

Grief as Meaning Making in Loss in Kyung Sook Shin's Novel *I'll Be Right There*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses grief as a process of meaning making in loss for the characters Jung Yoon and Miru in Kyung-Sook Shin's novel *I'll Be Right There* (2014), a bildungsroman grounded in the experience of loss amid South Korea's politically turbulent 1980s. This study explores why some individuals are profoundly affected by loss while others can adapt through a comparative analysis of characters with contrasting grief outcomes using Gillies and Neimeyer's meaning reconstruction model of grief (2006) and Worden's four tasks of mourning (2018). The findings reveal that Miru's failed sense making traps her in a destructive cycle that ultimately leads to her suicide, whereas Jung Yoon's gradual identity change and internalized sense making facilitates the integration of her loss into her core meaning structure. This contrast demonstrates that, far from simply being a response to death, grief is an ongoing struggle to reconstruct meaning and identity in the presence of loss. Ultimately, this study concludes that the ways individuals make sense of and incorporate their losses into their changing identities informs their ability to live with what has been lost.

Keywords: bildungsroman, grief, loss, meaning reconstruction, self-narrative

INTRODUCTION

Bildungsroman is one of the most popular and enduring genres in literary history (Graham, 2019). Bildungsroman narrative typically unfolds through an introspective storyline, centred on a self-aware individual whose identity is formed through their ongoing negotiation with the historical and social conditions around them (Rüggemeier, 2023). In Kyung-Sook Shin's modern Korean bildungsroman novel, *I'll Be Right There* (2014), the characters mature and form their identity through the pain of experiencing the deaths of people close to them. The narrative is set against the politically charged backdrop of 1980s South Korea, a period of military dictatorship and violent protests. Shin uses this setting to explore how individual grief is amplified and complicated by collective historical trauma. The novel's characters navigate a world where the smell of tear gas in the air is a daily reality (Shin, 2014), and loss inevitably becomes a constant companion.

The story revolves around three college friends Jung Yoon, Miru, and Myungsuh, who each experiences the death of someone close to them. The central problem of the text lies in its depiction of the deeply personal and varied nature of grief. When the main characters are confronted with death, their responses diverge dramatically. This variance challenges the notion of a universal grief experience and raises a critical question: why do some individuals seem to adapt to the death of their loved one while others are utterly consumed by it? To begin, we must first understand that grief is directly related not to death itself, but to loss. This concept draws upon John Bowlby's attachment theory which suggests that loss is only experienced when individuals are separated from a figure they are emotionally attached to, which elicits grief as a response (Worden, 2018). The death of such figure then becomes a loss that causes grief.

To understand the characters' varied grief then would require examining how they respond to loss, which this study does by employing the meaning reconstruction model of grief by Gillies and Neimeyer (2006). This constructivist approach views humans as beings who are fundamentally motivated to construct and maintain a meaningful self-narrative, which contains their core meaning structures: the beliefs, values, and assumptions that constitute their coherent sense of self and the world. It posits that grieving is not a passive journey through a series of fixed stages as proposed in the more commonly known Kübler-Ross's five-stage model (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006), but rather an active process of rebuilding a worldview that has been shattered by loss. When a loss creates a significant incongruence between one's pre-loss beliefs and the current, post-loss lived reality, the resulting distress triggers a quest for meaning. This meaning reconstruction can be done through three activities: sense making, the attempt to find reasons for the loss and comprehend its impact; identity change, the necessary work of reconstructing oneself such as re-evaluating priorities, roles, and relationships in a world without the deceased; and finding benefit in the loss (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). This study focuses primarily on sense making and identity change, as the nature of the deaths, along with the historical context in the novel, appears to limit the characters' ability to engage in benefit finding. If the new meanings generated through this process are helpful, distress may decrease, but if they are not, the bereaved can become trapped in a destructive cycle of searching for meaning.

This model is complemented by Worden's (2018) four tasks of mourning, which outline the initial, essential actions of grieving: accepting the reality of the loss (Task 1), processing the pain of grief (Task 2), adjusting to a world without the deceased (Task 3), and finding an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life (Task 4). Worden's framework aligns with Gillies and Neimeyer's in viewing the adaption to loss as tasks to address actively because "the mourner needs to take action and can do something" (Worden, 2018, p. 43) instead waiting passively to pass through some stages. The first two tasks must be successfully addressed before deeper meaning reconstruction can begin, which will occur in the third task.

This paper will focus on comparing the meaning making process in loss for the two characters that represent opposite outcomes of grief, Miru and Jung Yoon, as they engage in sense making and identity change. Miru's obsessive but futile external quest for sense making exemplifies a failed reconstruction, trapping her in a cycle of unresolved grief that leads to her identity dissolution and suicide. Jung Yoon, in contrast, illustrates a more internal and evolving process. Her gradual engagement in identity change and internalized sense making allows her to form continuing bonds with the deceased and adapt to a world irrevocably altered by their absence. The different outcomes reflect how crucial the meaning making process is and show what happens when meaning making in loss fails or succeeds. They also reveal that grief is a long, undetermined effort to keep going in a world that has changed forever.

ANALYSIS

Miru and Jung Yoon's contrasting experiences reflect Gillies and Neimeyer's model of grief by showing how meaning reconstruction dictates whether grief becomes a catalyst for transformation or leads to destruction. This analysis will explore the emotional foundations of their grief, the nature of their sense making or identity change activities, and the ultimate impact on their identities and adaptation to loss.

Failed Sense Making and Identity Dissolution: Miru's Cyclical Grief

Miru's character development illustrates the mechanics of complicated grief. Miru's grief comes from the loss of her sister Mirae who commits suicide by burning herself when she fails to find her missing boyfriend that she believes has been kidnapped or killed by the government.

Miru happens to witness Mirae's final moments although she is frozen from shock. Miru's journey is a systematic psychological unravelling rooted in a fragile identity that was never truly her own. We can trace her tragic end by dissecting its distinct stages: the foundation of her borrowed self, the impact of a traumatic loss that triggers a futile sense making process, the performance of grief that leads to complete identity dissolution, and finally, the ultimate act of self-destruction as a twisted form of resolution.

Miru's destructive response to loss is not an isolated event but the inevitable collapse of a life lived without an independent self. The foundation of her self-narrative is critically dependent on her sister, and her entire identity is based upon her older sister, Mirae. Her stark admission, "I must have been really attached to her. When we were little, I did everything she did . . . It wasn't because she was older than me. I just didn't feel like myself unless I was with her" (Shin, 2014, p. 150) is not a simple statement of affection but a confession of a void at her core. Gillies and Neimeyer's model posit that we have core meaning structures that define our world (2006), and for Miru, the primary, and perhaps only, core structure is Mirae. This was fostered by a family dynamic in which Mirae was the designated "very special" (Shin, 2014, p. 151) child, implicitly casting Miru as her shadow. This dynamic bred a deep sense of inferiority in Miru, creating a core belief that her own existence was secondary. Miru thinks that the family dynamic is justified "because she was better than me" (Shin, 2014, p. 153), revealing a worldview where her own worth is not inherent but relative and lesser.

This fragile, borrowed identity was founded on a trauma. In childhood, Miru accidentally caused an injury that ended Mirae's promising ballet career. The family's subsequent, complete silence on the matter "But we never said a word about it. Not once after that day" (Shin, 2014, p. 179) denied Miru any healthy path to process her guilt. She turned to a method of self-punishment that would foreshadow her end, developing what later would become a life-threatening eating disorder, as her mother later reveals. Starving herself can be seen as her way to physically manifest the pain and guilt she was not given the chance to communicate. This history becomes a part of her core meaning structures that believes guilt is an agony to be physically punished instead of an emotion to be resolved or integrated. Her entire pre-loss meaning structure is built on indebtedness, inferiority, and a learned helplessness that she masks as devotion. She does not know how to be Miru, she only knows how to be Mirae's sister.

Mirae's gruesome suicide by self-immolation shatters Miru's fragile identity. The violence of the act induces what Worden (2018) identifies as the key complications of suicide bereavement: overwhelming shame and guilt. Miru's shame is acute and isolating. She physically hides the burn scars on her hands (Shin, 2014), which she appears to consider as the physical evidence of her failure to save her sister. She also warns Jung Yoon that "You might regret it. Ever having known me, that is" (Shin, 2014, p. 192), as if the tragedy has made her a contaminant. This is later mixed with a crushing, ruminative guilt, manifested in classic "if only" statements (Worden, 2018) that Miru expresses by saying, "How I wish I could have seen what was coming... I would never have let her leave" (Shin, 2014, p. 187).

This unbearable distress immediately launches her on a frantic quest for sense making, as Gillies and Neimeyer's model suggest (2006). However, her approach is fatally flawed from the start. She fixates entirely on a singular, external task of finding her sister's missing boyfriend. She believes, or forces herself to believe, that this is the only way to "restore the order, security, and predictability" (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006, p. 37) in her life. This externalized quest, however, is a form of avoidance indicating failure in addressing the first task of mourning to accept the reality of the loss. It allows Miru to project her internal chaos onto an external vessel and so evading the daunting internal work of grieving and, more importantly, of building a new self from the ruins of her old one. She places no urgency in understanding her own feelings, directing all of her energy on finding a tangible cause; a person to whom she can assign blame. Her preconceived

judgment is clear when in the moments before Mirae's death, she screams, "He's not worth it" (Shin, 2014, p. 194), referring to Mirae's missing boyfriend. This reveals that Miru is not actually looking for truth, but for confirmation of a narrative that would absolve her from feelings of helplessness and guilt. The quest is also proven to be futile. Myungsuh, her childhood friend who is another survivor of Mirae's suicide, quickly deduces that in their violent political reality the man is likely already dead. However, that is a truth Miru cannot afford to accept because it would force her back upon herself, into the void where her identity should be.

This failed sense making traps Miru in a destructive, inescapable loop. Because her quest yields no helpful new meanings, her distress never lessens; it only intensifies, fuelling an even more desperate and life consuming search. As her external quest fails, she turns inward not for reconstruction, but for her final act of dissolution. Her identity change is a complete erasure of self as she progressively sheds her own persona to adopt Mirae's. Her childhood friend Myungsuh observes in horror that "She was becoming more like her sister everyday" (Shin, 2014, p. 68), taking on Mirae's obsessive quest and frantic mannerisms as if they were a posthumous mandate. The most powerful symbol of this is her treatment of Mirae's skirt. After her parents ritually burn Mirae's other belongings, Miru "stubbornly grabbed hold of that skirt and refused to let go" (Shin, 2014, p. 240), wearing it year-round. This must not be seen as an act of remembrance as it is more of an act of assumption. The skirt is her uniform of grief, a constant performance of the identity she has now stolen.

Her brief attempt to form a new life with Jung Yoon and Myungsuh is later also revealed to be just an opportunity to perfectly replicate the past by casting her friends as replacements for her sister rather than to restart her life. Her plea to Myungsuh "Like we did before. But this time with Yoon?" (Shin, 2014, p. 198) shows her goal is to imitate and not to form a new beginning. The moment this proves impossible when her parents sell the house, she regresses completely, cutting off all contact and resuming her obsessive search (Shin, 2014). In the end, she follows her sister into a suicide by starving herself, the ultimate return to her original coping mechanism for guilt.

Miru's journey represents a failure of grief resolution caused by unsuccessful meaning reconstruction in loss. Grief becomes a self-imposed, destructive cycle from which she never escapes. This is also proven through Worden's model, where she fails at every one of the four tasks of mourning. She never truly accepts the reality of the loss (Task 1); instead, she substitutes it with a frantic, life-consuming quest that denies the finality of Mirae's absence. She is unable to process the pain of her grief (Task 2); rather than working through her shame and guilt, she allows these feelings to become the core of her new existence. Her entire life becomes a performance of that pain. Consequently, she fails to adjust to a world without Mirae because she cannot make new meaning structures to help her settle in the changing world (Task 3). Instead of learning to function in a new reality, she dedicates herself to recreating a dead past, and when that fails, she simply adopts her sister's final, desperate state.

Finally, she is completely unable to find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life (Task 4), the most difficult task for many (Worden, 2018). For Miru, there is no "new life." She sacrifices the possibility of one to maintain a connection through imitation. Her unresolved grief manifests as a complicated, chronic grief. Her fixation on the loss proves to be all-consuming as she channels her yearning for her sister into the unsettling act of trying to become her and shows no capacity to imagine a future beyond that grief. Her withdrawal from others is no longer simply an expression of mourning, it has turned into a deliberate retreat to preserve and prioritize her attachment to the loss. Even her relationship with Myungsuh becomes functional, driven primarily by his usefulness in locating her sister's former boyfriend. Her connection with Jung Yoon is also just an attempt to create a surrogate sister, making their relationship doomed to fail because it is based not on appreciating Jung Yoon for who she is, but on what role she can fill.

It is important to highlight that the source of Miru's failure lies in her flawed meaning making. Because she externalizes the search for meaning entirely, she never engages in the internal work necessary for adaptation. She seeks a simple, singular answer to what should be a complex process, and when the world does not provide it, she collapses inward. Her death is the final step of her grieving process. Having failed to reconstruct a self and having fully dissolved her own identity into that of her dead sister, death is the only way to make her transformation complete. Her grief is never resolved; it is perfected into a state of non-being, a chilling testament to the dangers of a self-unmoored.

Identity Change and Continuing Bonds: Jung Yoon's Adaptive Reconstruction

Jung Yoon's experience of grief presents a contrasting journey to Miru's. Despite also going through terrible losses, Jung Yoon can gradually engage in rebuilding meaning and adapting her identity. Jung Yoon experiences two major losses: her mother, who dies of illness, and her childhood friend Dahn, who dies in a suspicious accident widely believed to be a targeted killing due to his involvement in protests the military regime. Her grief illustrates how mourning evolves over time through denial, reengagement, and eventual meaning reconstruction. Her story aligns with Gillies and Neimeyer's model of meaning reconstruction particularly in the way she develops her disrupted self-narrative toward a more resilient sense of self that integrates the multiple losses she experiences.

Jung Yoon's initial response to her mother's death is by entering a state of emotional withdrawal and avoidance. For an entire year, she disengages from everyday life, saying, "After Mom died, I stopped reading books... I did nothing the whole year" (Shin, 2014, p. 29). This period of limbo shows a clear disruption in her cognitive and emotional processing and a difficulty in addressing Worden's (2018) first task of mourning: accepting the reality of the loss. Rather than acknowledging the permanence of her mother's absence, Jung Yoon remains emotionally suspended by resisting any confrontation with the emotional implications of the event. This early avoidance appears to be a form of intentional psychological numbing as a defence against the destabilization of her meaning structures. Her mother was not only a loved one but also a central figure in her self-narrative. The loss of her mother, who was her primary attachment figure and source of stability, produced a level of disorientation that was too shocking for her core meaning structures to process directly. As Gillies and Neimeyer suggests, a loss that disrupts the assumptive world requires a restructuring of one's internal narrative (2006). While this restructuring does not begin immediately for Jung Yoon, her eventual progression toward reengagement sets apart her adaptation from Miru's.

This denial is vividly illustrated by her adherence to rituals of the past. Her refusal to wear her mother's ring because, as she admits, "Doing so seemed like admitting that she was dead, and I was afraid of that" (Shin, 2014, p. 29), is a key example. The ring, which to Jung Yoon appears to be a physical symbol of her mother's presence, also becomes a talisman of her absence. Wearing it would force Jung Yoon to accept her new, unwanted identity as a motherless daughter, so she avoids it. Even more telling is her continuation of her weekly visits to the hospital pharmacy long after there is any reason to. She sits in the waiting room, knowing her mother's number will never be called, yet she recalls that "each time the pager dinged, I looked up and watched the display change" (Shin, 2014, p. 19). This reflects an attempt to return to a place where her pre-loss self still existed. By revisiting familiar places, Jung Yoon tries to hold on to the sense that life has not completely changed.

This denial is not the absence of grief, but its active suppression. The emotional weight remains just beneath the surface, waiting for a catalyst. When her childhood friend Dahn comments on how well she "handled" (Shin, 2014, p. 29) her mother's death, the remark unexpectedly unsettles her. She describes feeling "a sudden pang in my chest" (p. 29) and

instinctively reaches out to him. This physical reaction proves that the emotional impact of loss can persist even when it is not consciously acknowledged. This moment of piercing pain acts as a wake-up call, forcing Jung Yoon to acknowledge the discrepancy between her outward appearance of composure and the distress she feels. The incongruence between her pre-loss and post-loss self that she continues to carry increasingly distresses her, prompting the beginning of a more active engagement with her meaning making.

Triggered by this moment of painful self-awareness, Jung Yoon moves from passive denial to the active work of grieving. Her first step is a conscious and deliberate act of identity change, one of the activities of meaning reconstruction in loss (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Upon deciding to return to city life, she makes "five promises to myself" (Shin, 2014, p. 17), which at glance appears like random resolutions, but are foundational acts of building a new identity for Jung Yoon. Analysing the promises reveals her conscious effort to create new meaning structures to replace those that have been shattered from her loss. For instance, "Start reading again" (p. 17) and "Memorize one poem a week" (p. 17) are acts of re-engaging with the intellectual and emotional world she had shut out. The promise to "not go to Mom's grave before the Chuseok holiday" (p. 17) is a sign of recognising that she must manage her exposure to the crucial sources of her grief to avoid being overwhelmed. The final promise, to "Walk around the city for at least two hours every day" (p. 17), is a physical commitment to move forward and re-engage with the world of the living. This list represents her first attempt at creating a post-loss self-narrative that is defined by what can be built and not by what has been lost.

From this foundation, her sense making process begins. It differs from Miru's in the way that Jung Yoon turns inward, approaches her grief patiently, and engages with it symbolically. She becomes deeply attached to her mother's ring and a pot of soil from her grave (Shin, 2014), using them as transitional objects that allow her to maintain a tangible connection while she slowly processes the finality of the loss. Her anxiety about the ring is profound, as she confesses, "I would wake with a start and hurriedly shove my hand into my pocket, searching for the ring" (Shin, 2014, p. 29). This is a manifestation of her attachment anxiety, now transferred from her mother to this symbolic object. In addition to the ring, her desire to plant something in the soil from her mother's grave is a powerful metaphor for her attempt at sense making by creating a new life and meaning from the fact of death.

Jung Yoon's emotional breakthrough, which marks the point at which she fully accepts her mother's death (Task I) and begins to engage with her grief on a deeper level (Task II), takes place during the chaos of a student protest. The intensity of the moment overwhelms her, breaking through the emotional numbness she has carried for so long. What had previously been an abstract or intellectual understanding of her mother's death becomes an emotional reality. As she recalls, "My mother's death, which had been drifting out of reach all that time, sank in at once, and a wave of loss washed over me.... Mama's dead. I may as well have heard drums beating and a herald delivering the news" (Shin, 2014, p. 81). This moment of painful clarity allows her to move into a more adaptive stage of mourning Worden describes as the development of a "continuing bond" (2018). From this point onward, her mother is no longer held at a distance through avoidance, she becomes integrated into Jung Yoon's ongoing self-narrative as an internalized presence.

This transformation is revealed through small but meaningful moments that suggest a deeper psychological shift. For instance, Jung Yoon unconsciously replicates her mother's gesture of placing a perilla leaf on a friend's rice, embodying her mother's nurturing role and carrying it forward. This quiet gesture signals the integration of her mother's care into her own behaviour. More explicitly, she also engages in an internal dialogue with her mother after impulsively trying a cigarette, thinking, "I'm sorry, Mama. I won't smoke again, Mama" (Shin, 2014, p. 27). Far from a sign of detachment from reality, it is evidence of what Worden identifies as a continuing bond: the internalization of the deceased as a lasting influence (2018). Her mother, now part of

Jung Yoon's inner world, becomes a source of moral grounding and emotional resilience. The relationship continues in a new form that is less visible but still deeply present. This demonstrates a healthy process of identity change, where loss does not erase the self but helps reshape it. Jung Yoon does not become her mother; she becomes a version of herself that is enriched and informed by her mother's memory instead.

However, Jung Yoon's journey is not a simple, linear success. The sudden, violent, and politically charged death of her friend Dahn marks a significant setback in her grieving process. Unlike her gradual adaptation to her mother's passing, this loss destabilizes her entirely. Her sense making falters, revealing that meaning reconstruction is not a fixed ability but a process greatly influenced by the nature of the loss. The injustice and violence of Dahn's death make coherent meaning nearly impossible to find. She regresses into the extreme negation of Worden's first task, a "full-blown delusion" (2018, p. 44), refusing to acknowledge his death and continuing to write him letters making future plans (Shin, 2014). This denial is revealed through Myungsuh's concerned remark, "Dahn died six months ago? Every time I asked Yoon about Dahn, she said, 'He's probably fine'" (Shin, 2014, p. 246). Jung Yoon's response to the loss of Dahn illustrates how grief can resurface in disruptive forms when meaning cannot be made, and how identity reconstruction can remain vulnerable to collapse when faced with unresolved or traumatic loss.

This unresolved grief leads to a fragmented self-narrative in which a part of Jung Yoon remains suspended in time, still collecting documents years later in the hope of reinvestigating Dahn's death. However, unlike Miru, this unresolved element does not take over her entire identity. The core self that she reconstructed following her mother's death is resilient enough to contain this lingering trauma without being overwhelmed by it. It remains a part of her story, but not the whole. Her ability to hold both unresolved grief and ongoing life at once reflects a more mature form of adaptation that allows for pain without letting it define her entirely.

The final process of her integration occurs years later, during a trip to see the Nazca lines in Peru. In a place of ancient, mysterious meaning, she finally finds a measure of peace as she whispers Dahn's name and acknowledges that he, too, has become a part of her integrated self. Her final acknowledgment is that he, too, now lives within her as part of her reconstructed identity. She reflects, "It was then that I finally realized I was not made up only of myself. Everything I saw and everything I felt was also part Dahn. And part Miru. And partly their unfinished time that I was living" (Shin, 2014, p. 320). This realization captures the fused core of Worden's fourth task (2018) and Gillies and Neimeyer's model's (2006) ultimate goal: the ability to carry the memory of the deceased as part of one's evolving self, while still affirming the value of one's own continuing existence. Jung Yoon's narrative ends in complete integration. Through meaning making, her identity has developed to be solid enough to contain both resolved love and unresolved sorrow without being destroyed by either.

CONCLUSION

The different journeys of meaning making in loss for Miru and Jung Yoon in *I'll Be Right There* clearly illustrate the principles behind meaning reconstruction model of grief. Viewed through Gillies and Neimeyer's framework, grief, at its core, proves to be a difficult and deeply personal effort to rebuild identity after a shattering loss. Miru's experience serves as an example of what happens when this process ends in failure. Her obsessive but failed sense making traps her in a destructive cycle where she is unable to reconstruct her own identity. Her identity becomes entangled with her sister's, and without a viable narrative to move forward, her grief ultimately leads to self-destruction in the form of suicide. In contrast, Jung Yoon represents a more adaptive, though imperfect, form of grieving. Her journey is marked by denial and fragmentation, but salvaged by moments of reflection, internal growth, and eventual integration. Through the active reconstruction of her identity and the gradual sense making of her losses, she

transforms the deceased from absent figures into enduring internal presences, creating continuing bonds. Her journey realistically portrays how adapting to loss is ultimately not about resolution or closure, it is about developing the ability to live with the loss in a way that allows life to continue. By placing these two characters side by side, Kyung Sook Shin leverages the bildungsroman genre to explore profound psychological depths of grief. The novel highlights that grief from loss is not a fleeting emotional state to be easily overcome, since it demands a deliberate and often difficult reconstruction of the self to accommodate its presence.

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