Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi
Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies

İSTANBUL UNIVERSITY PRESS

Litera 2023; 33(1): 53-69
DOI: 10.26650/LITERA2022-1198703

Research Article

Orpheus and Eurydice Revisited: Grief and Grieving in Zinnie Harris' *Meet Me at Dawn*

Tuğba AYGAN[1]

[1]Assist. Prof., Ataturk University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature, Erzurum, Turkiye

ORCID: T.A. 0000-0002-0514-8472

Corresponding author:
Tuğba AYGAN,
Ataturk University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature, Erzurum, Turkiye
E-mail: tugba.aygan@atauni.edu.tr

Submitted: 03.11.2022
Revision Requested: 12.04.2023
Last Revision Received: 17.04.2023
Accepted: 30.05.2023

Citation: Aygan, T. (2023). Orpheus and Eurydice revisited: Grief and grieving in Zinnie Harris' *Meet Me at Dawn*. *Litera, 33*(1), 53-69. https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2022-1198703

ABSTRACT

First immortalised by Virgil in his fourth *Georgic* (ca. 39-30 BC), the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice has captured the imaginations of artists for centuries. Conditioned by the age in which they were produced, many songs, plays, poems, and operas have been composed to honour this tragic love story. Among others, British playwright Zinnie Harris, in her 2017 play *Meet Me at Dawn*, draws her inspiration from this legendary love story. Defying the gender politics of the myth and the time, Harris reframes the characters in a more modern context and constructs both Orpheus and Eurydice as women. Whilst questioning what one would do if they were given another chance to be reunited with a beloved one who died suddenly, the play further explores the themes of bereavement, grief, and grieving by using the mythological love story as an allegorical scaffold. Drawing on Freud's model of bereavement and the Kübler-Ross grief cycle, this paper reflects on the embodiment of grief and grieving in the aftermath of a loss as manifested in *Meet Me at Dawn* arguing that it provides an exegesis of the validity of this particular model.

Keywords: *Meet Me at Dawn*, Orpheus and Eurydice, bereavement, grieving, Kübler-Ross grief cycle

Introduction

"Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away." Song of Solomon 2:10

Beyond any doubt, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is one of the finest and the most tragic love stories across time and cultures. Even though the story first made its appearance around 600 BC (Segal, 1989, p. 14), the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice was immortalised by Virgil in his fourth *Georgic* (ca. 39-30 BC). Thereafter, it has captured the imagination of artists for centuries and a wide array of songs, plays, poems, and operas honouring this grievous love story have been composed. In the original myth, Eurydice and Orpheus are two young lovers whose love is so deep that they are inseparable. One day, Eurydice is fatally bitten by a serpent while she is gaily running through a meadow. The poison of the sting kills her and she immediately descends to Hades, the land of the dead. Orpheus who is the son of Apollo, the great Olympian and the god of music, is gifted with the musical abilities of his father. Heartbroken over the loss of Eurydice, he decides to approach Hades, the god of the underworld, with his poetic and musical powers, to take Eurydice back. Fortunately, he convinces the god to relinquish her but on the condition that he will not look back while Eurydice is following him to the world. Sadly, he cannot keep his promise and loses her, this time forever. Ultimately, he accepts reality and succumbs to music to reflect the horrible emptiness and grief within him.

"The key to a myth's vigor is its adaptability" (1970, p. 210) John Friedman remarks in his book *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as an embodiment of grief has hitherto reverberated in countless artworks having been adapted to the times and genres accordingly. Following Virgil, Ovid in Book X of *Metamorphoses* (8 AD.) recounts Orpheus' tragedy once again with some divergences.[1] In his version, upon losing Eurydice for the second time, Orpheus does not merely reject women but resorts to affairs with men (Met. 10.83-5). In the Middle Ages, allegorical readings of Orpheus become rather tenacious. Earlier allegories are more critical as in *Consolation of Philosophy*, in which the late pagan philosopher Boethius stresses the ineffectuality of music and interprets Eurydice as an embodiment of the material world and its enticements (Segal, 1989, p. 167). However, after being informed by Christianity,

1 For a detailed examination of Orpheus in the Middle Ages, see Segal, 1972.

Orpheus enjoys more positive attributions in classical learning, whereas Eurydice retains the same fate as a representative of earthly desires and temptation associated with Eve (Segal, 1989, p. 167). In further rereadings of Medieval times, Orpheus is widely identified with Christ (Segal, 1989, p. 166). With the Renaissance, Orpheus, too, is reborn and referred to in the works of Petrarch, Boccaccio, Spencer, Shakespeare, and Milton to name but a few.[2] In the following centuries, overstepping the boundaries of literature, the myth of the two lovers also provides inspiration for various branches of art. Some good examples are *Orpheus and Eurydice* (1762) by German composer Christoph Willibald Gluck and German-French composer Jacques Offenbach's comic operetta, *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1858). In addition to these, Jean Cocteau with his surrealist film *Orpheus* (1950) successfully transfers the myth to the screen. Thus, for more than two thousand years, this mythical love story evolves by being rewritten, adapted, satirised and allegorised multiple times vindicating Friedman and proving to be one of the most vigorous myths of all times.

More recently, British playwright Zinnie Harris revisits this timeless love story in her 2017 play *Meet Me at Dawn*. "Particularly away from the gaze of the usual gender politics of a man and woman" (Swain, 2019), Harris delineates both Orpheus and Eurydice as women.[3] Moreover, she concerns the whole play with a final reunion of these two lovers, following the death of one in a boat accident. Yet, the themes of bereavement, grief, and grieving remain central to her piece in the same way as the myth. In line with this overt common theme, this paper intends to trace the manifestation of grief and grieving in *Meet me at Dawn* drawing on one of the well-known grief theories, the Kübler-Ross grief cycle. The study first reviews Freud's conceptualisations of mourning and melancholia as two responses to grief. Next, in order to trace a short genealogy of changing views on grief and grieving, particular theories on the concepts are briefly discussed, with a special emphasis on the Kübler-Ross grief cycle. Finally, the study presents an exegesis of the validity of the Kübler-Ross model pointing out the advent of five stages first in the Orpheus and Eurydice myth and afterwards in *Meet Me at Dawn* through a close reading of the play.

2 For a detailed examination of Orpheus in the Renaissance, see Gros Louis, 1964.

3 Aside from *Meet me at Dawn*, Harris brings women's traumatic experiences forward by rewriting another ancient tragedy and replacing male characters with women in her *This Restless House*. For a thorough analysis of the play in the context of women and trauma, see Karadağ, 2022.

Bereavement, Grief, and Grieving

Grief can be broadly defined as an intense sorrow in response to loss. Long-held views on the human experience of loss have expounded grief as an emotional trajectory from distress to recovery. Yet, varying reactions to loss have engendered various theories on grief and the process of grieving. The first and foremost theoretical contribution to the subject was provided by Sigmund Freud in his landmark paper "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) where Freud specifies two different responses to bereavement. The first is the experience of mourning, which is the expression of grief over a loss; the second is melancholia, a pathological state of depression in the face of loss. Freud asserts that "Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (1953, p. 153). In melancholia, which Freud observes as "a morbid pathological disposition" (p. 153) and not being a natural and healthy reaction,

> one can perceive that there is a loss of a more ideal kind. The object has not perhaps actually died, but has become lost as an object of love. […] but one cannot see clearly what has been lost, and may the more readily suppose that the patient too cannot consciously perceive what it is he has lost. This, indeed, might be so even when the patient was aware of the loss giving rise to melancholia, that is when he knows whom he has lost but not *what* it is he has lost in them. (emphasis in original, p. 155)

That is to say, melancholia surfaces when one cannot bear the idea of letting the object of love go as one is emotionally attached to it. So that, even if the object of love is lost, the person continues to stick to the memory and not to accept the loss. Loss, as Freud suggests, stands between these two diverse reactions. Whereas the first one is a conscious yet arduous and long process of libido's withdrawal from the loss, in the latter reaction, the recognition of the loss and its implications are often unconscious. "When the work of mourning is completed ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (1953, p. 154). However, melancholia is persistent, because the loss is so unbearable that it cannot be processed by the conscious mind and cannot be relegated to the unconscious.

Freud further proffers that melancholia is accompanied by "profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love,

inhibition of all activity, and lowering of the self-regarding feelings […], and culminates in delusional expectation of punishment" (p. 153). Thus, in the case of melancholia the ego gets impoverished and the person develops eating and sleeping disorders. However, mourning is experienced more externally. The person verbalises the pain and gradually accepts the loss. While successful mourning is a task carried out bit by bit (p. 154), and hence, is a finite and transforming process, melancholia is a persistent state which overthrows the "instinct which constrains every living thing to cling to life" (Freud, 1953, p. 156). What Freud proposes is that rather than holding on to grief and pain internally, one should mourn and make sense of the loss and the world again.

Over time, Freud revisits and reformulates his mourning theory in his writings such as "On Transience" (1916) and "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" (1915) in response to the Great War, besides his seminal paper *The Ego and the Id* (1923). On the necessity of breaking the melancholic cycle and repudiating the attachments to the lost object, this time, he writes: "Just as mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement to love, so does each single struggle of ambivalence loosen the fixation of the libido to the object by disparaging it, denigrating it and even as it were killing it off" (Freud, 1957, p. 254). Although he reaffirms a melancholic response to loss, he highlights the necessity of giving up the lost object and becoming a mourner. Thus, Freud breaks the strict opposition between these two responses by importing melancholia into mourning as an integral phase.

Freud's legacy of recovery following a successful grieving process through the task of mourning inspired the succeeding grief theorists. Several of them similarly conceptualised grief as a process demanding a series of stages. One of the most popular models of grief grounded on stages has been postulated in *On Death and Dying* (1969) by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, where she originally delineates five distinct emotional stages a terminally ill person undergoes as "denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance" (Kübler-Ross, pp. 34-100). Over time, these stages, labelled as the 'Kübler-Ross grief cycle' or 'five stages of grief', have started to be applied to all bereavement experiences, and it is implied that if the grieving person completes these stages, they will have a healthy working through. Thus, they will eventually be motivated to participate in life accepting their loss.

Three decades later, due to shortcomings of existing theories in helping all sorts of bereavement, Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut developed a dynamic model, named

the Dual Process Model of Grief. This model outlines grief as an "oscillation between loss-orientation and restoration-orientation" suggesting that "the grieving individual at times confronts, at other times avoids, the different tasks of grieving" (Stroebe and Schut, 1999, p. 197). According to the Dual Process Model, the grieving person switches back and forth from fixating on the loss and turning to daily activities of life, hence, completing the grieving process.

Another influential and comprehensive model is the Task-Based Model developed by psychologist J. William Worden. Worden (2009) considers grieving as an active process and provides a framework of four tasks to be accomplished while adapting to the loss. The tasks in question are "to accept the reality of the loss, … to process the pain of grief, … to adjust to a world without the deceased, … to find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life" (pp. 39-53). It is asserted alike that, once the bereft person fulfills these tasks, they will conclude the process of mourning successfully.

Even though contemporary researchers and traditional theoreticians differ on various conclusions about the ways and efficacy of surviving grief and accepting loss, all are of the same mind on the fact that some people adopt certain coping strategies that enable them to accept the loss and avoid severe health consequences, whereas others embrace attitudes detrimental to health. Besides, everyone's reaction and way of coping are personal just like their loss. Therefore, rather than setting one above the rest, this study employs the Kübler-Ross cycle as a grief model through which to read *Meet Me at Dawn*, as the main character's grief process fits it the most.

Revisiting the Myth

When the play opens, two lovers, Robyn and Helen, whose rented boat has sunk, are washed ashore. First enters Robyn, who seems perplexed, and addresses the audience saying "I know less than nothing so anything I say you have to ignore really or pretty much anyway" (Harris, 2017, p. 11). Along these lines, she places the story on shaky ground and creates an air of ambiguity from the very beginning of the action. In the meantime, Robyn's lover, Helen comes onto the stage, soaking wet. The rest of the play proceeds in the form of a duologue between the lovers revealing that they survived a boat accident and don't know where they are. Spending some time looking for a way out, Helen sees a dead moth on Robyn which is suspiciously dry. Later, they

see a woman whose unspoken questions are answered by Robyn and this woman mysteriously has the same moth on her as Robyn. Here with an ingenious twist, Harris turns the story upside down and introduces a whole new level of existence. Robyn remembers having seen this moth in the kitchen and the weird woman in front of her house before. Hence, she discerns that what is happening now is not real, as she gradually continues to remember how she survived the accident but Helen did not. She also remembers that she has been trying to cope with this loss and grappling with depression. She asserts that she saw an old woman in front of her house, let her sleep in the garage, and gave her some food. In exchange, the woman granted a wish to Robyn who asked for one last day with Helen. The rest of the story, spanning this bestowed day, unveils a confrontation between and a reckoning of not only two lovers, but also of Robyn and her grief, both of which culminate in a silent acceptance.

In an interview, Zinnie Harris acknowledges that for *Meet Me at Dawn* she had the inspiration from the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and states that she had always been impressed by Orpheus's final look at Eurydice which deprived him of her forever. On this last look, she notes

> the part of the myth that I was most interested in was that single look. […] I started to question what would happen if that moment of the single look was expanded and became the whole play - so Orpheus doesn't just see her, but has a last chance to be with her before she is condemned to her death. What if the two lovers were given a single day to look at each other and say goodbye? Would it help them come to terms with their separation or would it, in fact, become like a nightmare? (Swain, 2019)

Haunted by this moment of the heartbreaking last glace of Orpheus that marks a heartbreaking wink and a closure for an open wound, Harris interprets the moment as a final chance given to the lovers. Thus, she structures almost the whole play on this last look that caused the irrevocable separation of the lovers and fields the question of how they would make use of their last union if this look lasted a day.

While Harris sets the story of her play on the scaffold of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, she also borrows the theme of grieving to interweave it with. As attesting to a process of grieving, the play adopts five stages of grief formalised by Kübler-Ross. As a matter of fact, it can be argued that the myth itself is a clear manifestation of this

five-phased grieving process since it incorporates all the suggested stages. Just after he loses his beloved wife, Orpheus gets angry (anger) and wretched (depression); he cannot accept Eurydice's death and decides to descend to Hades (denial). There he makes a deal with the god of the underworld (bargaining). He reneges the agreement and loses Eurydice again. Subsequent to the second loss, Orpheus accepts that there is no other way to bring Eurydice back, hence, he succumbs to music and poetry to express his sorrow (acknowledgment). After her bereavement, Harris' heroine undergoes similar stages and she grieves and mourns, albeit in different orders and forms. This way, besides providing a contemporary response to the old myth, *Meet Me at Dawn* becomes a literary embodiment of a successful gradual grieving, attesting to the Kübler-Ross cycle.

Orpheus Lets Eurydice Go: Five Stages of Grieving in *Meet Me at Dawn*

Grief may occur in many forms and bring inevitable challenges and changes that people must endure. Ira Byock, in her foreword to the fiftieth anniversary edition of *On Death and Dying*, aptly defines grief as a "journey that none of us would choose but all of us must eventually travel" (Byock, 2014, p. xv) and identifies five distinct emotional states that accompany the grieving in this journey. These states, also labelled stages, Kübler-Ross and Kessler write, "are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order" (2005, p. 7). Hence, regardless of their orders, forms, and patterns, the grieving person passes through these stages as they are mourning and trying to work through their loss.

In the foreword of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler's co-authored book *On Grief and Grieving*'s (2005), Maria Shriver describes the five stages, namely "denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance", as "a road map to survive grief" (2014, p. xiii). In other words, for a successful grieving process and subsequent adaptation to normal life, one is expected to experience these states of mind throughout the mourning process. Similar to the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, Harris's play overtly incorporates each of these stages as the grieving heroine Robyn undergoes them before coming to terms with her bereavement. When the play opens, she is struggling in the stage of depression, having left denial, anger, and bargaining behind. In Freud's terminology, her state corresponds to the state of melancholy in which bereaved individuals cannot

withdraw from their attachments to the lost object and struggle to regain it. Freud notes that "this struggle can be so intense that a turning away from reality ensues, the object being clung to through the medium of a hallucinatory wish-psychosis" (1953, p. 154). Attesting to her inability to embrace Helen's demise, Robyn, grappling with depression, also turns away from life's reality and hallucinates about the day of the accident anew, this time making Helen survive with her. The lovers talk about the accident, how they feel, and finally how they can find a way back home.

Unfortunately, the illusion of survival starts cracking when Robyn starts to recollect what has actually happened after she sees a dry moth and the weird old woman.

> **Robyn:** there is a parallel day
> there is a parallel moth
> I am sure there is a parallel moth
> I have seen this moth before. This dry dead moth
> it has two red spots. (p. 34)

Yet, suspiciously enough, whereas Robyn initiates revelation by trying to remember what has actually happened and to figure out what is happening now, Helen attempts to prevent her from further remembering. Instead of delving into what Robyn is trying to disclose, she insists on sticking to the present and ignoring anything which might disturb it.

> **Helen:** I don't know what you are talking about then, I don't know why you do this, yes it's not great, yes it's not even all that okay but what can we do, what is the point? (p. 36)
> **Helen:** try not to be so crazy. it was a horrible accident okay, but it didn't happen. She relents and hugs Robyn back. (p. 46)

While Robyn's act of remembering alludes to her inclination for espousal of reality, Helen's tendency towards keeping this illusion intact and her attempts to stop Robyn from thinking further denote to Robyn's inability to accept what is real. In other words, Robyn and Helen's discussions are actually Robyn's struggle with grief. As one side of her tries to acknowledge the reality and move on, the other side, in the person of Helen, cannot face this possibility and denies it. Hence, in this phase of depression, she also experiences denial.

Melancholia, which in Kübler-Ross denotes depression, is detrimental when it is persistent. Yet, for both Freud and Kübler-Ross, it is an integral part of the grief cycle, and this state should be a usual and healthy phase of grieving. On this stage of grief Kübler-Ross and Kessler write,

> This depressive stage feels as though it will last forever. It's important to understand that this depression is not a sign of mental illness. It is the appropriate response to a great loss. We withdraw from life, left in a fog of intense sadness, wondering, perhaps, if there is any point in going on alone. (2005, p. 20)

Upon discerning the ugly truth, Robyn recollects the aftermath of the accident. As she attempts to articulate this ardous process, she also evinces the depression stage of her grieving. She refers to her distaste for life and detachment from the world. Furthermore, Kübler-Ross' claim that the bereaved sees the world as devoid of meaning after the loss of a beloved one is echoed in Robyn's lines throughout the play:

> **Robyn:** I couldn't remember it all at first, but little by little –the condolence cards, the people smiling at me from across the street, the hideous memorial, the nights I couldn't sleep that I would have done anything (p. 55)
> **Helen:** how bad is it?
> **Robyn**: Bad lining up pills bad not getting out of bed bad it's (p. 67)

Her statements prove that stage of depression as she faces the fact that she has lost Helen and feels the loss deeply. As her sorrow grows, she retreats more from life and people, and she takes medication to ease her pain because it seems impossible to deal with it on her own. Similarly, her depression reverberates in statements like "I wasn't sleeping. I wasn't coping." (p. 51) "I survived and you know what? you left life in a total mess (p. 53) which evince the magnitude of Robyn's grief and what a difficult time she has been going through. It also shows that her life has been changed as the effects of depression interfere with and permate in it. Besides, her referring to seeing a consultant exposes the real extent of her depression stage. She pursues a life that is senseless yet full of pain and finds it really hard to handle.

In his book *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker defines death as "a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome

it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man" (1997, xvii). This is because, no matter how inevitable it is, death and the idea of evanescence are hard to be swallowed by people. That is why people always tend to ignore or disavow this fact throughout their lives. Nonetheless, Becker underscores the difficulty of one's coming to grips with their own death, hence denying it. Denial is also the case when one experiences the death of someone they know or love. Reasonably acceptable in the face of grief, denial engenders another constituent of the grief cycle. Kübler-Ross expounds on denial as a healthy way of "dealing with the uncomfortable and painful situation" (1969, p. 35) and further explicates that "Denial functions as a buffer after unexpected shocking news, allows the patient to collect himself and, with time, mobilize other, less radical defenses" (p. 35). Along the same lines, Stroebe and Schut, opening a space for a temporary situation, say that "in contrast to classic psychoanalytic formulation, which emphasized the detrimental effects, the benefits of denial are acknowledged. This is provided that denial is not extreme and/or persistent" (p. 216). As the professionals agree, denial is an acceptable response to death as long as it is not persistent. This is because, it helps the grieving person to process their pain and provides a rather smooth transition to acceptance. Robyn's refusal to accept the reality that Helen will not return, accordingly, proves to be a justifiable and temporal defense as it is soon to be replaced by partial acceptance. Yet, before a complete acceptance, in line with the Kübler-Ross cycle, her denial gives way to anger.

Rather than going into an obsessive state and adopting "a morbid pathological disposition" (1953, p. 153), to quote Freud again, Robyn's grieving proceeds with another emotional state. Kübler-Ross writes "When the first stage of denial cannot be maintained any longer, it is replaced by feelings of anger, rage, envy, and resentment" (1969, p. 234). Conspicuously in the play, once Robyn can no longer deny Helen's demise, she desperately resorts to anger. First, she directs her anger towards herself and says: "we went out on that boat, you didn't want to, it was my fault" (p. 55). Fuelled by the grief, she is angry with herself as she proposed to go on a boat. On top of that, she also expresses her anger and frustration for Helen's death by accusing Helen, too.

> **Robyn:** I hate you too. the day you died, I was so angry. […] (66)
> **Robyn:** no you listen to me –do you think I haven't asked, raged, Helen why the fuck couldn't you swim? you don't go out in a boat if you can't swim, you don't fuck around over the side –it wasn't an accident Helen you were mucking about […] (65)

> **Robyn**: … you died
> you died because you didn't fight hard enough you didn't fight through it Helen and I will never forgive you –you should have fucking fought, and swum and got your head out of that motor and told your liver not to pack in and bloody lived you should have bloody lived. (p. 66)

As the above lines manifest, Robyn experiencies extreme discomfort, and anger allows her an emotional outlet. Being helpless and unable to change the course of the incidents, she directs her anger to Helen. Famous British poet Dylan Thomas, exhorting his dying father to resist death in his fabulous lines "Do not go gentle into that good night/ Rage, rage against the dying of the light" (2003, p. 122) also bestows a poetic portrayal of anger in the face of death. Robyn's response, rather than being overcome or erasing the sense of loss, is a typical articulation of grief and stems from her disappointment at being left alone. Anger that "does not have to be logical or valid" (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005, p. 11) actually becomes an expression of helplessness. As she cannot cope with the grief and has no way of removing it, Robyn projects her feelings into anger. Evoking Thomas, she feverishly articulates that Helen should have fought harder in order to spare them from this unbearable pain.

Just like avowal turns into anger, Robyn's anger, when she can no longer maintain it, evolves into another stage. What Kübler-Ross proposes next is the stage of bargaining. On this stage of grieving, Kübler-Ross notes,

> If we have been unable to face the sad facts in the first period and have been angry at people and God in the second phase, maybe we can succeed in entering into some sort of an agreement which may postpone the inevitable happening." (1969, p. 72)

Embarking on a new attempt at avoiding the reality of loss and postponing pain, bargaining becomes the bereft person's next endeavour. Following Kubler-Ross' order in the cycle, Robyn, too, is involved in a bargain while grieving. Yet, as this stage is left behind, Robyn narrates her bargain which also sheds light on this mysterious and illusional meeting. She says that after Helen's death she saw this weird old woman in her garden in the middle of a storm. The woman slept in the garage and said that she could give Robyn a wish. Robyn gives the woman some bread and lets her sleep in the garage because she "knows, from past experiences, that there is a slim chance

that [s]he may be rewarded for good behavior and be granted a wish for special services" (Kübler-Ross, 1969, p. 80). Believing that her help may be exchanged for some desired reward, she helps the woman. As a matter of fact, this bargain "is really an attempt to postpone; it has to include a prize offered 'for good behavior,' it also sets a self-imposed 'deadline' […], and it includes an implicit promise that the patient will not ask for more if this one postponement is granted" (Kübler-Ross, 1969, p. 73). Within the framework of the bargain, Robyn wishes to be able to postpone the inevitable and have another day with her dead lover. This way she lulls herself a little longer with an illusion, hence, avoiding the painful reality, if only for a short time.

The play is set in the wake of Robyn's depression and right after this bargain when her wish comes true. As Harris notes, it covers 'the last look' and how the two lovers make use of that reunion. It also encapsulates Harris' questions "What if the two lovers were given a single day to look at each other and say goodbye? Would it help them come to terms with their separation or would it, in fact, become like a nightmare?" (Swain, 2019). Both the play and the myth along with the Kübler-Ross grief cycle may be of help in answering this question. Yet, even though the myth does not let the lovers bid farewell whereas Harris' piece does, both mark a closure for the grieving person no matter how painstaking it is. That is to say, this last chance, seeming a blessing in the beginning and turning into a nightmare, proves to be a necessary stage to culminate the abiding grief.

When Robyn realises that what she is experiencing is only her wish for one last day with her dead lover, she also understands that she has to experience the death of Helen once again. This realisation makes her regret the deal as she protests "if this is the wish it's cruel, it's a joke it's horrible. I don't want it. I don't want this wish, take it back" (p. 44). Living one last day would end the same way as the reality and both would suffer the same pain one more time. Hence, this inevitable end turns Robyn's last wish into a hellish nightmare.

Helen, who realises her harrowing doom, is not happy with her second death either. She also gets agitated and reproaches Robyn for this negligent wish.

> **Helen:** and then I get to die again.
> my hair being ripped in the fucking motor, is that what happens?
> Beat.

> fucking hellfucking fucking hell
> will I have to die again?
> I don't want to die again, if I already did it once
> …you shouldn't have done this
> other people get over grief, why do you have to be the one that can't stand it? (pp. 63-64)

Helen's indictment is actually another manifestation of Robyn's incessant sorrow that ensues as Robyn continues to stick with her grief. She realises that as long as she does not let Helen go by accepting her death, she will be running in a loop of loss which will not take her anywhere. Likewise, in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the lovers' reunion ends with Eurydice's second death. In Virgil's version, just like Helen, Eurydice chides Orpheus for looking back as she is obliged to die once more.

> 'Orpheus! what ruin hath thy frenzy wrought
> On me, alas! and thee? Lo! once again
> The unpitying fates recall me, and dark sleep
> Closes my swimming eyes. And now farewell:
> Girt with enormous night I am borne away,
> Outstretching toward thee, thine, alas! no more,
> These helpless hands.' (Met. 4. 494-8)

Both Orpheus' and Robyn's insistence on eluding reality and their attempt to revert the laws of nature due to their inability to endure the pain, end up in even more agony. That is to say, the very last *chance* turns into a nightmare.

Yet, the last and the most important intersection between the grief cycle and Harris' piece is constructed with Robyn's avowal of the call for reality and the necessity of letting Helen go. She realises that her tenacity in defying the loss comes at the price of her living the grief again and again. This very realisation activates the culminating stage of grief that is acceptance. It enables the grieving person to withdraw from the lost person, meaning working through the loss and coming to terms with the reality. Yet, as Kübler-Ross notes, even though this final stage is the desired outcome of a grieving process "acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage. It is almost void of feelings" (1969, p. 100). This implies that acceptance does not eradicate grief, but functions as a cradle for embracing the present and re-orienting to life despite the

bereavement. Accordingly, living the hell again and seeing the futility of her endeavours helps Robyn complete her mourning by bowing to the inevitable.

In this sense, the last look of Orpheus and the last day of Robyn become a watershed for their grief. Even though both have to experience their pain again, these last "chances" convince them that there is no possibility of their lovers coming back, hence they are enabled to set them free from an endless cycle of grief. This is because they have learned that there is no return from death. As Charles Bowra comments "Orpheus was not so much forbidden to look back at Eurydice as to look back at all, and this was not a test of his patience or his obedience, but an application of the old rule that the living should keep their eyes averted from the powers of the dead" (1952, p. 116). No matter how hard Robyn tries to embark on the same journey, she eventually ends up learning the same lesson.

Conclusion

In his landmark paper "Mourning and Melancholia", Freud compares and contrasts two painful states of mind, mourning and melancholia, as reactions pertaining to a loss. Even though Freud values mourning as a normal process of grieving and rejects the latter for being a pathological state, in his later writings, he integrates melancholia into mourning as a part of grieving. Following Freud, grief theorists have developed varying grief models incorporating a number of stages attending the process of grieving. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' formulation of these stages has become one of the most well-known grief theories across the globe. Labelled the Kübler-Ross Cycle or Five Stages of Grief, this theory identifies depression, denial, anger, bargaining, and acceptance as typical emotional stages that every grieving person undergoes. However, Kübler-Ross notes that these stages "are not stops on some linear timeline in grief" (2005, p. 7). In this way, she acknowledges that each grief has its own imprint, as distinctive and unique as the person one has lost, and rather than dictating a timeline for the identified stages, she underlines the variety of grieving processes.

History abounds in love stories embodying loss and grief. Among others, the mythical story of Orpheus and Eurydice is a very touching one, which recounts love, loss, and grief beautifully. Even though there are a plethora of literary and artistic works celebrating and revisiting this story of love and grief, British playwright Zinnie Harris, in her recent play *Meet Me at Dawn*, revives it once again. In defiance of the androcentric treatment of the former adaptations, Harris' Orpheus and Eurydice are two women. One of them, Robyn, after the

sudden demise of her partner, is in the devastating wake of her feelings and she experiences the true depths of grief. Overwhelmed by grief, she needs to move through the pain of loss no matter how hard it is. As she undergoes this process, she manifests five stages of grief which culminate in accepting the reality of Helen's death and completing the grieving process.

Orpheus and Eurydice is an apparent and acknowledged allusion for *Meet me at Dawn*. What is common to the myth and the play is that both are portrayals of a loss and its subsequent grief. Therefore, the play at its outset is a consideration of grief as a response to loss through experiencing five stages of grief. In *Meet Me at Dawn*, Orpheus' transcendence of the laws of nature and of a god granting Eurydice's return are equated with a psychosis that induces hallucination corresponding to the stage of denial. At this stage, Robyn reflects on her depression, anger and bargaining stages. Looking back and stepping forward, in Harris' version, become metaphors for facing the reality of death and coming to terms with it, attesting to the last phase of the grief cycle.

While revisiting the myth, Harris replaces a heroic and tragic story with a nakedly human experience. She employs all elements of the myth to reflect on the eternal cycle of life and death as well as the grief accompanying them. Yet, rather than glorifying Orpheus's grief and struggles due to the irrevocable loss of his lover, Harris points out the necessity of letting Eurydice go and embracing life's reality. That is to say, as Segal comments

> The power of Orpheus, then, is no longer the power of magical compulsion or persuasion, nor even the power to unite animate and inanimate nature in the rhythmic sympathy of song, but rather the capacity to grasp the changeful, death-bound beauty of life while simultaneously surrendering any claim on its permanence. (1989, p. 31)

In his very recent book *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, Kessler identifies this state with an additional sixth stage: meaning (Kessler, 2000). A grieving person, upon completing the five stages, arrives at this final stage where they find a way through loss. Harris allows her protagonist to achieve meaning after undergoing all stages of grief and to complete her mourning process successfully. In this way, Robyn comes to the realisation that there is no point in sticking to the loss, and so she should let the deceased go. Achieving this meaning and epitomising an exegesis of the Kübler-Ross cycle, with *Meet me at Dawn* Harris also reminds her audience of the reality of death and grief and how they go concurrently hand in hand.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support: The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

References

Becker, E. (1997). *The denial of death*. New York: The Free Press.

Bowra, C. M. (1952). Orpheus and Eurydice. *The Classical Quarterly*, *2*(3/4), 113-126.

Byock, I. (2013). Foreword. In *On death and dying* (pp. xi-xv). New York: Scribner.

Freud, S. (1953). Mourning and melancholia. In Ernest Jones (Ed.) *Collected papers Vol. IV* (pp. 152-170). London: Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (1957). Thoughts for the times on war and death (Trans. J. Strachey). In *On the history of psycho-analytic movement, papers on metapsychology and other works XIV (1914-1916)* (pp. 275-301). London: Hogarth Press.

Friedman, J. B. (1970). *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Harris, Z. (2017). *Meet me at dawn*. London: Faber&Faber. Retrieved from

http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780571347339.00000003

Karadağ, Ö. (2022). Rewriting women and trauma: Zinnie Harris's *This Restless House*. *Tiyatro Eleştirmenliği ve Dramaturji Bölümü Dergisi*, *34*, 19-3.

Kessler, D. (2000). *Finding meaning: The sixth stage of grief*. New York: Scribner.

Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. New York: Macmillan.

Kübler-Ross, E. & Kessler, D. (2005). *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss*. New York: Scribner.

Segal, C. (1972). Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan ideology. *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, *103*, 473-494.

Segal, C. (1989). *Orpheus: The myth of the poet*. Baltimore: JHUP.

Shriver, M. (2014). Foreword. In *On grief and grieving* (pp. xi-xvi). New York: Scribner.

Stroebe, M. & Schut, H. (1999). The dual process model of coping with bereavement: Rationale and description. *Death Studies, 23*(3), 197-224.

Swain, M. (15, Oct. 2019). Guest blog: Playwright Zinnie Harris on *Meet me at dawn*. *Broadway World*. Retrieved from https://www.broadwayworld.com/westend/article/Guest-Blog-Playwright-Zinnie-Harris-On-MEET-ME-AT-DAWN-20191015

Thomas, D. (2003). *Dylan Thomas selected poems 1934-1952*. New York: New Directions.

Virgil. *The Georgics*. Retrieved from https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0058%3Abook%3D4%3Acard%3D494

Worden, J. W. (2009). *Grief counselling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner*. New York: Springer.