger PTG as "seismic" in their quality.

analogy to illustrate this: “The remains of old structures must be removed so that new, stronger structures can be built”. Davis (313) points out that PTG is unlikely to occur “[i]f the loss event does not shatter worldviews or self-views, and if one is not able to accommodate knowledge structures to account for the implications of the loss”. Veronica, crushed by her loss, struggles to find meaning after Liam’s death but does not seem to be fully able to accommodate her knowledge structures to fit her new worldview. With a pessimistic predisposition to her character, Veronica finds it challenging to see positive outcomes in the aftermath of crisis, which poses a considerable obstacle on her way to growing a stronger individual. However, Liam’s death might have been an important impetus for Veronica to rethink her routine life which she seems to have become increasingly discontent with. Not only is her relationship to her husband Tom steadily deteriorating, also the connection to her two daughters Emily and Rebecca seems disrupted. Viewed in this light, Veronica might indeed have benefited from Liam’s death, since it may have provided her with a “fresh start” (Brown & Harris 1989, qtd in Schaefer & Moos 1998: 112) needed in order to alter her life for the better. It seems that Veronica not only has to be strong for her own sake, but also for her family, illustrating that “a new life crisis can be a precursor of positive changes in adaptation” (Schaefer & Moss 1998: 112). Viewed in its entirety, however, Veronica’s path towards growth is a highly ambiguous one. While she is intent to change her habits and views, she simultaneously seems insufficiently able to reorganise her life properly, even though she makes attempts: “I try to believe in something, just for the heck of it [...] God, or the future, or the greater good. I bow my head and try to believe that love will make it better, or if love won’t then children will” (G 228), both referring to Rowan and the baby she and Tom might have in future (cf G 260). With remarks like “I have the rest of my life to organise” (G 255) and “I felt [...] full of purpose” (G 256), it is hinted at that Veronica indeed attempts to make amends with her family and wishes to change her life for the better; however, there is no concrete indication as to how it will be accomplished. This, again, points to the palpable difference between Veronica and Holly – while the latter actually makes an effort to actively change her life by *doing* something,



Veronica, with her lack of hands-on mentality, merely *ponders* about a better future. It can be argued, then, that Veronica does not exhibit growth per se, but, viewed within Davis' (2008) taxonomy, predominantly shows signs of *benefits* and *insight*. Concluding Veronica's progress of healing, it may thus be emphasised that although she does, to some extent, portray a successful adaptation to the loss of her brother Liam with the occasional glints of hope initiated by her nephew Rowan, it may equally be hinted at her dispositional pessimism which does not favour the development of growth and its therapeutic value. Most importantly, *The Gathering* reveals a somewhat ambiguous outlook on Veronica's future development. Her constant oscillation between positive outlook and pessimistic views is ever present; there is no clear indication that Veronica is indeed ready to leave her traumatic past behind and move on by integrating Liam's memory. As Harte (202) observes that Veronica's experiences mirror "the reality of trauma's chronic destructive power", he emphasises that although she may attempt to look ahead into a brighter future, "there is no suggestion that her recovery will follow any simple, linear arc of progression". This is underlined by the fact that Veronica views herself as "[having] been falling for months", "falling into [her] own life [...] about to hit it now" (G 261). While the realisation of this falling may be precious for her self-perceived healing, the ultimate hitting the ground of her life seems to be tainted in the same pessimistic undertone inherent to her character. On the other hand, she admits that "running away" (G 259) from her problems is no satisfactory solution, and reveals the essence of her healing process by stating that "[t]here are no other journeys" (G 258), thus confronting her problems in a future-oriented manner. Further, she states "I do not want a different life. I just want to be able to live it, that's all" (G 260), thus acknowledging an optimistic love of life while simultaneously surrendering to her long-established routine of life. Her ultimate yearning appears to be humble - Veronica "just [wants] to be less afraid" (G 261), thus setting the first step towards a new future devoid of her beloved late brother.

## 9. Conclusion

The present thesis aimed at comparing two seemingly congruent Irish novels dealing with death and bereavement. The comparative analysis has unravelled numerous differences in the mode of coping with traumatic loss (suicide vs disease) and its implications for the griever, the course of grief, the role of society and traditional mourning and the ultimate process of healing. It also provides various character-inherent clues which proved crucial in identifying the protagonists' grieving process. The present analysis also revealed other striking differences, including spousal vs sibling loss, anticipated vs sudden death and optimistic vs pessimistic outlook on life. Even though *The Gathering* and *PS, I Love You* turned out to be quite different in both tone and content, the two novels nevertheless still convey the same underlying message: grief is indeed never ending and the loss of a loved one can never be fully overcome. However, getting used to the new situation is a common feature, which aims at incorporating the eternal image of the beloved lost one into everyday life. An attempt was made to show this correlation by means of employing the *continuing bonds theory* (cf Chapter 4.7.), which encourages a lifelong relationship with the deceased and dismisses any notion of having to resolve one's grief completely in order to successfully adjust to loss. It has been shown that the theory of *continuing bonds* is indeed manifest in both protagonists: while Holly accepts that Gerry will always be a part of her by acknowledging a possible future relationship only in the light of a triadic union, Veronica embraces the idea of an eternal bond with her late brother and no longer suppresses her conversations with him but incorporates them as a valuable part of her healing process. Most importantly, both protagonists acknowledge the ever-present tie between themselves and the lost person and both affirm this ongoing bond, which in turn introduces the emergence of a wholly new perspective in portraying Holly and Veronica as the survivors and their attitude to the lost loved one (cf Kübler-Ross & Kessler 25).

It has been claimed that the protagonists' inherent predisposition will ultimately influence their course in life as well as the outcome of grief. Veronica provides

the antithesis in many respects to Holly's coping mechanism, which is characterised by a healthy amount of optimism. While this may alleviate the course of one's grief, the exact opposite, namely a pessimistic faculty as exposed by Veronica, is likely to hinder a positive future-oriented process of coping. With both protagonists exhibiting so different character traits, mindsets and views of the world, it comes as no surprise that their journey through grief proved to be particularly distinct. While Veronica attempts to come to terms with her grief by revisiting and confronting her traumatic past, Holly's reckoning with loss is predominantly triggered by sustaining cheerful memories of her life with Gerry and her stable and supportive social environment which she can rely on in times of distress. In conclusion, it is interesting to note that Holly's grief is fully socially integrated, whereas Veronica's is largely, and at times deliberately, isolated and not sustained by a supporting social network. Having visited the protagonists' grief experience in turn, it becomes obvious that Veronica is unable or unwilling to let others join her in this difficult task of coping, which suggests that Veronica is overwhelmed by private grief, which is rooted in Liam's suicide and gets stuck in disenfranchised grief (cf Doka 2008, Chapter 5.2.1. in this thesis). Holly, on the other hand, is able to share her painful grief experience with her closely-knit social networks and is thus more likely to adapt healthily to her loss.

As regards the correlation between type of loss and the process of grieving, an effort has been made to indicate that whereas spousal loss has been well integrated into the bereavement discourse, sibling loss, one of the most complex and excruciatingly painful losses, has not yet been sufficiently explored. While there has been some research on sibling loss in the present bereavement discourse (cf Bank & Kahn 1982), considerably more work will need to be done to determine the special connection between siblings in times of bereavement in order to render this variety of death more scholarly appealing.

As one of the main theoretical foundations of this thesis, Kübler-Ross and Kessler's (2007) *Five Stages of Grief* have been used for portraying grief and its manifestations in the respective novels. Both protagonists provide evidence of the importance of this model by reliving each stage, although not necessarily entirely as suggested by Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2007), but in their very individual manner. Holly's predisposition to optimism seemed to help her overcome her negative sentiments as regards her future without Gerry, Veronica's grief as represented in the *Five Stages* model appears to be much more self-destructive and pessimistically inclined, and full of anger, which considerably exacerbated any process in healing.

Considering the mourning process of both Holly and Veronica, the comparative analysis revealed that both protagonists considerably struggled with the over-regulation and the social norms and expectations as regards the resolution of grief. While a traditional mourning view is displayed in *The Gathering* by introducing Liam's wake and funeral procession, the notion of wake is entirely missing in *PS, I Love You*, thus exemplifying its focus as lying on internal and psychological processes rather than external ones.

The present thesis aimed at linking healing with and posttraumatic growth (PTG). A reinforcement of character traits and views indicates that the loss has been accepted, which suggests a readiness for future dedications in life. In conclusion, the analysis has shown that Holly's active participation in life and her confrontational coping mechanism paired with an undaunted optimism has controlled her course of grief as well as outcome. Not only is she able to adjust to a world devoid of her husband's physical proximity, she also maintains a precious bond with Gerry and even succeeds in growing beyond her former self by acknowledging that Gerry's death may have triggered a newly won appreciation to experience life more fully. Veronica's grief and healing process, on the other hand, is much more complex and ambivalent. While she succeeded in confronting her traumatic past by reliving Liam's story, she failed at incorporating this valuable insight into her new world view and thus reveals a

somewhat stagnating future philosophy of life. Except for her nephew Rowan, Veronica still seems unable to view life in a sustained positive light. In the end, Liam's death surfaces the trauma that so long afflicted the Hegarty clan, but fails to successfully integrate Veronica's newly won insights and to enable sustained growth. The loss of her brother would have offered plenty of opportunities to improve her monotonous existence, but it appears that she does not undergo any such development.

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## **12. Deutsche Zusammenfassung**

Als fixer Bestandteil des Lebens gilt der Tod und die damit einhergehende Trauer jener Hinterbliebenen, die sich oftmals mit einer schier unüberwindbaren Aufgabe konfrontiert sehen: Die Trauerbewältigung. Diese Diplomarbeit befasst sich mit dem Prozess und den vielschichtigen Stadien der Trauer, die ein geliebter Mensch nach seinem Ableben hinterlässt. Anhand zweier irischer, zeitgenössischer Romane (Cecelia Aherns *PS, I Love You* und Anne Enright's *The Gathering*) wird versucht, die diversen Phasen der Trauer theoretisch aufzuarbeiten und in weiterer Folge auf die Protagonistinnen der beiden Romane (Holly und Veronica) anzuwenden. Es gilt die Annahme, dass Trauer als lebenslanger Prozess zu verstehen ist und die Auflösung der Trauer im klassischen Sinne nicht als erstrebenswert angesehen wird.

Beginnend mit einer Gegenüberstellung beider Werke wird versucht, sowohl Unterschiede als auch Ähnlichkeiten beider Werke darzulegen und in weiterer Folge die Schwierigkeiten einer interdisziplinären Analyse auf diesem Gebiet zu verdeutlichen. Der ausführliche Theorieteil bedient sich sowohl klassischer als auch moderner Zugänge und dient im Weiteren dazu, die vielschichtigen Modelle vorzustellen und deren Übereinstimmungen mit den beiden Protagonistinnen zu veranschaulichen. Hierbei liegt das Hauptaugenmerk auf den internen Prozessen, die die Protagonistinnen Holly und Veronica auf ihrem Weg zur Heilung durchlaufen und welche Hürden es schließlich zu bewältigen gilt, um ihre geliebten Verstorbenen in den Alltag zu integrieren. Es wird behauptet, dass eine komplette Auflösung der Trauer kontraproduktiv ist. Vielmehr sollte die Trauererfahrung in den bestehenden Lebenszyklus eingegliedert werden. Die Theorie der „Fortdauernden Bindung“ (*continuing bonds*) dient als integraler Bestandteil im Aufzeigen der Annahme, dass Trauer niemals vollkommen endet, sondern Prozesse der Anpassung stattfinden, die es einem ermöglichen, mit der Erinnerung der Verstorbenen zu leben. Ferner dienen Kübler-Ross und Kesslers „Fünf Phasen der Trauer“ als integraler theoretischer Anhaltspunkt, um Phasen wie Verleugnung, Zorn, Verhandeln, Depression und schließlich Akzeptanz in den Protagonistinnen Holly und

Veronica zu lokalisieren. Weiters wird postuliert, dass die Protagonistinnen unterschiedliche Phasen der posttraumatischen Entwicklung durchlaufen, welche förderlich für den Prozess der Heilung sind.

Die Struktur der Diplomarbeit spiegelt die einzelnen Phasen bis hin zur Heilung wider. Somit ergibt sich eine Einteilung, die mit den Konzepten Verlust und Trauma beginnt, sich über die Phasen der internen (*grief*) sowie externen, öffentlichen Trauer (*mourning*) streckt, und schließlich bei der Heilung ihren Endpunkt findet. Mithilfe dieser strukturellen Einteilung wird sichergestellt, dass alle Phasen separat analysiert werden, jedoch stets aufeinander Bezug nehmen.

Die detaillierte Analyse beider Werke ergab, dass obwohl oberflächlich thematisch verwandt, *PS, I Love You* und *The Gathering* äußerst unterschiedliche Einblicke in die Materie von Trauer und ihrer Bewältigung liefern. Es ergeben sich folgende Dichotomien: ehelicher und geschwisterlicher Verlust, erwarteter und plötzlicher Tod sowie eine optimistische und pessimistische Einstellung zum Leben. Die Hauptaussage, dass Trauer niemals vollkommen endet und einen fortlaufenden Prozess des sich Anpassens bedeutet, wird jedoch in beiden Romanen widergespiegelt und bekräftigt somit die Theorie der Fortlaufenden Bindung.



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