

Scandalous mourning in the work of Amy Bloom

In bereavement counselling they use the term- *complicated grief* and I often wonder what other kind there is. Well of course I know. It is the neat and tidy secret pain that shows enough of itself to suggest love but not enough of itself to disturb. This paper will briefly explore the work of the American short story writer Amy Bloom, who evinces a striking fascination with the whole messy experience of grief, a fascination that refuses easy judgement and accepts that complicated grief must require complicated healing.

'For fifteen years I saw her in my dreams. When my father got sick in the spring of my junior year dying fast and ugly in the middle of June. I went to Paris to recover, to become someone else, un homme du monde, an expert in international maritime law, nothing like the college boy who slept with his step-mother the day after his father's funeral.' Amy Bloom, *'Night Vision'*

'In the middle of the eulogy at my mother's boring and heartbreaking funeral, I began to think about calling off the wedding.' Amy Bloom. *'Love is not a Pie.'*

In his essay 'Coming to grief' Adam Phillips suggests:

'If grief doesn't have a sharable story, if there is no convincing account of what happens to people when someone they know dies, grief will always be singular and secluding: as close as we can get to a private experience without it sounding nonsensical. When someone dies, something is communicated to us that we cannot communicate. Hence the urgency that goes into making death a communal experience...'

Phillips' insights are particularly helpful when we consider the peculiarly resonant registers of Bloom's protagonists. For if society encourages grief to be finite, a process that as we work through it, becomes ever nearer a resolute and stoical 'end' of mourning, then what will remain of the essentially private, incommunicable experience of loss? And what testimony can be given to the bizarre and uncontrollable thoughts that arrive unsolicited from grief's amoral dimension?

This tension that exists between the unerringly personal aspects of mourning, and the more 'public' and observable and quantifiable 'stages' of mourning, receive repeated attention in the work of Amy Bloom. Characters show seeming irreverence for their absent, or impending

absent loved ones, as they transgress the prescribed limits of their original affection, improvising new means to assuage the overwhelming solitariness of the human condition.

In Bloom's story '**Rowing to Eden**' Ellie, an avowed lesbian, struggles with her own knowledge of breast cancer, whilst trying to support her best friend, Mai's own fight against the disease. Ellie finally finds Mai's husband needs some very practical insight into his wife's condition in order to face the ensuing horror of her mortality:

'On the left side of Ellie's narrow chest, a hand's length below her small, pretty colour bone, a few inches from the edge of her sun tan, there is a smooth very square of skin bisected by a red-blue braid of scar tissue. In the middle of the scar is a dimple.

"That?" says Charley, pointing without touching.

"Where the nipple was."

"Ah." Charley wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. He cups Ellie's breast in his palm and leans forward, his other arm around her waist. He lays his cheek against the scar.

"Can you feel this?"

"I can feel pressure. That's all I feel right there."

Displacement here is a tender gift masquerading as a near betrayal.

For earlier in this story we have been made aware that Mai's cancer has made Charley a fearful fool whose utterances seem inappropriate and estranging. Here, Ellie's quiet acceptance of Charley's transference, and her own implied counter-transference, privileges the resourcefulness of the individual in coming to terms with their own mortality as well as that of the other.

Charley and Ellie are implicated in a scene of tender remembrance, so that at some point, in the future, they can begin to forget. This unique gift between friends reveals the precarious and unconventional ways that secular grief might seek to manifest itself, where grief is not sanctioned by any tradition or coherent symbolic system.

Ellie's gift to her friend Mai is thus act of intervention within Charley's blind despair. Significantly Ellie's wound though visible, has healed. Significantly also however there remains an irreplaceable loss. This scene therefore seems to work as a trope on the whole process of grief as well as being a very powerful exploration of localised consolation between specific individuals.

Charley traces the contours of Ellie's lost breast and by implication that of his wife and thus traces the contours of his own suffering, engendering a place he can mourn from. If the scene shocks the unsuspecting reader because of its indeterminate eroticism and power, then Bloom is clearly advocating resourcefulness above prurient 'good taste' as a means of embracing some tentative future where 'successful' mourning has been achieved.

In Michael Ondaatje's novel **The English Patient**, the character Caravaggio admits to another, that '*he/I shall have to learn how to miss you*' an admission that calls into question the very possibility of mourning itself, and suggests that any representation of loss must be at best, tentative, and must depend on some readdressing and retracing of the I/thou dichotomy. For the evocative admission of Caravaggio, '*I shall have to learn how to miss you*' suggests that mourning is tentative and always in a sense provisional.

Indeed Caravaggio's acknowledgment that his missing of another is a form of self-education, underlines the tension between the intense privation of loss and its necessary 'publicisation'. This concern resurfaces in Bloom's latest collection, **A Blind Man can see how much I love you**, In the story, '*Light into Dark*' where Julia, the step-mother from the stories '*Night Vision*' and '*Sleepwalking*' tries to speak about her lost loves and finds she is engaged in some strangely relativising process, where one's loss is set against another in some unwarranted hierarchical emotional puzzle.

*'Julia would like to say that missing Peaches does not cover it. She misses Peaches as much as she missed her stepson during his fifteen year absence. She misses Peaches the way you miss good health when you have cancer. She misses her husband, of course she misses him and their twelve years together, but that grief has been softened, sweetened by all the time and life that came after. The wound of Peaches' death will not heal or close up; at most the edges harden some as the day goes on, and as she opens her mouth now to say nothing about her lost love, she thinks that even if Lionel is wrong about what kind of man Peter is, he is fundamentally right. Peter is not worth the effort
"I do miss Peaches too of course."*

Bloom's narrative mirrors the processes of Julia's intimate admissions. Her sons' assumption that their father will be missed most is privately thwarted by Julia's own thoughts. However Julia publicly subscribes to

her sons' need for such a hierarchy of affection, whilst privately admitting otherwise.

No one can organise and plan their grief any more than we can organise and contain those we will fall in love with. Love auctions are very dangerous affairs as Lear once learnt to his cost.

The reader is also aware of the incendiary admission behind the apparently sanitised acknowledgement that '*She misses Peaches as much as she missed her stepson during his fifteen year absence.*' For of course her stepson, Lionel's absence was due to his sexual relationship with his stepmother and the narrative affects an emotional symmetry that is far more complicated than may first appear.

Once again Bloom uses juxtaposition to reclaim private testimonies of loss, from public consumption. In Bloom's work, Death may liberate the signifier from the signified, so that old relationships become reconstituted through unsparingly new and improvised registers of loss.

Thus Julia misses Peaches the way those with 'cancer might miss good health' and the way a woman might miss her stepson if she had slept with him after the funeral of his father, her husband. Characters in Bloom love beyond the boundaries of the permitted and this is reflected in the arresting juxtapositions within her narratives.

These admissions engender dignity as they underline the need for authenticity and the personal in mourning, so that their grief cannot be just hijacked away from them by the public mechanisms of grief.

Intimacies are redrawn in Bloom they seem never quite resolved, and this lack of resolution highlights the painful reassurance engendered by mourning that we are intransigently attached to others and that it is not easily possible to attach ourselves to new love objects.

Perhaps the rawness of Julia's grief for Peaches is perpetuated further by the possibility that Julia is mourning both Peaches and the possibility of loving Peaches. This is suggested by the clear social sanctioning of Julia's relationship with her husband above that of Peaches, even within an obviously supportive family structure. The parallel therefore between the missing of Peaches and the missing of Lionel, the stepson is all the more revealing as it places one socially 'disadvantaged love' as the literal bedfellow of another. Once again Bloom underlines the very complicated processes of mourning and their infinite capacity to disturb.

In Bloom's first collection of stories, **Come to me** the opening story **'Love is not a pie'** begins at a funeral and although I framed this talk with a brief reference to the story, I now wish to revisit it again more fully.

'In the middle of the eulogy at my mother's boring and heartbreaking funeral, I began to think about calling off the wedding. August 21 did not seem like a good date. John Westcott did not seem like a good person to marry, and I couldn't see myself in the long white silk gown Mrs Westcott has offered me.'

More than anything else perhaps, death says THINK. The protagonist here is full of deliberations about her many choices in a future cruelly unimpeded by the presence of her beloved mother.

The meditative, apparently incidental phrases give an associative aspect to the narrative, which though hardly out of place or surprising in a story about loss, also gives voice to the ironic and painful freedom enjoyed by the protagonist Ellen once her mother has died.

Mourning is performative as the narrator decides to reconstitute herself beyond the holding gaze of her mother and what she believes were her mother's expectations. Such freedom brings Ellen the disturbing gift of elaboration. For Ellen discovers that the advent of grief brings with it, the loosening of tongues.

And thus, she realises the reality of her mother's ménage à trois, with the family's best friend, Mr DeCuervo. It is typical of Bloom that Ellen's initial decision to break off her engagement is ironically upheld by a revelation that subverts all her previously held assumptions. Intuitively she is right, where pragmatically she is wrong. She breaks off the engagement and becomes a different mourner.

'I called and John was very sweet, asking how was feeling, how the memorial service had gone, how my father was. And I told him all that and then I knew I couldn't tell him the rest and that I couldn't marry a man I couldn't tell this story to.

"I'm so sorry, Ellen, he said. You must be very upset. What a difficult day for you."

I realise that was a perfectly normal response; it just was all-wrong for me. I didn't come from a normal family: I wasn't ready to get normal.

Adam Phillip's earlier comments on grief are particularly pertinent here. For when death arrives with its own scandalous publicity, and revelation,

then the secluding aspects of death are going to be all the more pronounced.

IT is ironical that death often involves an unwelcome exhumation and 'unburied' of the past, as much as being some final 'laying to rest'. Ellen has to metaphorically 'unbury' her mother, and her narratives about her mother, in order to begin to mourn her anew.

The traces of the past that have been read according to one narrative, and one narrator, now necessitate rereading through the filter of a more knowing and reliable narrator. Hardly surprising then that the narrator needs to call off a union with an individual whose register and range of reference are so far apart from her own? *'And then I knew I couldn't tell him the rest and that I couldn't marry a man I couldn't tell this story to.'*

Like Morrison's *Beloved*, Bloom's narrator in this story knows that this is not a story *to pass on*. As in other stories the complicated aspects of grief, make the *passing on* of the story restricted to those who are particularly implicated and involved.

In this story, the bizarre or distinctive aspects of her mother's complicated love life make the narrator's memories of her mother all the more tender. For the narrator retraces the earlier signs of her mother's secret life and finds the signs were never as illegible as she allowed them to be. The revelation of her mother's secret past is yet another of Bloom's 'gifts' of mourning, where the mourner finds the new aspect upon the dead, an opportunity for wonder and reinvention.

"How about some gin rummy, El?" my father said.

"If you're up for it," said Mr DeCuervo.

"Okay" I said. "I just broke up with John Westcott."

"Oh?"

I couldn't tell which one spoke.

"I told him that I didn't think we'd make each other happy".

Which is what I had meant to say.

My father hugged me and said, "I'm sorry that it's hard for you. You did the right thing." Then he turned to Mr DeCuervo and said, "Did she know how to call them or what? Your mother knew that you weren't going to marry that guy."

"She was almost always right, Dan."

"Almost always, not quite," said my father, and the two of them laughed at some private joke and shook hands like a pair of old lovers.

“So you deal,” my father said, leaning back in his chair. “Penny a point,” said Mr DeCuervo.

I have said earlier that death may liberate the signifier from the signified, and this final scene from the story amply illustrates this premise.

For the narrator has obviously awakened to the new translation of her mother, and in doing so has abandoned the narratives that would have made marriage to a man like John Westcott desirable or possible.

Thus, the death of Ellen’s mother has ironically given her daughter space and permission to become *more* like her unconventional mother, a likeness that is playfully hinted at in this final scene, where there is a clear invitation by both the father and the lover to include Ellen within their previously disavowed narratives.

Quite what form such complicity will take remains unresolved yet there are certainly unresolved questions that remain, surrounding the dynamics between the mother, the father and the lover.

This irresolution is encapsulated in Ellen’s inability to differentiate between her father’s voice and that of Mr DeCuervo. Yet again, Bloom employs a seemingly ‘scandalous’ juxtaposition, in this case a daughter’s mis-recognition of her father’s voice for her mother’s lover, in order to question the whole nature of their relationships.

Their strange complicity is registered through Ellen’s colluding language of shock. They enjoy a ‘private joke’ as they wait for Ellen to fully comprehend the missed narratives of her childhood and beyond.

Interestingly it is almost as if Ellen’s language has got there before her, holding up the discovery, as she fumbles behind, hesitating to process the full meaning of what is before her.

The bemused surprise of the narrator before the spectacle of her father and Mr DeCuervo’s strange community, in a peculiar way rescues her mother from a very ordinary death.

And if this surprise is still more positively provoking in that this remaining community of two, might still be involved with each other, in ways Ellen had never entertained, then perhaps no set of mourners could better understand the full complexity of that which had been lost.

However it is also possible that Ellen's role as vaguely complicitous spectator, also re-empowers her before their dyadic inter-dependency, and re-appropriates her mother's memory for herself once again. *The past is only ever finished in Amy Bloom, never finished with.*