

Ways of Grieving

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"Home Burial," by Robert Frost, illustrates the different ways in which a man and woman grieve over the loss of their first child. First published in 1915, the poem was written nearly eight years after the death of Frost's first son, Elliott. Because he often wrote about and incorporated his feelings regarding his family into his poetry, Frost is thought to have composed "Home Burial" to commemorate the death of his son, Elliott.

Within the poem "Home Burial," Frost assumes the role of the husband, and he uses his wife, Elinor, for the character of Amy. The poem begins with Amy coming down the stairs of their home. As she descends, she looks out the window in the stairwell, catches sight of the family cemetery, and becomes upset. Her husband sees her and asks if anything is wrong. In response, she grows agitated and crumbles on the steps. She is reluctant to reveal the reasons for her emotions because she does not believe that he even remotely feels the same way over the recent loss of their son.

Both the husband and wife grieve the loss of their son, but they do so in different ways. For example, the wife is content to be away from the house that reminds her of him, while the husband digs the grave in an effort to move on to happier times. Laurence Sasso, Jr., in describing the wife's reaction to her husband's grieving, notes, "she doesn't credit her husband with having the capacity for grief which she possesses herself. The hostility and revulsion that might be controllable in less trying circumstances cannot be contained when her passion is fully devoted to her mourning" (100). Although her husband tries to tell Amy that he understands her,

she does not believe him. He realizes that their relationship is experiencing difficult times, and he vainly attempts to console her. Frost shows his sheer desperation in the poem when he writes, "Amy! Don't go to someone else this time / Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs / He sat and fixed his chin between his fists" (41-43). After he states this, Amy moves closer towards the door, but does not open it. She tells him that he does not understand what she is going through, and he begs her to let him into her mind and heart so that they can grieve together. He finally tells her what he is thinking when he says:

My words are nearly always an offence.
I don't know how to speak of anything
So as to please you. But I might be taught
I should suppose. I can't say I see how.
A man must partly give up being a man
With women-folk. We could have some arrangement
By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off
Anything special you're a-mind to name. (Frost 48-55)

At this instance in the poem, he is nearing his breaking point. He appears to be somewhat agitated by having to tell her his innermost feelings. After he reveals his thoughts, Amy states that he is being ridiculous. She actually views him as the source of her grief. She is angry with him because he acted nonchalantly after the death of their child, while she cried.

Near the conclusion of the poem, the husband has lost his patience with his wife. According to Robert H. Swennes, "[the husband] appears to try to help her express her grief, and yet acts angrily when she claims that he is the source of her misery" (365). At the end, he relents and states that she can go, but that he will come to get her later. The last two lines of the poem

read, "Where do you mean to go? First tell me that. / I'll follow and bring you back by force. I *will!*" (Frost 119-120). By italicizing the final word of the poem, Frost emphasizes the ensuing stress and indignation.

As noted, Frost used the relationship that he had with his wife to mirror the personalities of the man and woman within "Home Burial." Donald Sheehy from *The New England Quarterly* indicates that, before Frost got married, he had a fear of being alone; he felt that marriage would alleviate some of that fear (41). According to Sheehy, "An awareness of this threat lurks behind the husband's desperate bluster at the end of 'Home Burial'" (41). Frost never wanted to be alone in life, and the husband's personality in the poem "Home Burial" illustrates this perfectly. However, Frost agreed that his work often came between him and his wife, resulting in a complex marriage. In reference to his wife, Frost once said, "She always knew I was a good poet, but that was between her and me, and there I think she would have liked it if it had remained at least until I was dead" (Francis 520). Although Frost dearly loved his wife, his work, as well as the death of their first-born child, attributed to the complexity of their marriage.

Frost was able to take the grief that he held close to his heart and incorporate it into his poetry. In "Home Burial," he wrote about the different ways that he and his wife grieved over the death of their child, Elliott. Although Frost conveyed his feelings to his wife through his poem, because he did not also converse with her, their marriage had problems. At the poem's end, the man states that he will find his wife wherever she is and bring her back home; Frost seemed to do the same with his wife. Each grieved in his or her own way, but in the end, Frost brought her back to reality.

Works Cited

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Dr. Spence's Comments: *Rachel Lee has written a fine paper in which Robert Frost incorporates his relationship with his family, particularly with his wife, into the personalities and actions of the husband and wife in "Home Burial." The husband in the poem does not know when "to keep hands off" and when to show love and understanding. Like Frost, it seems, he does not want to be alone. "I'll ... bring you back by force. I will!"*