

Digital Mourning and Online Grief in Post-2020 English Poetry

Faheem Ul Haq*  and Preeti Sharma 

¹Department of English, Govt Degree College, Chenani, 182141, Jammu and Kashmir, India

²Department of English, Government Degree College, Sunderbani, Rajouri, 185153 Jammu and Kashmir, India

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*Corresponding Author: **Faheem Ul Haq** | Email Address: **Faheemmarouf92@gmail.com**

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in late 2019 and intensifying through 2020, fundamentally altered global experiences of death, loss, and mourning. Physical distancing, lockdowns, restricted funerals, and the sheer scale of mortality shifted bereavement into digital spaces. Social media platforms became primary sites for expressing grief, sharing memories, and building virtual communities of support. This article examines how post-2020 English-language poetry reflects and interrogates these shifts, focusing on "digital mourning" and "online grief." Through close readings of selected works by poets such as Amanda Gorman, contributions from lockdown poetry projects, and emerging voices engaging with social media aesthetics, it argues that contemporary poetry serves as both a mirror to and a critique of digitized bereavement practices. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship from thanatology, media studies, and literary theory, the analysis explores themes of virtual presence/absence, continuing bonds in algorithmic spaces, collective versus individual grief, and the aesthetics of fragmented digital expression. The study highlights poetry's role in processing hybrid grief—simultaneously private and hyper-public—while questioning the long-term cultural implications for mourning in an increasingly online world. Findings suggest that post-2020 poetry not only documents these changes but actively reshapes emotional norms around death.

Keywords: digital mourning, online grief, post-2020 poetry, COVID-19 elegy, social media, continuing bonds, English literature.

1. Introduction

The year 2020 marked a global inflection point in how humanity confronts mortality. As the COVID-19 pandemic claimed millions of lives, traditional mourning rituals—funerals, wakes, communal gatherings—were severely curtailed or rendered impossible due to public health measures. In their place, digital platforms emerged as vital arenas for grief expression. Facebook memorial pages, Instagram tribute stories, Twitter hashtags, and Zoom funerals became commonplace. This phenomenon, often termed "digital mourning" or "online grief," extends pre-existing trends but gained unprecedented scale and visibility post-2020 [1]. Poetry, historically a privileged medium for elegy and lamentation, has responded with remarkable vitality. From Amanda Gorman's public recitations addressing collective national mourning to crowd sourced lockdown poems and individual collections exploring personal losses mediated by screens, post-2020 English poetry captures the paradoxes of grieving in the digital age: connection without touch, permanence in ephemeral feeds, public performance of private pain. This article investigates these intersections. It posits that post-2020 English poetry functions as a critical archive of digital bereavement, illuminating how technology reshapes emotional labor, memory construction, and the ethics of mourning [6-11]. By analyzing representative texts, it addresses key research questions: How does poetry articulate the affordances and limitations of digital platforms for grief?

In what ways does it challenge or affirm theories of "continuing bonds"? What formal innovations reflect the fragmented, algorithmic nature of online mourning? And what broader sociocultural insights emerge about grief in a post-pandemic, hyper-connected world?

The scope is limited to English-language poetry published or widely circulated from 2020 onward, primarily from the UK, US, and other Anglophone contexts. While acknowledging global diversity, the focus remains on works engaging explicitly or implicitly with digital mediation. The article contributes to Scopus-indexed interdisciplinary discourse by bridging literary studies with digital humanities and death studies.

2. Literature Review: Digital Mourning and the Evolution of Grief Studies

Scholarship on digital mourning predates 2020 but accelerated dramatically during the pandemic. Foundational works by [2-4] examined Facebook as a site for "post-mortem social media," where profiles of the deceased persist as spaces for interaction. Concepts like "continuing bonds" [12] traditionally psychological, gained new technological dimensions as users "speak" to the dead via comments, tags, and memorial pages. Post-2020 research highlights pandemic-specific dynamics. Studies document how lockdowns amplified reliance on social media for emotional expression and community support, while also introducing challenges such as performative grief, algorithmic amplification of sorrow, and "context collapse"

where personal loss mingles with unrelated content. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok favor visual and short-form content, influencing grief expression toward montages, poetry snippets, and viral threads. In literary studies, pandemic poetry has been analyzed for its therapeutic value and formal experimentation. Projects like the Ledbury Poetry Festival's Lockdown Poems and global anthologies captured real-time responses to isolation and loss. Scholars note a resurgence of elegiac forms adapted to digital constraints: fragmented lines mirroring Zoom grids, hashtagged motifs, and intertextuality with online discourse. Gaps remain in scholarship specifically linking post-2020 poetry to digital mourning theories [13-15]. This article addresses that by integrating close textual analysis with insights from media ecology and affect theory (e.g., Papacharissi's "affective publics"). It also engages ethical questions: Who owns digital grief narratives? How does platform capitalism commodify mourning?

3. Methodology

This study employs qualitative literary analysis combined with thematic synthesis from death studies. Primary sources include:

- Publicly available poems from 2020–2026 (e.g., Gorman's "The Miracle of Morning," selections from lockdown collections, works by poets like Donna Ashworth or emerging voices on platforms like Instagram).
- Anthologies and online archives (Ledbury, Academy of American Poets grief collections).
- Secondary sources: peer-reviewed articles on digital grief and pandemic literature.

Selection criteria: English language, post-2020 publication/circulation, explicit or strong implicit engagement with grief mediated by digital/online elements (e.g., references to screens, social media, virtual funerals, algorithmic memory). Thematic coding draws on Braun and Clarke's approach, identifying patterns such as "virtual presence," "fragmented temporality," and "collective isolation." Ethical considerations include respecting living poets' contexts and avoiding sensationalism. Limitations: Focus on accessible online/public works; potential Anglo-centric bias.

4. Analysis: Themes in Post-2020 Poetry

4.1 Virtual Funerals and the Aesthetics of Absence

Many poems depict Zoom or livestreamed memorials, highlighting physical disconnection. In examples from lockdown projects, mourners appear as "a sheet of commemorative stamps" on screens—together yet isolated. Poetic form often mirrors this: short, enjambed lines and white space evoke pixelated grids and emotional gaps. The inability to hug or share physical space intensifies grief, transforming traditional consolation into digital longing.

Amanda Gorman's work addresses broader societal mourning, urging acknowledgment of pain amid virtual overload. Her public, shareable poetry itself becomes a digital mourning artifact, circulated on social media to foster collective catharsis.

4.2 Continuing Bonds in Algorithmic Spaces

Poetry frequently explores "haunting" by digital remains—scrolling through old posts, algorithm-triggered memories, or maintaining profiles. This aligns with scholarly notions of continuing bonds but adds layers of technological mediation: the dead "live on" in feeds, yet subject to platform policies and data decay.

Poems may use direct address to the deceased as if commenting on a post, blending intimacy with public performance. This reflects the participatory nature of online grief, where strangers offer condolences via likes and shares, creating hybrid communities.

4.3 Collective Grief and Hashtag Elegies

The pandemic's scale prompted collective mourning for strangers, healthcare workers, or public figures. Poetry engages hashtags and viral phenomena, sometimes mimicking their repetitive, accumulative style. This creates "affective publics" where individual loss intersects with global statistics. Critiques emerge too: poetry questions the ephemerality of online solidarity versus sustained personal grief, or the risk of grief becoming performative content.

4.4 Formal Innovations: Fragmentation and Multimodality

Post-2020 poems often incorporate digital aesthetics—emoji-like symbols, broken syntax, found text from social media, or references to scrolling [22-25]. This mirrors the "datafication" of mourning and challenges linear narrative, reflecting disrupted temporality (e.g., grief resurfacing via "On This Day" features). Short-form poetry suits platforms like Instagram, blurring lines between art and everyday expression.

5. Discussion: Implications for Theory and Culture

Post-2020 poetry validates and extends digital mourning scholarship. It illustrates how platforms afford new forms of agency (e.g., legacy-building) while imposing constraints (algorithmic visibility, digital divides). Themes of resilience alongside critique suggest poetry helps negotiate "complicated grief" in a mediated world.

Culturally, this poetry documents a shift toward more public, democratized mourning, potentially reducing stigma but raising privacy and emotional labor concerns [16-21]. For literary studies, it revitalizes the elegy as a hybrid genre responsive to technological change. Future research could explore non-Anglophone comparisons, AI-generated grief poetry, or longitudinal impacts.

6. Conclusion

Post-2020 English poetry powerfully captures the textures of digital mourning: its comforts, its alienations, its transformative potential. By giving voice to online grief, poets not only process personal and collective trauma but also illuminate broader questions about humanity in the digital age. As we move further into an AI-augmented future—with griefbots and persistent digital avatars—such poetry remains essential for ethical navigation and emotional truth-seeking. Ultimately, it affirms poetry's enduring power to humanize loss amid technological flux.

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