

A close comparative literary and linguistic study essay sample



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Throughout the Twentieth Century, the theme of bereavement features in the work of many of the major poets. The treatment of this theme is especially poignant when poets deal with death within the family. Les Murray's trilogy of poems written in memory of his mother – 'Weights', 'Mid-Summer Ice' and 'The Steel' – exemplify how varied the treatment of this theme may be, given the range of emotions expressed and the scope of Murray's reflections on his mother's death.

It is my aim, to compare and contrast a selected body of poems written by various Twentieth Century poets that deal with the theme of family bereavement with Murray's treatment of the theme in his trilogy. To keep this study concise, I have selected a body of poems from the Twentieth Century that deal only with the death of a parent or child. In analysing these, I will attempt to identify both common and contrasting features across the body of poems.

Within the analysis of the poems selected, it became apparent that individual poets deal with the theme of bereavement in a variety of ways. One treatment of the theme is to deal with how bereavement affects those who have suffered the loss of a loved one. In Tony Harrison's 'Long Distance II', for example, the poet makes known his father's struggle in coping with his new role as widower, and his difficulty in dealing with the loss of his wife. Harrison's father desperately clings to the fantasy that his wife will one day return to him.

In keeping this fantasy alive, he continues to carry out everyday routines: he "kept her slippers" warm and "put hot water bottles / her side of the bed"

(Long Distance II, lines 2-3). These actions reveal the love Harrison's father felt for his wife, as they show his desire to continue caring for his wife by ensuring that she is comfortable within the home even after she has departed. Moreover, the father continues to act out the role of loving husband by carrying out routines outside the home as he would have done had his wife still been alive: he "still went to renew her transport pass" (line 4).

Harrison's reference to everyday aspects of life here, invites us to recognize the great pathos of his father's situation: showing how his failure to cope is so great that he refuses to face the reality of the situation in this way makes us feel great pity for the man. In the second stanza of the poem it is apparent that the father feels ashamed by his actions and wants to put on a brave face as he tries to hide his actions from his son. He is conscious of how his actions will appear to others and takes time to return the home to its original state where his wife's belongings are hidden away: "You couldn't just drop in.

You had to phone" (line 5) (my emphasis). Here, the use of colloquialism, "drop in", shows that, to the son, the visit wasn't anything out of the ordinary and it gives a sense of familiarity. The conviction behind, and definiteness of, "Couldn't" and "had to", however, show that the father demanded prior warning of any visit, so that he could disguise his failure to cope by hiding his wife's belongings: "He'd put you off an hour to give him time / to clear away her things and look alone" (lines 6-7). The definiteness of this is also underlined by the use of caesura placed between these two requirements, midway through line five.

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All of this serves to show that, while Harrison's father understands that his behaviour must appear strange to his son, his pain is so heart wrenching that to be surrounded by his wife's belongings is an ailment to his suffering.

Harrison's poem is short in the use of metaphorical imagery: there is only one metaphor ("still raw love") which compares the father's pain to that of a fresh wound; and the language is both colloquial and conversational in tone. Furthermore, while the poem does possess a rhyme scheme, the frequent use of enjambment makes this less obvious.

The one use of onomatopoeia, "scrape", therefore, is very marked: He couldn't risk my blight of disbelief though sure that very soon he'd hear her key scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief. (lines 9-11) In a world made silent for the most part by the loss of his partner, Harrison's father's dreams are based on his anxiety to hear this familiar sound because it would signal not only the unlocking of the door, but more symbolically, the opening of the barrier which is an obstacle between him and his wife, the barrier brought about by her death.

As such, to "hear her key/scrape in the rusted lock" would "end his grief" because husband and wife would be re-united. This, of course, can never happen and its inclusion in the poem serves once again to highlight the extremity of the grief felt at the loss of a partner. In many ways, Harrison's description of his father shares much with Les Murray's depiction of his father after his mother's death in 'The Steel', the third of his trilogy of poems commemorating his mother's death. In this poem, Murray makes known how his father also struggled to cope with the loss of his wife.

Whereas Harrison's father pretended to himself that his wife had "just popped out to get the tea" ('Long Distance II', line 12), Murray describes how his father blanked out the fact that he had lost his wife by regressing to a lifestyle resembling that of the "Pioneer age" ('The Steel', line 173). In the first poem of Murray's trilogy 'Weights' – a title which hints at the heavy burden of grief that is to follow in 'The Steel' – we learn that the family had been through years of financial and physical difficulty: "Not owning a cart, my father / in the drought years was a bowing / green hut of cattle feed" ('Weights', lines 1-3).

This humorous metaphor depicts the father in the traditional role of the strong provider and support mechanism for the family. His strength of will is shown in his defying the tough conditions brought about by the poverty caused to the family by "the drought years" and setting about his tasks as best he could. The husband's love for his wife is clear within this poem as we can see how much he feels for his wife, since he insisted on carrying out all of the manual labour: "No weight / would he let my mother carry" (lines 4-5).

This is an extremely touching insight into the father's love for his wife, as he was concerned in case she strained herself. The placing of the phrase "No weight" at the end of the line emphasizes the resoluteness of the father's judgement: he simply would not allow his wife to be placed under any burden. This emotive insight into the father's love for his wife makes it clear why he fails to cope with the loss of his wife, as revealed in 'The Steel'. In this poem, we learn how Murray's mother's unexpected death brought

turmoil to the family: and on Friday afternoon our family world went inside itself forever. ('The Steel', lines 73-5)

Here we learn that his mother died after a series of miscarriages caused by the Caesarean section required when Murray was born, a fact not lost on Murray himself: "The steel of my induction / killed my brothers and sisters" (lines 8-9). This sense of blame on the part of the poet seems absurd given that he himself was not responsible for carrying out the botched operation; however, the horror of the fact that his mother died as a ramification of his parents' wish to have a family, seems instrumental in his father's failure to cope.

The extent of Murray's father's initial struggle is made clear as he regresses and family life is turned upside down: "For a long time, my father / himself became a baby" (lines 106-7). To me, this suggests that he became a man who lacked the confidence and the will to carry on alone without his wife; a man incapable of sustaining the family through his abject sense of loss and grief.

This in itself is a form of regression, as behaving in such a way, like "a baby", the father may be seen as regressing to a state where he no longer has to cope with his adult responsibilities: by regressing to an infantile state, he can attempt to blank out the pain of his loss. This method of coping through denial and regression is shown by Murray to be the main device used by his father to cope with the remainder of his life without his wife: My father never quite remarried. He went back by stages of kindness to me to

the age of lonely men, f only men, and men's company that is called the Pioneer age. (' The Steel', lines 168-73)

While Harrison's father tried to cope in part by surrounding himself with his wife's belongings, Murray's father learned to cope with the loss of his wife by evading female companionship, preferring to be alone or in the " company" of males. Moreover, unlike Harrison's father who continued to fulfil the everyday routines he performed for his wife's benefit, Murray's father threw himself into his work: " Snig chain and mountain track; / he went back to felling trees" (lines 174-5).

All in all, this constitutes a lifestyle resembling that of the " Pioneer age", where men prepared the way in a new land for their kinsfolk to settle, an old-fashioned and obsolete way of life. This is reinforced by Murray's word choice earlier in the poem, when he refers to " Clan" and an " antique" way of life (lines 140-1). As such, it can be seen that, in order to cope with his loss, Murray's father regressed to living his life as if he never had a wife and family. Seen in this light, the " felling" of " trees" may be interpreted as the felling of his own family tree, to prepare for a new life without his wife.

Despite the similarities between the respective fathers' reactions to the death of their wives in each poem, the reactions of the two sons, Harrison and Murray, differ greatly. In ' Long Distance II', Harrison makes known his feeling that his father's denial of his wife's death, by seemingly continuing to wait for her to arrive back home, is illogical: " my blight of disbelief" (line 9). Similarly, he knows that it would be even more absurd for him to adopt a

similar method of coping after the death of his father: “ You haven’t both gone shopping” (line 14).

However, he finds himself as reluctant to move on as his father was, since he cannot bring himself to fully accept their absence: just the same in my new black leather phonebook there’s your name and the disconnected number I still call. (lines 14-6) Placing the name of his dead father in a new phonebook shows he is still mourning after the father; but more importantly, this shows that he is attempting to cope in a similar fashion to his father’s method.

Including his parent’s phone number in his new phonebook and continuing to make routine phone calls, shows an inability to accept the severing of any living connection between himself and his dead loved one. Indeed, at this point the title of the poem becomes clear, as it is the ‘ Long Distance II’ that separates them, the distance between the living and the dead, that he wishes his phone calls to make a connection over, even though he knows this is a futile task.

In contrast to this, while across his trilogy of poems in memory of his mother Murray expresses anger and pain, his poems reveal his acceptance of her death. Whereas Harrison rebukes himself for failing to face up to his father’s death, in ‘ The Steel’ Murray shows an acceptance of the reality of the situation. Herein, he writes of his anger at his mother’s passing, comparing it to a death sentence: It was the steel proposed reasonably, professionally, that became your sentence. (‘ The Steel’, lines 90-2)

This metaphor shows that Murray places the blame for his mother’s death solely at the hands of the doctor who, because of his refusal to deal with the

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Murray's requests for help earlier, could only propose Caesarean section as a way of saving Miriam Murray's unborn child, the poet. Nevertheless, he shows an acceptance of her death because it was her selflessness that made her accept the doctor's proposal despite the risks to herself: but I don't decry unselfishness: I'm proud of it. Of you. Any virtue can be fatal (lines 93-5)

While ultimately Murray accepts his mother's death, a similar sense of injustice and bitterness brought about by bereavement runs through several of the poems chosen for this study. This is most clearly evident in Les Murray's poems, 'Weights' and 'The Steel', Ted Hughes's 'Dust As We Are' and Seamus Heaney's 'Mid-Term Break'. In 'The Steel', Murray explains how he can find no logic in searching for justice over the death of his brothers and sisters, the "spilt children" (line 159) who were lost through miscarriages after his own difficult and hurried birth.

Justice cannot bring them or his mother, back into his life: Justice wholly in this world would bring them no rebirth nor restore your latter birthdays. How could that be justice? (lines 160-3) Murray expresses his belief that the justice system only serves to punish those who have acted wrongly: it does not undo the wrong suffered by victims. He vents his disgust and bitterness over this in the rhetorical question, "How could that be justice?".

For Murray, there will only ever be injustice as far as his mother's death is concerned; since the wrong dealt to her by the bungling doctor who left her little option but to receive a hurried Caesarean section when expecting the poet (see above) cannot be undone, nor can the series of heart wrenching miscarriages she suffered. In 'Weights', Murray makes known why the loss

of his mother was particularly hard, given her tremendous character. He portrays his mother as a practical woman who was a committed member of the community: she “welded handles” and “ran committees” (lines 6-10), for example.

Her contributions to the community were always useful and constructive, and she abhorred others who thrived on rumour and hearsay in their lives: she “scorned gossip” (line 10). Moreover, he describes how his mother played an important role in the local community, being the one others turned to for medical help, and how she was always practical in her improvisations without the necessary equipment: “gave saucepan-boiled injections / with her ward-sister skill, nursed neighbours” (lines 8-9).

Murray’s use of alliteration of the ‘n’ sound here makes stronger the connection between “nursed” and “neighbours”, highlighting the fact that Murray’s parent cared for the community, not simply her family. Also, the repetition of sibilant sounds brings to life the sound of the “saucepan-boiled injections” and the sizzling of the stove, making the memory seem a particularly vivid one. This attention to detail helps set the memory of his caring mother in stark contrast with his memory of the “professional” doctor’s neglect and cold refusal to administer aid in ‘The Steel’ (‘The Steel’, line 91).

Furthermore, this drawing up of contrasts based on the care and attention each of them administered, reveals the bitterness Murray felt towards the one he held responsible for his mother’s death. Mixed with Murray’s sense of injustice and bitterness, then, is the need to blame after the death of a

relative. This is also apparent in Ted Hughes's poem about his dead father, 'Dust As We Are'. While Murray makes known what he saw as the one act of another that led directly to his mother's death, in his poem Hughes blames his father's involvement in the war for his demise.

To Hughes, the war changed his father into a different person from the one he knew, and this is reflected in his initial reference to his father: "My post-war father" ('Dust As We Are', line 1). Through his word choice here, Hughes sets up a contrast between the two characters of his father, referring to his father's "pre-war joie de vivre" (line 16), suggesting in turn that "post-war" his father was not full of the joys of life. As such, the change brought about in his father, the change Hughes associates with his demise towards death, is clearly shown as because of the war.

To Hughes, the war left his father a broken man, and he is compared metaphorically in the poem to damaged goods when he returned from war: "salvaged and washed" (line 26). Hughes suggests that the war became part of his father, describing the "muscular definition" of his body after the war in terms of battlefields: "Swampquakes of the slime of puddle soldiers / Where bones and bits of equipment / Showered from every shell-burst." (lines 19-21) In Hughes's eyes, the horror of the war became part of his father and it killed the man he was before the war: "He had been heavily killed" (line 28).

Only the care of his family "revived" his father after the war, but the effects remained evident: "There he sat, killed but alive" (lines 28 - 31). The "fragility" (line 35) of his father is highlighted in the syntax here: by placing "killed" before "alive" in the expression "killed but alive", Hughes implies

that the man was more dead than alive, that the person had been killed by the war and that only his body really lived on. Moreover, the effect it had on his nerves and sanity is shown when, by metaphor, he compares his father to “ A strange thing, with rickets – a hyena” (line 40).

Ultimately, then, Hughes blamed the war for leaving his father in a state where his behaviour made him seem strange and unfamiliar to the man Hughes knew before the war and which ultimately brought about his demise into death, when he became, as the title implies, “ Dust”. Another example of a poem in which a poet expresses a sense of bitterness and injustice in his treatment of the theme of bereavement, is Seamus Heaney’s ‘ Mid-Term Break’. Unlike the other poems, this poem deals with the death of a son, the brother of the poet.

For this purpose, Heaney adopts the voice of his younger self, when he was a young schoolboy: “ I sat all morning in the college sick bay” (line 1). In this poem, Heaney shows the different reactions to death across the various ages of the family: he saw his father “ crying”, whereas “ the baby” was oblivious to it all as it “ cooed and laughed” (lines 4-7). It is in these observations that a sense of bitterness and injustice first appears, since, crushed both emotionally and physically at the loss of her son, his mother “ coughed out angry tearless sighs” (line 13).

The use of oxymoron¹ within the adjectival group used here, “ angry tearless sighs”, emphasises how, despite her bitterness at her son’s premature death, because of the pain and heartache she endures, the mother is incapable of mustering anything more than a sigh: she is deeply embittered

by what has happened to her son, but with no energy left even to cry, she is in no fit state to express her anger.

Similarly, the young Heaney expresses extreme bitterness in the poem, though only after seeing his brother's corpse and finally realising the reality of the situation. Before this, Heaney shows how the young do not always understand death. He achieves this by placing the boy outside of the mourning described, creating a sense of isolation. In a similar way to 'The Steel', where after the death of his mother Murray was "haunted, all that week / by the spectre of dark woman", the home holds a strange formality that the young Heaney was not accustomed to.

Whispering "strangers" inhabited the house and "old men" stood up to "shake" his "hand" and formally offer their condolences: "Sorry for my trouble" (lines 9-10). Moreover, there is a lack of familiarity in the way that the boy refers to his brother in an impersonal way, using "the" instead of 'his' when referring to his brother and his belongings. For example, he refers to his brother as "the corpse" (line 15), giving the impression that it does not belong to his family, that it is not his brother; and so, creating a sense of emotional detachment.

Nevertheless, on viewing the body, a sense of recognition and awareness is created by Heaney finally using personal possessive pronouns and personal pronouns when referring to his brother: "I saw him" (line 17). This coming to terms with the reality of the situation, however, brings with it bitterness at the injustice of his brother dying so young and this is expressed most clearly

in the final one line stanza of the poem: “ A four foot box, a foot for every year” (line 22).

The use of back vowels and monosyllabic words make this line very heavy sounding which reflects the emotional weight Heaney now has to bear. Moreover, the alliteration of the ‘ f’ sound makes it seem that his words are uttered with anger, as fury seems to fizz from them. The reason for this is finally made clear by Heaney at this point: his brother was only “ four” years old when he was knocked down and killed.

As such, his treatment of the theme of bereavement in the poem also creates a clear sense of bitterness and injustice, bitterness not only at the loss of a family member, but at the injustice of that family member being taken at such a young age. While bitterness and a sense of injustice at the death of a loved one runs through many of the poems selected, a final treatment of the theme of bereavement that emerged in the poems studied is the poet’s use of bereavement to write a poem that celebrates the life of the deceased relative.

It has already been shown how, throughout his trilogy on the death of his mother, Murray celebrates the contribution his mother made both in his life and within the community. Similarly, Patrick Kavanagh’s poem, ‘ In Memory Of My Mother’, where the poet celebrates the life of his deceased mother, and Elizabeth Jennings’s ‘ For My Mother’ are further examples of the treatment of the theme of bereavement in this way.