
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Clothes of the Dead: Materializing Loss in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*

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| ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interconnected themes of dress, death, and identity in Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2008). It is an attempt to examine how clothing functions as a powerful symbolic medium through which Enright's characters express their cultural belonging. Through Veronica Hegarty's narration of her brother Liam's death and burial, the study investigates the significance of dressing the dead as both a personal and cultural practice. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Sigmund Freud (2003), Elisabeth Bronfen (1992), Peter Brooks (1992), Clare Gittings (1984), and Nina Glick Schiller (1995), the paper argues that clothing goes beyond its mere function as a material covering of the body to an equivocal sign that communicates meaning after death. Particular attention is given to the various garments associated with Liam's dead body, including his fluorescent jacket, worn-out Wellington boots, paisley pyjamas, and formal suit. These items reveal the conflictual analogy between individuality and social convention, private memory and public ritual, as well as homeland and diaspora. By connecting funeral dress to issues of migration, displacement, and Irish identity, the paper highlights the role of mourning practices in resisting cultural erasure and maintaining a sense of belonging across geographical boundaries. As possible findings, the study contends that Enright transforms the act of dressing the dead into a meaningful ritual through which identity is reconstructed and preserved. In *The Gathering*, clothing becomes a metaphorical language that negotiates the boundaries between life and death, presence and absence, and memory and forgetting. Thus, this paper opens new horizons to understand the slippery nature of death via the acts of dressing and undressing the dead.

| KEYWORDS

Dress, Death, Identity, Mourning, Memory, Diaspora.

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1. Introduction

Clothing has long occupied a significant place in literary and cultural studies as a material object through which identity, memory, and social belonging are articulated. In this sense, the symbolic language of clothes communicates personal histories, emotional states, and cultural values. Scholars such as Roland Barthes (1983), Joanne Entwistle (2001) have demonstrated how clothing operates as a system of signs through which individuals negotiate their relationship to society and construct a sense of self. More recently, studies of dress and material culture have extended this discussion to the realm of death and mourning. As an illustration, Clare Gittings in *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (1984) argues that "the present-usage of the words "death" and "funeral" is itself heavily influenced by our culture and time". It means that funeral practices reveal the social meanings attached to death and remembrance, while Elisabeth Bronfen (1992) highlights the cultural fascination with the dead body as a site where absence and presence intersect, "The dead body as text serves as a metaphor of the correlation between designation, as well as interpretation, and absence" (1992, p. 6). In this sense, the other is impactful even when he is a dead body. This idea is thoroughly theorized in Paul Ricoeur's *Memory, History, and Forgetting* (2004). Indeed, the dead body has this epistemic ability to convey meanings of memory and loss, "Along the road that passes through the death of the other—another figure of the detour—we learn two things in succession: loss and mourning. The loss of the other is in a way the loss of self and as such constitutes a stage along the path of "anticipation."" (p.359). Within this growing body of scholarship,

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clothing emerges as a particularly powerful medium through which loss is materialized. More than that it enables the living to maintain symbolic connections with the deceased.

Anne Enright's *The Gathering* offers a compelling exploration of these issues through its representation of Liam Hegarty's death and the rituals surrounding his burial. While existing criticism has largely focused on the novel's engagement with trauma, memory, family history, and the silenced legacy of abuse, comparatively little attention has been paid to the symbolic significance of the clothes associated with the dead body. This paper addresses that gap by examining how garments such as Liam's fluorescent jacket, worn-out Wellington boots, paisley pyjamas, and funeral suit function as material signs that mediate grief and reconstruct identity after death. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Sigmund Freud (2003), Elisabeth Bronfen (1992), Peter Brooks (1992), Clare Gittings (1984), and Nina Glick Schiller (1995), the paper argues that the act of dressing the dead in *The Gathering* is more than a mere practical necessity. It is a meaningful ritual through which memory, cultural belonging, and diasporic identity are negotiated. By analyzing the relationship between clothing, mourning, and migration, the paper aims to demonstrate how Enright transforms the dead body into a text inscribed through dress to revealing the complex interplay between presence and absence, remembrance and forgetting.

2. Dressing the Dead and Cultural Belonging

Dressing the dead emerges as a powerful act that reveals the deep connections between memory, identity, and mourning in Enright's novels, particularly in *The Gathering*. Enright attempts to understand the very nature of death by highlighting the contrasts and similarities between British and Irish funeral costumes and practices. Embarking on a journey towards England to retrieve her brother's remains, Veronica recognizes how death is uncanny: "I can feel his gaze on the skin of my cheek as he turns to look at me, uncanny and dead" (Enright, 2008, p.174). This term "uncanny," according to Freud, refers to the blurring of the boundary between fantasy and reality. "When we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes, and so forth." (Royle, pp. 150-51). This concept serves to better understand the slippery nature of death as a never-ending process since it keeps conveying endless meanings.

Veronica's first encounter with her brother's dead body is unbearable but suggestive. His clothing at the time of suicide provides clear insight into the brother's personality by depicting his dead body: "The first is that Liam was wearing a short fluorescent yellow jacket when he died, like the one's railway workers and cyclists wear" (Enright, p. 141). Wearing a yellow jacket can be seen as a colored item of clothing that is easily recognized and identifiable. On the other hand, committing suicide with no socks or underwear, "he had no underpants on under his jeans, and no socks in his leather shoes" (p.159), indicates Liam's awareness that underpants and socks are unclean. It suggests that he is fixated on the notion that the sea is purifying. Death, in Enright's *The Gathering*, is not the final departure from the world, but rather the beginning of a new journey. Furthermore, Enright's secular vision towards the body and dress is based on the interplay between pagan ideas and Catholic imagery. Through vivid and intimate descriptions of the dead body, dressed in everyday clothing like worn-out boots or paisley pajamas, Enright shows how clothing continues to shape identity even after death. In this regard, the novel addresses the issue of dressing the dead body in familiar, yet torn, clothes. This clothing choice can be interpreted as a way to preserve the individuality of the deceased. Liam's clothes serve as a narrative tool to anchor the memories of the living. At the same time, it highlights how death distorts ordinary perception of familiar items of dress and how they take on strange, sacred, or unsettling meanings when placed on the still body. Negotiating the problematics of dressing Liam's dead body opens a controversial debate on the cultural identity of diasporic agents in the host countries.

Enright also creates an entire novel focused on coping with death in a time when traditional rituals have lost their significance, and no effective alternatives have yet emerged to replace them. Veronica portrays this process of dressing her brother's dead body, as it captures a decisive moment where clothing becomes a tool for expressing identity after death. Veronica states: "My emigrant brother makes an old-fashioned ghost, and when he died, I dressed him in worn-out Wellington boots, as the Irish seventies dipped back into the fifties in my mind." (Enright, p.191) In this suggestive scene, the dressing of the dead provides enough about who the brother was. It gives insights into his personal and cultural identity. The choice of "worn-out Wellington boots" is significant. Still, dressing the brother in everyday clothes and used boots rather than formal attire might suggest a detached, ceremonial identity. These boots symbolize the brother's humble and practical life. Through this clothing, Veronica preserves an authentic image of her deceased brother, an image of a character rooted in a rural or working-class tradition. Even in this moment of grief, Veronica adopts a rational approach, representing her brother not as an idealized or transformed figure, but as a mere working-class character.

In an intricate reference to her brother, Veronica describes her brother's dead body as an "old-fashioned ghost." This metaphoric analogy suggests that death has not erased his character. Instead, his identity remains firmly connected to the past. Being depicted as an old-fashioned character links the brother's still body to an earlier way of life, one that might be distant but still deeply present in Veronica's memory. Here, dressing the dead resists the forgetting that time and emigration often bring. The brother's identity is not only shaped by individual memory but also by the collective memory of Ireland. For this reason, Veronica draws a connection between her brother's dead body and the Irish seventies, dipping back into the fifties, to reflect how clothing connects personal and national history. As a diasporic agent, the brother, Liam, has experienced years of

displacement. Being dressed in old-fashioned, rather torn clothes symbolizes his fragmented identity and a deep feeling of homesickness.

Schiller, Nina Glick, et al, in *Blood and Belonging: Long-Distance Nationalism and the World Beyond* (1995), have explained why rituals matter deeply in diasporic contexts. "A set of identity claims and practices that connect people living in various geographical locations to a specific territory that they see as their ancestral home" (p. 570). These identity practices are not merely about honoring the individual, but also about reinforcing collective memory and a sense of belonging. Dressing the dead emigrant becomes an act of resistance against cultural erasure. It allows emigrant families and communities to assert continuity across time and space. Dressing the dead in a humble but Irish manner indicates that cultural identity does not end with migration or with death. Thus, Schiller's theory of identity helps see that the emigrant's connection to their homeland is not only lived in daily practice but also preserved and honored in death. In this sense, dressing the dead, therefore, becomes an act of cultural preservation; it is a way to restore a lost or fading identity by physically representing cultural signs of home in the clothed dead body itself. It is about preparing the body for burial. It is an emotional and symbolic act to affirm the brother's lasting, authentic self, body, and soul, which is rooted in a particular place, time, and culture.

In the Preface to *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992), Elisabeth Bronfen argues: "The aesthetic representation of death lets us repress our knowledge of the reality of death precisely because, here, death occurs at someone else's body and as an image" (p.5). The representation of death often happens through the body of another character, which creates a sort of emotional distance. In this context, clothing plays a decisive role in shaping the visual appearance of the dead. As a mosaic image, the dead are dressed in specific garments in many cultures. They are dressed in burial shrouds, uniforms, or ceremonial attire, making it a moment of remembrance. These clothes do more than cover the body; they transform it from a lifeless state into a symbolic image of dignity, memory, and identity. This aesthetic transformation at the level of the dead body contributes to the familiarization of death. It is a cultural ceremony that turns death from an unbearable reality into a stylized image.

3. Funeral Dress and the Aestheticization of Death

Dressing the dead helps maintain the illusion of identity after death. It preserves the deceased's social and cultural role and makes the moment of death a lasting image to be remembered. In this sense, clothing serves as a complement to the visual representation of death, helping to soften the impact of loss. Thus, Bronfen claims that death turns a moment of decay into one of display, where the dead body is adorned and dressed. The Gathering is narrated to trace Veronica's journey as she travels to England to bring back Liam's body and tries to reunite the scattered members of the Hegarty family, who are living in Ireland, England, and South America (Bridget, 2017, p. 150). Veronica provides an intimate reflection on her brother's dead body. As a deceased one, Liam's dead body is depicted as a site of vulnerability, stillness, and humanity.

Through celebrating the aesthetic view of Liam's dead body, Veronica elevates her loss into something with broader and sacred meanings:

"If you ask me what my brother looked like after he was dead, I can tell you that he looked like Mantegna's foreshortened Christ, in paisley pyjamas. And this may be a general truth about the dead, or it may just be what happens when someone is lying on a high, mortuary table, with their feet towards the door." (Enright, p. 64)

Here, Veronica draws an analogy between the image of her dead brother and Mantegna's foreshortened Christ. This famous Renaissance painting portrays the body of Christ lying flat, viewed from the feet upward.



Andrea Mantegna, The Lamentation over the Dead Christ, Pinacoteca di Brera, 1483, Milan
<https://pinacotecabrera.org/en/collezioni/collezione-on-line/lamentation-over-the-dead-christ/>

Unlike Mantegna's foreshortened Christ, whose body is almost naked, Liam's still body is dressed in "paisley pajamas," which are not traditionally funeral garments, but rather domestic clothing. This detailed description offers a rich space for interpreting the

dead body as a bearer of identity and belonging. As an emigrant character, the brother's dead body, dressed in paisley pyjamas, may reflect a dislocation from traditional funeral customs due to life in a diaspora context. Focusing on the cultural and symbolic meanings of the funeral garments, Veronica stresses the idea that identity remains rooted in the ancestral homeland.

Unlike ceremonial garments tied to religious or ethnic social traditions, pajamas are private, soft, and a modern way of clothing. Indeed, dressing the brother in other clothes may indicate a loss of ritual. The dominant power structures of those societies often challenge cultural practices introduced by migrants in host societies. As migrants attempt to preserve and express the culture of their country of origin, they frequently encounter obstacles to social inclusion and acceptance in their new environment. The image of the dead brother might evoke a moment of sorrow about the fragmented identity that Liam has experienced both in life and in death; here and there. This portrayal of the dead raises questions about how emigrants are buried, with or without regard to their origins and the traditional dress of their homeland. Compared to Mantegna's Christ, the brother's body is challenging. It is not a neutral act; it shapes how the deceased is remembered and how it is placed within narratives of identity, loss, and belonging. In short, the choice of clothing here is nontraditional and intimate. It challenges the traditional way of dressing the dead. It is an open appeal to consider and reconsider how diasporic death is staged.

The interconnection between clothing and death in *The Gathering* pays tribute to the character of Liam, the brother. It seeks to preserve personal identity by dressing the brother in familiar and living clothes. It creates a tension between the everyday and the sacred, between the intimate and the distant. Later on, the brother is dressed in a suit: "They have put him in a navy suit with a blue shirt—like a Garda. He would have liked that. Who dressed him?" (Enright, p. 193). This statement highlights the revealing nature of dress and how it becomes a final statement of identity and societal norms in the context of mourning. The suit itself, a traditional marker of respectability and formality, adheres to social expectations of how the dead should be presented. Unlike paisley pajamas, the suit, like a uniform, represents a complete sense of conformity and uniformity. It reflects cultural norms that demand the deceased be dressed appropriately. It is a formal dress that embodies the meanings of dignity and honor. However, these norms may be regarded as an erasure of the brother's nuances; Liam's identity is symbolically preserved. "He would have liked that". Veronica's ambivalence suggests a discomfort with how others shape identity in death. Through referring to her brother's choices and attitudes, "Dead or alive. Liam does not care about such things [.....] He would have liked that" (Enright, p.193), Veronica challenges the restrictive nature of death rituals through giving a voice to Liam's choices about dress, space, and ritual.

Veronica is very concerned with preserving and protecting Liam's identity in death. Drawing a comparison between Liam and the Garda seems interesting since it carries rich symbolic connotations that reflect both authority and ambivalence. In terms of clothing, the Garda uniform symbolizes order, discipline, and public service. Dramatizing the Garda dress is a narrative strategy that defines Irish sovereignty and redefines the state against British rule. Such a way of clothing can be interpreted as a source of ambivalence and ambiguity. In certain moments of Irish history, the Garda is portrayed as a figure of bureaucracy, repression, or even corruption. In Enright's *The Gathering*, Veronica attributes certain aspects of the Garda to her brother. Her desire to pay homage to her brother in life and death reflects a sense of ambivalence between individual free will and the collective order.

This idea is well discussed in Clare Gittings's *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (1984), where he argues how individuality and personal identity are reconsidered only mourning dress: "Growing individualism is revealed in a desire to separate the living and the dead, and in an increasing horror at the idea of physical decomposition [.....] by the growth in the use of coffins at burials." (p.102) This reflects the tension between the desire for separation from the ghost-like nature of death and the need for symbolic continuity. Furthermore, the question, "Who dressed him?" raises the idea of death commodification as a controversial issue in today's world. It connotes how dressing a dead body becomes a part of the funeral industry package rather than a chosen farewell. Seen in the light of Freud's theory of death, questioning and repetition serve as tools to reclaim the past and preserve the identity of the beloved brother.

The repetitive compulsion shows that human destiny is driven not only by the life instinct (Eros) but more significantly by the death instinct (Thanatos), an "ego instinct" that expresses itself through the urge to repeat (Bridget, p. 153). In his book, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Peter Brooks discusses the deeply Freudian concept of repetition as a prevailing aspect of death and how it is applied to literary works: "Repetition, remembering, reenactment is how we replay time so that it may not be lost" (p. 299). He refers to the human need to resist the finality of time, especially in the face of loss and death. In *The Gathering*, the recurrence of death in material and symbolic forms helps preserve the memory and identity of the deceased. Repeating the act of dressing the dead body can serve as a symbolic reenactment of their presence. It tends to keep the brother alive even in a symbolic way.

Also, dressing the dead body reveals how the loss of a beloved does not only create emotional pain but also disrupts the mourner's sense of identity. Veronica is disintegrated from the narrator's inner world after the death of her brother Liam. Her identity is torn between presence and absence. She experiences a sort of identity fragmentation: "This is how I live my life since Liam died. I stay up all night. I write, or I don't write. I walk the house. Nothing settles here. Not even the dust." (Enright, p.36) Here, Veronica evokes a state of uncertainty and emotional paralysis which goes in harmony with her first statement "I need to bear witness to an uncertain event" (p. 11). Her identity is no longer a stable narrative; this fact implies that her sense of self is also unraveling. In this regard, Veronica uses fragments and contradictions to reveal her liminal position and to challenge the

blurring boundaries between the real and the hyperreal, the living and the dead. Her sense of identity is constantly disturbed by the death of her brother. Her reference to dust as a symbol of time and stillness aims to highlight the loss that exceeds the human and affects the environment itself. In this sense, grief is not just a response to the death of another; it becomes a partial death of the self.

In Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, the intertwining of dressing, death, and identity emerges as a central motif, particularly in the characters' psychological and emotional negotiations with loss. As postmodern agents, Enright's characters attempt to separate themselves from their own identities. This ambivalent and paradoxical act underlines the fragmentation of identity. Both Veronica and her brother, Liam, make efforts to escape or dislocate from a fixed sense of self, which leads to more profound confusion. Such a state of mind suggests that identity is not a stable essence but a shifting construct. Veronica's act of dressing her brother's dead body becomes a ritual of meaning-making. In the process of dressing the dead, Veronica's narration evokes fragments of her own identity, using the body of her brother as a mirror for her internal struggles. Thus, in Enright's literary work, dressing becomes a metaphor for the formation of identity. It is through dress that the narrator, Veronica, equates the living with assuming the identity of the deceased.

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