

Anticipating Death on the Domestic Stage: Grief, Family, and Kübler-Ross in Laura Wade's *Colder Than Here*

Belgin Bağırklar*

Abstract: The period before bereavement is difficult to describe because the expected loss is already shaping everyday life while the person who will be mourned remains present. Laura Wade's theatre places this tension inside and ordinary family home, where practical arrangements and avoidance occur together. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five-stage model gives the discussion an initial vocabulary for denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. It is treated here as a heuristic rather than a fixed sequence, since the characters respond unevenly and often contradict themselves. In her play *Colder Than Here* (2005), she explores how mortality is perceived by family members and the individual who is facing it, as well as their emotional and psychological struggle to cope with it. In the play, Myra prepares herself physically and emotionally for death. Her husband and two daughters must fulfill her final wishes while also confronting emotions and memories they have long suppressed. Through their journey, the play delves into the multifaceted nature of grief. The aim of this article is to examine how grief is represented and negotiated through the lens of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's "Five-Stage Grief Model". The article also reveals how Wade represents the perception and experience of death in contemporary society.

Keywords: Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Five-Stage Grief Model, death, contemporary British theatre, Laura Wade

Introduction

Death is an inevitable reality of human life. Although we are aware of it, we often unconsciously avoid thinking about this reality. However, in the 21st century, frequent experiences of pandemics and natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods have brought death into our daily lives more visibly. This constant exposure, together with the uncertainty of death, has increased negative psychological effects and

* Belgin Bağırklar (✉)

English Language and Literature, Izmir Democracy University, Izmir, Türkiye
e-mail: belgin.bagirlar@gmail.com

contributed to a rise in mental health problems. Theatre, as a mirror of society, has addressed the inevitable themes of death and mourning from various perspectives throughout different historical periods, particularly within the contexts of individual trauma and psychological disintegration. This makes the mourning process, which varies by society and culture, more meaningful.

In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud states that the mourning process experienced after the death of a loved person—the lost object—is not “pathological” (Freud 1957, 238), because it is a natural and necessary phase that must be lived through. Although grief initially dominates a large part of our lives, it gradually diminishes over time. It also allows individuals to continue their lives with reduced pain (Tonkin 1996, 10). Bowlby (1980, 27) claims that “Grief is the price we pay for attachment and love. Without attachment, there would be no grief”. Explaining mourning through emotional intensity and attachment theory, Bowlby emphasizes the lasting impact of grief on individuals’ lives. Parkes, influenced by Bowlby, contends that bereavement is not merely a psychological degeneration but also “a part of life as the joy of love” (Parkes 1972, 5). He highlights both the necessity and naturalness of the process. According to Kübler-Ross, who made significant contributions to psychology through her work on death and mourning, it is impossible for individuals confronting death and loss to respond in the same way.

Based on interviews with terminally ill patients, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified the stages of the mourning process and named her theory the “Five Stages of Grief.” This model has been widely applied beyond death, including losses such as divorce or unemployment. According to Kübler-Ross’s theory, the stages—Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance—allow us to approach the mourning/death process within a specific framework. In her book, *On Death and Dying* (1969), Kübler-Ross emphasizes that death is a reality we must all learn to accept as part of life. Kübler-Ross did not, however, describe these responses as a compulsory route with a single order. They may overlap or recur a qualification that matters when the model is transferred from dying patients to relatives anticipating a loss. Babarinde accordingly treats the stages as a provisional language through which people may recognise parts of their experience, rather than a complete account of grief (Babarinde 2025, 128). Kübler-Ross also links the fear of death to unconscious associations with emotions such as fear and punishment, and when we confront death, we also

confront these unconscious fears. For this cultural disposition, she uses the phrase “death-denying society” (Kübler-Ross 1972, 174). While in the past people primarily died due to wars and epidemics, technological advances and medical treatments have rendered the time and manner of death increasingly unpredictable. Although humankind has achieved remarkable success in many fields, death remains inevitable. The transformation of the unknown into the unpredictable contributes to the formation of a death-denying society. Despite our society’s advancements in medical fields, cryonics, anti-aging pharmaceuticals, and organ transplantation to challenge death, Ross insists that we must accept the inevitability of death. For this reason, she asserts: “Those who learned to know death, rather than to fear and fight it, become our teachers about life” (Kübler-Ross 1969, 138). Moreover, those who lose loved ones are not always adults; children under the age of nine also experience these stages. Nonetheless, children experience these stages with less depth than adults, because “they have no real concept of death yet” (Kübler-Ross 1972, 18).

Despite its widespread use, Kübler-Ross’s theory has been criticized by many scholars in terms of both its contemporaneity and sufficiency. According to Hall, while transitions between the stages in Kübler-Ross’s model are flexible, the theory remains “incapable of capturing the complexity, diversity and idiosyncratic quality of the grieving experience” (Hall 2014, 8). Friedman and James press the objection further. They assert that variation is not a minor exception to the model but a challenge to the assumption that grief unfolds in recognisable stages. As they state, “The fact is, no study has ever established that stages of grief actually exist, and what are defined as such can’t be called stages” (2008, 42). Avis et al., writing about public accounts of grief, reach a related caution. The model remains “extremely popular and frequently accepted,” but familiarity should not be mistaken for confirmation (2021, 1). Recent crises have also made the social conditions of mourning harder to ignore, since interrupted rituals and anticipatory grief shape how loss is lived and narrated.

The attraction of a stage model lies in the order it appears to give to an experience that resists order. Friedman and James therefore question not merely the number or sequence of the stages, but the evidential basis for assuming that such stages exist at all (2008, 38). Theatre approaches the problem differently. It can place incompatible responses, bodily presences, and mourning practices within the same

dramatic time. Death has consequently remained a persistent concern from ancient tragedy to contemporary performance. Theatre presents mourning and death by revealing individuals' diverse grieving practices, rituals, and complex emotional responses following profound loss, thereby fostering emotional sharing. In this sense, "death has been the lifeblood of theatre" (Robson 2019, viii). In *Performing Grief in Pandemic Theatres*, Walsh (2024, 7) argues that theatre stages death and mourning in order "to forge meaningful relationships between what's gone and what remains". Consequently, rendering grief and death visible enables individuals to express emotions more openly and facilitates confrontation with the feared and unknown. Similarly, Twitchin (2016, 57) also asserts that theatre, death, and mourning are deeply intertwined in revealing the tragic and historical realities of life.

Lehmann (2016, 411) states that "mourning has found different forms of expression at different times. However, modulated, tragic experience returns again and again". In ancient Greek tragedy, audiences witness the downfalls and tragic deaths of heroes such as Oedipus and Ajax. These heroes, tested by death because of excessive *hybris* or fatal error, ultimately generate scenes of sorrow and mourning among others. Themes of grief and death recur persistently in Shakespeare's plays as well. Shakespeare explores the fragility of human bonds and the collapse of political and moral order. For instance, in *King Lear*, following Cordelia's death, the audience witnesses Lear's elegy, as well as Edgar's lament after Lear's death.

War, secularisation, and changes in theatrical form have also altered the language through which loss is staged. Absurdist drama deprives its characters of a reliable metaphysical or linguistic structure within which death might be understood. In Ionesco's play, uncertainty about whether a person is living or dead belongs to a wider breakdown of reference. Mortality becomes disturbing because its speakers cannot secure a common account of reality.

Contemporary plays often extend grief beyond private sorrow by tracing its cultural and political conditions. In Sarah Kane's plays "death is ... the only escape from the nightmare of living" (Soncini 2010, 116). Caryl Churchill employs death as a means of critiquing patriarchal authority and capitalist structures. Similarly, in *Oh, What a Lovely War*, Joan Littlewood satirizes World War I through popular songs that emphasize the immense human cost of conflict. Littlewood uses mourning as a collective experience. He allows the audience to

participate in a shared process of grief by confronting the tragic futility and waste of human life. On the other side, Laura Wade, one of the leading contemporary playwrights, explores grief as an internal and psychological process.

Focusing on death and mourning in her first staged play *Colder Than Here* and later in *Breathing Corpses*, Wade was honoured with the Pearson Prize for the Most Promising Playwright in 2006 for both plays. Vient (2021, 10) states that “for Wade, it is the stories—‘learning about truth through fiction’—that constitute the most important aspect of creating theatre”. Drawing on experiences, memories, and events with both emotional depth and realism, Wade reflects these elements in her plays with remarkable skill, resulting in a highly innovative theatrical style.

Haughton (2018) examines the theme of grief trauma in *Colder Than Here* through its political and cultural dimensions. Gültér (2021), on the other hand, approaches grief trauma within the framework of family relationships and connects it to the concept of ecological trauma. However, the dramatic impact of the anticipatory grief process on individuals has not yet been sufficiently explored. Through this article, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief Model is used to examine the emotional rhythms and affective contradictions of grief as they emerge on stage. Kübler-Ross's model has been widely criticised for its linear structure and clinical limitations. Nevertheless, when employed as an interpretive (heuristic) framework, the model continues to retain its value as an effective analytical tool (Stroebe, Schut, and Boerner 2017, 278). In this sense, the representation of grief in *Colder Than Here* moves beyond a strictly clinical paradigm. The aim of this article is to reveal Wade's approach to the theme of death in contemporary society and to demonstrate how she transforms grief into a performative and relational experience embedded within everyday life.

Themes of death and mourning in *Colder Than Here*

First staged at the Soho Theatre in 2005, *Colder Than Here* brought Laura Wade critical attention within contemporary British theatre. While Haughton (2018) describes the play as a “subtly chilling play”, Hickling (2012) argues that it “is strongest in the scenes where the family appear fractious with grief; at other times the tone becomes a little maudlin, even mawkish”. Focusing on the thematic concerns of Wade's play, Sierz (2012, 7) labels it “a contemporary chronicler of

our attitudes to death”. In contrast to critics who emphasize the play’s realist and emotional qualities, Stewart (2017) describes it as “a sensitively handled and genuinely touching comedy about death”. *Colder Than Here* presents familiar experiences through a realistic style. It situates themes of death and mourning within moments that are at times reflective and at times deeply melancholic. Examining the play from the perspective of contemporary trauma, Güler draws attention to its political implications. She argues that “the play further tangles up the questions of family relationships, lonesome individuals, and ecological deterioration” (Güler 2021, 67).

In Wade’s play, symbolic language and realism intertwine. In the title, Wade associates life and death with the ironic juxtaposition of symbols. She emphasizes the natural circulation of death and life. Composed of nine scenes, the play centres on Myra, a middle-aged woman diagnosed with cancer and explores her emotional relationships with her husband and two daughters. “The liminal state of dying that Myra embodies further embeds the dramatic space, revealing the hierarchies and, to a certain extent, class relations that the Bradleys’ social bond maintains as a middle-class family in contemporary England” (Haughton 2018, 83). Wade thus exposes how the phenomenon of death is normalized within everyday life. The play examines how a family navigates grief, denial, and emotional reconnection in the face of impending loss.

Robson (2019, 11) argues that “the idea of the cemetery as a city of the dead (that is, where the dead live) has frequently been used as a metaphor”; since the cemetery functions as a space shared by both the living and the dead through rituals and acts of remembrance.

From the beginning of the play, Wade brings life and death together within the same setting. She ironically blurs the boundary between them. The play begins with Myra and her twenty-seven-year-old daughter Jenna having a picnic in a graveyard. Through the depiction of the trees—“the trees just a few years old and still spindly”—and a graveyard that “is out of the sun” (Wade 2005, 9-10), Wade creates a grotesque atmosphere in which the living and the dead coexist. The fact that the play both begins and ends in the same graveyard emphasizes the continuity of the cycle of life and death.

According to Kübler-Ross, the first stage individuals experience upon hearing either news of their own impending death or that of a loved one is denial. She argues that “the patients or their loved ones want to believe that a mistake has been made, and they are not actually

dying, but the appearance of denial in the survivor of the deceased is much more symbolic" (Kübler-Ross & Kesler, 2005, 5). In this sense, denial functions as a defence mechanism that allows individuals to cope with loss. By temporarily rejecting reality, individuals protect themselves from shock and attempt to maintain normalcy in their lives.

In the early scenes of the play, Jenna repeatedly mentions her inability to accept her mother's approaching death while picnicking with her. She remarks, "I woke up one morning and realised I'd been living a lie all my life" (Wade, 2005, 12). As Jenna begins to question her life, she expresses her need for her mother's support while describing a problem at work. "Jenna: I miss her. Like the other day, I got from work and it was a shit day—I wanted her there. And I got home and just gripped by it. Desperately wanted her. Lying in bed, crying my eyes out and there's no one else, no-one else is good enough" (Wade, 2005, 38–39).

Through Jenna's character, Wade presents the denial stage of a grieving daughter in a realistic manner. Moreover, when Myra expresses her wish to be buried in a cardboard coffin in the same graveyard where they picnic, Jenna continues eating as if nothing has happened. She psychologically denies the reality of her mother's impending death.

Harriet, the elder daughter, entirely rejects the idea of her mother's death. She confesses, "...And I just thought God, I can't cope with this, I can't do this. I was looking at her and I missed her..." (Wade 2005, 76–77). Struggling to manage her pain, Harriet insists that adapting to her mother's absence is impossible.

Kübler-Ross (2011, 42) argues that men and women often respond differently to death and mourning. She notes that "in our society it is supposed to be unmanly to cry". Alec, Myra's husband, also displays clear signs of denial. He isolates himself, avoids discussing his wife's illness, and becomes emotionally withdrawn. Rather than confronting Myra's impending death, Alec chooses silent denial. He conceals his grief and tears from his family. While others speak of funeral arrangements, Alec distracts himself by solving puzzles or repairing a heater. His silence and emotional distance from his daughters reflect his refusal to accept reality. In this way, Wade exposes gendered differences in responses to death and grief.

According to Kübler-Ross, another stage of mourning is anger. "This stage presents itself in many ways... Anger does not have to be logical or valid" (Kübler- Ross & Kessler, 2005, 8). Harriet's anger

assigns blame where no one can control outcome. Her accusation that Jenna continues to behave as though Myra's illness were "your disaster" redirects helplessness into a dispute over whose suffering is legitimate (Wade 2005, 41). The attack reaches beyond Jenna. It also registers resentment towards Alec's distance, the disruption of familiar family roles, and the expectation that Harriet remain competent while her mother is disappearing. The outburst brings suppressed conflict into speech, although the play does not treat that disclosure as proof that Harriet has completed one stage and moved to another.

Jenna's decision to end her relationship follows a different logic. Her admission that she did not want her boyfriend "at the funeral" imagines Myra's death in advance and reorganises intimacy around that future event (Wade 2005, 78). The action is abrupt, but the line does not identify anger as its cause. Instead, anticipatory grief reaches into a relationship outside the family, where the imagined funeral becomes a test of who may witness Jenna's loss.

Kübler-Ross associates bargaining with conditional promises through which a dying person seeks delay or reprieve. It represents a form of truce in which hope intertwines with reality. "Patients usually promise something, usually in exchange for prolongation of life. It looks like peace, but it is not peace yet" (Kübler-Ross 2011, 38). Wade represents this stage through Harriet. As winter ends, Harriet becomes aware that her mother's death is approaching, she insists that summer is an inappropriate time for death. "Harriet: When she dies. Winter's easier... Summer you're supposed to be happy, aren't you?" (Wade 2005, 75)

Through Harriet's internal negotiations, Wade intertwines bargaining with temporality. She emphasizes the character's need for time to confront a reality she is not yet prepared to face.

Following bargaining, individuals often enter the stage of depression. Wade illustrates Harriet's transition into this stage as she confesses that she "can't get on with her life because she's feeling all the time" (Wade 2005, 77). For Harriet, the reality of death prevents any sense of continuation.

Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005, 11) define depression as a natural response to profound loss. Like Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia, Kübler-Ross identifies two forms of depression. First one is reactive depression which is associated with loss already experienced. The second one is preparatory grief, which involves mourning an impending loss and results in deeper alienation (Kübler-

Ross 1972, 177). Kübler-Ross argues that women often navigate this stage more easily than men. In the play, Alec's quiet despair and emotional withdrawal reflect depressive resignation. He internalizes his grief and avoids discussing death with Myra or his daughters. His silence turns into a manifestation of sorrow.

Kübler-Ross compresses the movement from denial to depression into changing forms of assent. "If, in the denial stage, they say 'No, not me,' then in the anger stage they say 'Why me,' and in the bargaining stage 'Yes me, but.' When they drop the 'but,' it is 'Yes me.' Then the patient becomes very depressed" (Kübler-Ross 1972, 177). This sequence is too orderly for Wade's family. Acceptance appears beside irritation and renewed avoidance.

Myra discusses her death with unusual directness, although her composure does not amount to uninterrupted serenity. From the very beginning of the play, she attempts to prepare her funeral speech. She asks her husband and daughters for a coffin made of cardboard and decorated with stars. Wade repeatedly emphasizes Myra's request for a cardboard coffin throughout the play to highlight the ordinariness of death and its place within the natural cycle. Actually her proactive planning of her burial and funeral reflects a desire to render death meaningful. She also encourages emotional connection among family members. She assigns tasks, turns off Jenna's phone to allow intimacy, and urges Alec to "fall in love" (Wade 2005, 84) and "look after the girls" (Ibid, 86). In doing so, Myra supports her family's journey toward acceptance. By the end of the play, Alec agrees to share a room with Myra again, Jenna begins a new relationship, and the sisters grow closer. The final scenes suggest reconciliation—not only with death but also with one another.

Wade reconstructs the relationship between life and death ironically in the play's conclusion. The play ends in the same setting in which it begins. Wade emphasizes its transformation: "the site has increased beauty since we last saw it" (Wade 2005, 85). This spatial continuity and change reflect the non-linear nature of grief. As Kübler-Ross suggests, loss does not disappear; individuals learn to live alongside it, establishing a new equilibrium. Despite the setting remaining the same, its aesthetic enrichment suggests that the loss is not denied; rather, its transformative effect is acknowledged and accepted.

The play does not confirm Myra's death. Instead, Wade holds the scene at the threshold between anticipation and bereavement. "Myra looks around her, smiling quietly. She slowly lies down on her side

and strokes the most with her hand. She tucks her feet up and places her hands under her face, as if she were asleep. After a few moments, Myra changes her mind. She rolls over slowly and lies on her back, looking up at the sky” (Wade 2005, 95).

By emphasizing Myra’s foetal position, Wade suggests that death is as natural as birth. Looking toward the sky, Myra meets death peacefully, dissolving fear of the unknown. Metaphorically, even the stars she draws on her coffin ultimately yield to the order of nature. Finally, Wade dismantles the fear of the unknown traditionally associated with death.

Conclusion

Wade presents a compelling dramatic portrayal of how death and mourning—often forgotten in contemporary society—are perceived and experienced. Through everyday domestic settings and symbolic spaces such as the home and the graveyard, she reinforces the naturalness of death. Throughout the play, she reveals how characters react to loss differently. Wade stages that the loss may remain while the mourner’s life gradually develops a larger context around it. In this sense, the play foregrounds anticipatory grief as a prolonged psychological and emotional process rather than a singular moment of loss.

In contemporary societies, when confronted with the natural cycle of life and death, the emotional responses of alienated family members can be deeply exhausting. When approached as a dramaturgical and interpretative framework, Kübler- Ross’s Five Stages of Grief Model remains analytically productive within contemporary theatre studies. In the play, Kübler-Ross’s stages do not appear as rigid or sequential phases but rather as overlapping emotional states embodied by each character. The family members move through denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance in different ways and at different paces. By dramatizing these disordered and uneven transitions, Wade emphasizes that grief in contemporary society is not linear; instead, it is fragmented, relational and often shaped by interpersonal dynamics rather than only individual psychology.

Gender enters this pattern through forms of expression that differ within the family. Harriet and Jenna verbalise distress, while Alec translates much of his loss into withdrawal and silence. Yet Wade does not reduce these responses to an opposition between emotional women and an unfeeling man. Harriet and Jenna also deflect grief through

accusation or changes in their intimate lives. Alec's attention to the broken heater turns practical labour into care. The contrast places masculine restraint under pressure while asking who is permitted to speak and which forms of care the family can recognise..

Using silence and cyclical imagery, *Colder Than Here* transforms grief into a performative experience enacted on stage rather than merely represented. These devices do not turn death into a reassuring emblem of renewal. The burial landscape changes, but warmer weather does not remove the family's knowledge of what is approaching. Grief is performed through recurring tasks, pauses, and spatial associations whose meanings shift from scene to scene. The play makes mortality shareable without claiming that it has become harmless or complete; its final image belongs to anticipation, not to a finished cycle of death and rebirth.

The closing scenes register changes in the Bradleys' relations, but they do not show all four characters completing Kübler-Ross's stages. Jenna begins another relationship, Harriet speaks with greater candour, and Alec moves closer to Myra. None of this cancels the preceding fear or conflict. Myra remains alive when the play ends, so the family's anticipatory grief has not yet become bereavement. The ending holds them in that unresolved interval, allowing attachment, irritation, care, and foreknowledge to coexist rather than converting them into completed acceptance.

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