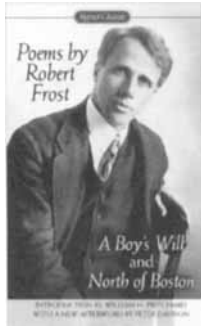


HOME BURIAL

Robert Frost

First published in 1914. 2001 edition, New York: Signet/
New American Library, 176, £3.36. ISBN 0451527879



Robert Frost's son Elliott, the first of his six children, died at the age of three. The year was 1900: Frost was 26 and had been married for four and a half years. In response to the child's death Frost's wife entered into a deep, persisting despair. Jeffrey Myers¹, in his biography of Frost, writes 'Luxuriating in her grief, alternating between glowering silence and wounding accusations of selfishness and neglect, she opposed him [Frost] with her stillness and her sharp retorts, and neither cared nor understood how he felt. Instead of consoling each other, the Frosts exacerbated each other's misery'.

Later, 14 years after his son's death, Frost published a long narrative poem, 'Home Burial', dramatising a searing confrontation between bereaved parents. Frost claimed that the poem was based on his observations of acquaintances whose marriage foundered after the death of their child. Without question it also was based on his own experience.

The poem begins with the mother staring out of a window on a narrow staircase. Against his

wife's wishes the father insists on seeing what his wife is looking at and realises that from the window she can see the grave of their infant son. The father then pleads for his wife to accept that he too is grieved, but she rejects him:

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,
... I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.'

The mother is now at the door but her husband, in his overbearing way, pleads that she not go:

There, you have said it all and you feel better.
You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door.

And when he realises that a neighbour may witness their quarrel, 'Amy! There's someone coming down the road!' But that her husband should be worried about a neighbour at a time like this is more than the mother can bear. She leaves, even as her husband blusters that he will follow and bring her back.

This is, of course, fiction, its action heightened and condensed beyond anything real life is likely to provide. Nevertheless, it is based on close observation and self-observation and captures much that can become problematic in the marriage of bereaved parents. The mother and father, though each grief-stricken, deal with their grief differently. Perhaps just because each is under stress, neither has the energy to suspend his or her own view and understand the other's. Each is, in consequence, alone, alienated from the other.

The mother yearns to protect her child from hurt. In her eyes her child was being abandoned when it was put into its grave by her husband. She sees her husband's matter-of-fact acceptance of their child's death as utterly unfeeling – almost brutal. Now, after having himself abandoned their

child, he insists that she too abandon it. Outraged, and desperate to defend the child, she holds her memory of it close to her, as she might have held the child itself, and fiercely resists her husband's intrusion.

The father deals with his grief as might many men. He puts the pain aside as best he can, and goes on. He has already done what had to be done: he has dug the grave and buried the child. To continue to be the husband and father he requires himself to be, he must be constructive and protect his wife as well as the memory of his child. He needs his wife's reliance on him. Her rejection of him leaves him doubly bereft.

Husband and wife are both angered by the other's failure to understand, sympathise, and care. The wife is appalled by her husband's ability to go about his business after having consigned their child to the ground. She is also threatened by his heavy-handed intrusiveness. The husband feels betrayed by his wife's refusal to acknowledge how devotedly he works for her and how much he does to keep their lives going. He is angry, too, because his wife seems so unrelenting in her silent criticism of him.

Frost did not include this poem in any of his many readings of his poetry; he said it was too sad. It is indeed sad, the more so because it offers no suggestion for how the couple might find their way toward each other. Yet it is among the most valued of Frost's poems, perhaps for its reminder of how much partners in marriage affect each other for good and for ill as they respond, often differently, to the vicissitudes of life and, should that most dread of events occur, to the death of a child. **BC**

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I. Meyers J. Robert Frost. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997

BOOK REVIEWS

THE MOURNING FOR DIANA

Tony Walter (ed)

Oxford, UK: Berg, 1999, 286pp. £42.00 hb,
£14.99 pb. 1 85973 2380; 1 85973 233X



Of all the books about Diana, Princess of Wales, this must be one of the most scholarly. Written by a group of academics and researchers, it considers in depth the wide range of reactions to the death of the princess and, in an

absorbing and thought-provoking way, examines the possible uniqueness of the public mourning that followed her totally unanticipated death.

Here Diana is accepted as a 'super-icton' and the reaction to her death is compared with that of other 'super-ictons' such as Evita Peron, John F Kennedy, Marilyn Munroe and Elvis Presley. The conclusion is that in the mourning for Diana there was little that was entirely new and therefore capable of starting a new trend. Mourning for the princess did not constitute a cultural revolution, but it did have consequences. Some of these relate to very practical matters, such as aspects of policing an event like Diana's funeral. Others have to do with political aspects of the situation with particular

reference to the popularity of Tony Blair, the Prime Minister, and the role and functioning of the monarchy.

However, the most interesting and useful chapters are those dealing with the public grief – the leaving of floral tributes, the signing of books of condolence, the creation of shrines, and the spiritual aspects of the people's reaction. In particular, the chapter dealing with the psychological impact on the general public is insightful and immensely valuable. The authors provide evidence that for many individuals their responses to the death and funeral were not trivial and that, for significant numbers, high levels of stress and psychological disturbance resulted. At the other end of the scale of reactions, jokes about Diana's death are consid-

ered in an illuminating analysis of the role of humour following traumatic loss.

For anyone interested in death, grief and mourning, this is a well-written, stimulating and valuable book. It will appeal most to those with an interest in the sociological aspects of these subjects. The standard of the contributions is very high throughout the book and most of the chapters contain excellent references and bibliographies for further reading. A number of poignant photographs add much to the text and the general impact of the book. Of much greater interest and appeal than the title first suggests, I recommend this book in the hope that it will enjoy the wide readership it deserves.

John Beaumont

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