

# A Flight of Stairs in “Home Burial”

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**Abstract**—Robert Frost is very good at using metaphors in his poems. The employment of metaphors endows his poems with rich emotions and thought, which is probably what Frost calls “emotion has found thought and thought has found words”. The loss of a child, in “Home Burial”, brings about the vastly different views of the husband and wife towards family, love, and children. The half-shut and half-open door is often taken as an example by scholars to symbolize the deadlock the couple is in. In fact, that flight of stairs is also symbolic of the separation and isolation of this couple. The setting of the poem is the staircase of the house, which will show how the position of the husband and wife in relation to the stairs influences their right of speech.

**Index Terms**—flight of stairs, “Home Burial”, failure of marriage

## I. INTRODUCTION

Lack of effective communication between husband and wife leading to the failure of marital relations is an eternal topic in literary works. Robert Browning's masterpiece “My Last Duchess” is an extreme case, in which the proud and arrogant Duke refuses to condescend and tell his wife, citing as reasons his poor eloquence and the possibility that his wife may argue with him after being warned, that he has felt discontented with some of her conducts. Unfortunately, his wife is unaware of the Duke's dissatisfaction with her, resulting in her death, commanded by the Duke. In this famous dramatic monologue, Browning presents a domineering husband who has never offered a chance to his wife to explain her conduct or to correct her seeming misconduct. T. S. Eliot, in the second section of his masterpiece, “The Waste Land”, depicts a wealthy lady living in a luxuriously decorated and glittering mansion, who is mentally ill and eager to communicate with her husband, but her husband always responds to her urgent need with silence. She never knew what her husband was thinking or what she should do. Eliot vividly portrays the somewhat neurotic and pitiful woman, who is incapable of effective communication with her husband. In “The Constant Symbol”, Frost (1995) mentions, “Every poem is an epitome of the great predicament; a figure of the will braving alien entanglements” (p. 787). Whereas, fewer couples are lucky enough to resolve their predicament, as the couple, Warren and Mary, in “The Death of the Hired Man”. Although living together in the same room, modern people are still “isolated from each other and unable to communicate” (Huang, 2011, p. 350). Oster (2004) in “Frost's Poetry of Metaphor” once said, “Home Burial” presents “a frustratingly anguished scene of confrontation and failed (or non-existent) communication” (p. 164). Lack of effective communication may issue in the distress of the husband and wife, the loss of love, the breakup of the marriage, even the death of the wife.

“Home Burial” is about the barrier and isolation between a New England couple who have recently lost their only child. This title literarily means the fact that the father buries his dead child on the home burial ground by himself. However, as the story goes on, this title implies that the home burial may refer to the tentative fact of the burial of the home, the burial of love, and the burial of marriage. When commenting on this poem, Oster (2004) said that this “poem does indeed dramatize the burial of that home and that marriage” (p. 164). Frost (1995) once said in “The Constant Symbol” that poetry “is simply made of metaphor... Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing” (p. 786). Frost employs a lot of metaphors in presenting the predicament husband and wife are caught in; for instance, the “room within a room”, “a cage... of hickory poles” (Frost, 1995, p. 68) in “A Servant to Servants” and the “dark pine” in “The Hill Wife” (p. 123). In reference to “Home Burial”, some scholars (Nitchie, 1960, p. 223; Huang, 2011, p. 284) focus on the image of the half-shut and half-open door, maintaining that this door symbolizes the deadlock the couple is in. Some others put emphasis on the loss of the child, which brings about the vastly different views of the husband and wife towards family, love, and children (He, 2010, p. 99). In fact, that flight of stairs is also symbolic of the separation and isolation of this couple. The setting of the poem is the staircase of the house, which will show how the position of the husband and wife in relation to the stairs influences their right of speech.

## II. FRIGHTENED WIFE UPSTAIRS VS. ADVANCING HUSBAND DOWNSTAIRS

Staircase may remind us of Scene 2, Act 2 (lines 1-78) in *Romeo and Juliet*, where Juliet stands above by the window talking to herself about her passionate love for Romeo; while Romeo overhears her secret downstairs in the dark orchard. This staircase serves to link the two young lovers together. Nevertheless, the staircase in “Home Burial” severs the cord

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between the husband and wife. According to the respective positions of the husband and wife on the staircase, the poem can be divided structurally into three parts.

In Part 1, the husband, from the bottom of the stairs, sees his wife at the top of the stairs, hesitantly takes a step down, and immediately takes back the step. The wife raises herself to look at something and seems frightened. At this moment, the wife is not conscious of being seen by her husband. Her facial expression faithfully reflects her inner mind. She is really frightened by what she has seen through the window at the top of the stairs. The husband, mounting the stairs, asked, "What is it you see\ From up there always—for I want to know" (Frost, 1995, p. 55). From the use of the word "always" in the question of the husband, it's evident that the husband must have observed his wife several times from the bottom of the stairs. The word "always" might also suggest that the husband must have looked out of the window but failed to see anything unusual, which served to nurse his grievance against his wife. The wife's fright, in response to the husband's demand, suggests to the husband the desperation she feels for what they call the "home", which is unbearable to him. Moreover, the demand, "I want to know", "you must tell me" reveals the husband's irritation at the seemingly irrational behavior of the wife. Upon hearing the husband's demand, the frightened wife sinks on her skirts. This conflict between the husband and wife is vividly presented through their position at both ends of the staircase, the wife taking up the center of the stage but hesitant, doubtful, and terrified, while the husband taking a lower position but determined, assertive, and impatient. From being seen and being frightened to being demanded, this wife is consistently passive in this case. The following gestures of husband and wife also form a striking contrast: with the husband advancing and mounting, the wife "sank" and "cowered". This telling word "advancing" denotes moving forward in a slow and determined way, which presents vividly the assertive self-consciousness of the husband. The word "mounting" refers to both the climbing action of the husband and the tension between this couple. As a result of this advancing and mounting, the wife couldn't help sinking on her skirt and cowering under her husband. This sinking and cowering seem to show that the wife has been defeated, and she has to move to the edge of the stage, leaving the center—the top of the staircase—to the husband.

The husband's determination to find out what the wife has seen is emphasized by the repeated structure, "What is it you see". In the very beginning, the husband poses a threat to the wife in not so much what the husband says and does as what his manner and tone are. The wife might have been accustomed to her domineering husband for a long time, but this time, she chooses to ignore his demand, leaving him to find out by himself. Knowing that he will not see anything, she still refuses to offer any hints. Judged from his murmuring and his initial response of "Oh" and "Just that I see", the husband, as expected by his wife, hasn't seen anything strange. When challenged by his wife, he has to look hard, and finally, the home burial ground comes into view from the window. He admits that he never "noticed" the burial ground from the window before. The word "noticed" indicates again that the husband must have seen the family graveyard from the window, but he has never focused his attention on the particular new mound where his dead child was buried. At this moment, if the husband had been fully aware of the agony the lost child's mound in the family graveyard had brought to his wife, and if he had chosen to comfort his wife, he might have avoided the hysteria of the wife and escalation of the marital crisis. This transitory meeting on the top of the stairs offers a transient chance of the compromise of the husband and wife if both of them could put themselves in the other's position.

However, instead of sympathizing with his wife, the husband is careless enough to associate the window with the size of the burial ground and even to equate the graveyard with the bedroom, "So small the window frames the whole of it.\ Not so much larger than a bedroom" (p. 56), the two opposite sides of a person—when he is alive, he takes a rest in the bedroom while after he dies, he takes his eternal rest in the graveyard. This equation denotes a spatial sense and connotes a mental sense as well, which conveys the poet's attitude towards marriage and reflects the true meaning of the title, the burial of home, the burial of love, and marriage.

### III. APPEASING HUSBAND UPSTAIRS VS. EXASPERATED WIFE DOWNSTAIRS

In Part 2, at long last, the husband realizes that it is the child's mound that pains the wife. Before he could mention his loss of the child, the wife loses her temper. She forbids him from mentioning the lost child by repeating "don't" four times. The flight of stairs is mentioned again by the telling action of the wife's "sliding" down the stairs. Now, the husband and wife have reversed their positions, with the husband left at the center of the stage—at the top of the stairs. The seemingly docile wife now turns on her husband with a daunting look, leaving the husband overwhelmed, for the husband "said twice over before he knew himself:/ 'Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?'" This carelessness and callousness of the husband when mentioning the dead child exasperate his wife. Once more, she intends to go out to one of her neighbors' to pour out her anger, but the husband wishes to solve the problem by themselves. Separated by the flight of stairs, the husband tries to appease his wife. He, sitting down on the stairs and promising to stay on the top of the stairs, is prepared to yield to his wife because he is a man. He pleads with his wife to teach him how to please her and how to avoid displeasing her. At the same time, he makes it clear that he doesn't think pleasing can help sustain the loving relationship between husband and wife. In response to his humble tone, the wife moves the latch of the door a little. The husband is forced to humble himself once more because it hurts him to imagine his private affairs become a table talk among his neighbors. The husband wishes to talk with the wife and share her grief, he professing himself a potential good listener, "Tell me about it if it's something human. /Let me into your grief" (p. 57). However, he couldn't help telling her his confusion as to why it's so hard for her to get over the loss of a child. In his opinion, it's improper to get stuck with

the grief, which will prevent her from going anywhere. Both the husband and wife are partly right “in the manner in which they conduct themselves” (Myers, 1969, p. 46). The husband’s attitude sounds more rational and objective; he is partly right in that he has realized that after the death of the child, man has to adjust to sorrow by going on with life again; after all, that is what he is left to do. On the other hand, the wife is partly right, too, in that she wishes to live in the lovable memory of the child. Therefore, the wife notes a sense of irony when the husband expresses his perplexity at her inconsolable grief. She yells at her husband, which incurs his wrath. The husband threatens to break his promise and come down the stairs. The wife unleashes her complaint on him by accusing him of callousness. She presents his grave-digging scene, which astonished her so much so that she started to wonder who was that man and whether she knew him. In her opinion, a loving father cannot bear to dig his own child’s grave and bury him in the family burial ground with his own hands.

If you had any feelings, you that dug  
With your own hand—how could you? — his little grave;  
I saw you from that very window there,  
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,  
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly  
And roll back down the mound beside the hole. (Frost, 1995, p. 57)

In the second line, by placing “With your own hand” and “his little grave” at the beginning and end of the same line, a sharp contrast is formed; the two dashes in the line vividly show that she actually sobs out her only son’s death, a fact she is unwilling to face up to. The repetition of “leap” in the fourth line and the alliteration formed by “leap”, “like”, “land” and “lightly”, the repetition of “like that”, the assonance of /ai/ in “like” and “light”, /æ/ in “that” and “land” imitate the energetic digging actions of the husband; the /əʊ/ in “roll” and “hole” and /aʊ/ in “down” and “mound” stress the finality of the actions, showing the wife is simmering with resentment towards her husband. Perhaps the husband’s talking about rain’s rotting the birch fence is a way to lighten his grief of having to dig his only child’s grave. Nevertheless, in the wife’s understanding, the rotting birch fence is associated with the rotting of the child’s coffin and perhaps the rotting of the dead body of the child as well. What the wife can’t bear most is that her husband could talk about death in such a casual manner when his shoes are still stained with the fresh earth from the new grave and when he has just laid his spade against the wall.

Judging from the husband’s attitude towards the death of the child, the wife comes up with the idea that when one is alive, he is alone, and when he dies, he is more alone because friends and relatives, who are eager to go back to life, choose to forget the dead as represented by her husband. She is desperate because she realizes the world is evil, but she is too helpless to change it, so she decides to go along the road not taken, that is, to refuse to reconcile herself to the death of her only child and stay obsessed with the grief. On the part of the wife, the digging of the grave and the casual talking about the decaying of the birches when the child’s coffin is placed in the darkened parlor are proof of her husband’s apathy. What she cannot understand is that her husband perhaps bears the same grief as her, but in a different way, by covering his grief, by pretending that he has got over it, so as to show his manliness. This misunderstanding and misunderstood couple, this partly right and partly wrong couple blindly collide with each other, venting their anger on each other. They have subconsciously stepped into a vicious cycle. When one is tempted to step one foot out, the other drags his other foot in. The husband chooses to face up to reality, while the wife prefers to escape from it. The wife’s accusation against her husband and the world demonstrates that this couple’s relationship will remain a deadlock for the time being. All these happen while the flight of stairs keeps the husband and wife apart, each bearing grudges against the other.

#### IV. ANGRY HUSBAND UPSTAIRS VS. HESITANT WIFE DOWNSTAIRS

In Part 3, the husband had hoped that after his wife aired her grievances, she would reconcile herself to reality, go out of her grief, and get back to life. Therefore, he tries to comfort her by saying that she has expressed her anger and that she has done the right thing to let go of the past. He presumes that she must have taken the load off her mind, so he attempts to ask her to close the door for fear of the scene being seen by the passing neighbors. However, after the wife has given vent of anger, the husband is not rewarded with a reconciliation for his restraint. Instead of closing the door, the wife opens the door wider. Once again, the telling action of opening the door is presented in the way the flight of stairs is introduced at the very beginning of the poem. The husband, sitting on the top of the stairs, becomes exasperated, and he demands to know where she wants to go. He makes it clear that wherever she goes, he will bring her home by force. The poem ends with “I *will!* —” (p. 58). The italicized “will” and the following dash really show the husband’s warning and determination. In response to the husband’s warning, will the wife open the door completely and go out, or will she close the door and stay home? It is not certain whether the husband will go downstairs to drag his wife home or the wife will go upstairs to stay in the house. Readers are left in suspense. Nevertheless, regardless of their choice, their marital relationship will undoubtedly undergo further ups and downs for a long time.

#### V. CONCLUSION

It seems from the wife's description of the grave-digging scene that she must have caught the sight from the window on the top of the stairs, and it is the first time that she has shared her memory of this scene with her husband. The spade's digging and lifting of the gravel from the grave hole must have exerted tremendous emotional pressure on the wife. To release her anxiety, she crept up and down the stairs. She went downstairs but she dared not to go to the graveside to stop her husband from digging. She went upstairs in the hope that her husband might stop voluntarily. That flight of stairs witnesses her emotional anxiety and serves as a permanent reminder of the trauma she has been through. However, the spade's digging and lifting keep crossing her mind ever since then. To make things worse, when the husband finally took the spade home and stood it against the wall, he immediately struck up a conversation with others about everyday concerns. It looked as if he had just dug somebody else's grave hole instead of his own son's. The emotional torture suffered by the wife is heightened when the wife takes note of the seeming carelessness and callousness of the husband, which, in turn, intensifies her hate towards her husband. This fresh memory of the grave-digging scene, closely linked with the creeping upstairs and downstairs of the wife, foregrounds the flight of the stairs, which serves to separate the husband from the wife, and prepares the readers for the door that is neither open nor shut.

The wife's going up and down the stairs echoes the chances of reconciliation coming and going. In the very beginning, the speaker of this poem mentions the stairs with the wife standing on the top of it, doubtful and helpless. Then, the speaker mentions that the husband mounts up the stairs, insisting that he will find out what view frightens his wife. Temporarily, both the husband and wife are on the top of the stairs, with the husband standing to find out what the wife has seen, and the wife cowers under him. Accepting the challenge of the wife, the husband finally takes note of the home burial ground from the window, and he admits that he has never noticed the graveyard from the window. At first, the careless husband thought his wife minded the view of the graveyard, then he realized that it's the child's grave that plagued his wife. At that moment, if he had chosen not to mention the new grave and cared more about his wife's poor nerves, he would have avoided the first emotional outbreak of his wife. In response to his speaking of the child's mound, his wife starts to recoil against him and slide down the stairs. Again, the flight of stairs serves as a barrier between husband and wife. When the wife gets down to the bottom of the stairs, she has transformed from a frightened and doubtful woman into a courageous and resolute woman who dares to throw a daunting look at her husband. The formidable husband, after learning about the true reason for his wife's fear and grief, has turned into a humble man for a while. If he could remain humble and really keep his promise not to mention the dead child and give his wife time and space, the couple might have avoided the second and more violent confrontation. The husband's challenge to his wife's preoccupation with the dead child causes her to fly into a rage. Later, the husband realizes his wife is not only obsessed with the loss of the child but also seethes with anger at him, simply because she has mistaken his seeming talkativeness for his callous disregard for his dead child. Instead of pouring out his heart to his wife, the helpless husband could only respond to his wife's accusation with the worst laugh he has ever laughed. His response sends his wife into fury. To fortify her accusation, she recalls the exact words he once said after he had just dug the grave hole. The wife simply cannot understand why her husband could be so heartless. In a fit of rage, her husband and all other men are under her attack. This misunderstanding and misunderstood couple, separated by that flight of stairs, fails to seize the fleeting opportunities to reconcile with each other. If the sensible husband had been willing to throw away his dignity for a moment and tell his wife his true feelings towards his dead child, and if the sentimental wife had given her husband a chance to speak his heart and become sensible in accepting the fact of the death of the child, the husband could descend a few stairs to meet his wife who was ready to ascend a few stairs, they might be able to end up in a harmonious relation again.

To sum up, in "Home Burial", not only the half-open and half-close door serves to indicate the possible breakup of the marriage, but the flight of stairs also serves to keep the husband and wife apart, making it hard for them to make a compromise, both of whom need to find out what should be buried in their hearts and what should be spoken out. No words can express the inconsolable grief of the loss of a child; therefore, both the husband and wife must learn to accept reality and support each other to get out of this darkest moment of life.

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