

Notes on Home Burial by Robert Frost:

In A Nutshell

Fair warning: If you're looking for a mood lift, this poem is not the place to find it. That said, if you're looking for an empathetic journey into the heart of marriage, mortality, and grief, you're in the right spot.

"Home Burial" is one of Robert Frost's longest poems, and it can also be considered one of his most emotionally disturbing ones. "Home Burial," published in 1914, tells the story of a married couple fighting after their baby has died. It's written mostly in dialogue, so it sounds like real people talking. But this is no ordinary conversation. It tackles the subjects of love, grief, and death, making readers think about each of those common topics in a new way.

You probably know Frost from his shorter poems like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" or "The Road Not Taken." These poems are often read as inspirational, beautiful odes to nature and exploration. But if you read closely, they have a dark side. We promise.

In "Home Burial," there's no missing the dark side. It's right there, staring at you, haunting you long after you finish the poem, just as this couple is haunted by the memory of their dead child.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

While you may not be exactly the same as the two people featured in this poem, we're betting that, at one point in your life, you've had trouble communicating with someone else. Throw in love, death, and a staircase, and you've got "Home Burial."

Much of this poem is a dialogue in which Amy and her husband duke it out over their dead child. Amy's grieving, and she's upset that her husband doesn't seem to be grieving enough. Ol' hubby, meanwhile, wants Amy to talk it out. But she'd rather cry, thank you very much.

While we eavesdrop on this conversation, some of it might start to sound eerily familiar. How many times has someone tried to get you to talk about something you Just. Don't. Want. To Talk. About? And how many times has someone seemed careless about something that you hold near and dear to your heart? And how many times have you shouted something along the lines of "You make me angry" (71) to a loved one? Go on, be honest. We won't judge.

We've all be there, and now we're back, as flies on the wall of this couple's stairwell. As we listen in, we get a glimpse into domestic life that's all too typical, but no less powerful. In fact, maybe that's why this poem is so powerful—we've seen this play out before. And we'll see it play out again and again.

"Home Burial" starts with a husband watching his wife as she walks down the stairs. She pauses to look over her shoulder at something, but won't tell him what. He figures out that she's looking at their child's grave, in the family graveyard, which she can see through the window.

But as the husband climbs the stairs to talk to his wife, she does just about everything she can to avoid talking to her husband about their dead child. She feels trapped, and is trying to leave the house altogether. The husband tries to convince her to just talk to him, but they have major communication issues. He doesn't know how to have a conversation without angering her.

The wife, on the other hand, is so distraught by the loss of her child that she's inconsolable. She can't understand how her husband can carry himself normally when she's been so floored by the loss. The dialogue between the two begins to develop and soon covers their differing perspectives about relationships, life, and death. Still, the conflict is far from finished by the end of the poem.

The poem ends with a cliffhanger. The wife has opened the door to leave, with her husband threatening to go after her and bring her back if she goes. We're left to guess whether or not she manages to get out, and what happens to the couple.

Lines 1-3

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.

These lines set up the basic scene of the poem, and for a poem called "Home Burial," it all seems nice enough to start.

First, there's a man at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at a woman who's starting to head down those stairs. Simple.

But she's not looking at the man—she's looking over her shoulder at something that scares her, and doesn't even know that the man's there.

The way the third line reads, we know it's not a horror poem, even though the woman is afraid and this poem has an eerie title. She's looking at a "fear," which makes it seem as though the horror here is in her head, and not some external scary monster.

Let's talk form for a second (or, if you want to talk form for a while longer, you can head over to our "Form and Meter" section). The first two lines have ten syllables each, which is often a good sign that we're probably working with iambic pentameter. Let's see if Frost keeps up this meter for the rest of the poem.

Also, lines 1 and 2 are examples of enjambment, because the thought from line 1 carries over onto line 2 without a pause. So if you were reading this poem aloud, you wouldn't stop to pause at the end of line 1, but instead move smoothly to line 2.

Though these lines may seem at first like an ordinary household scene, there's something underneath the surface. As this woman is walking down the stairs, something behind her is haunting her.

Plus, we have the strange dynamic of this man watching her without her knowledge. Will her behavior change when she realizes he's there?

Lines 4-7

She took a doubtful step and then undid it
To raise herself and look again. He spoke

Advancing toward her: "What is it you see
From up there always—for I want to know."

Whatever this woman is seeing over her shoulder, it's really tripping her up. In lines 4 and 5, she takes one step down the stairs, but it's a doubtful one, so she's not even sure that she should have taken it. Note the personification here, too. Normally, people are doubtful, not the steps they take.

Sure enough, as soon as she steps down, she undoes it, moving back up the stairs so she can look over her shoulder yet again. There's something she can see as she walks down these stairs that eats at her so much that she can't even walk down them normally.

The man who's watching her has noticed this disturbance, and asks her about it. As he's speaking, he walks up the stairs toward her. We guess she's been looking over her shoulder at this spot for a while, because he asks her what she "always" sees.

And he seems a little pushy when he says, "for I want to know." It seems as if the man views "for I want to know" as reason enough for her to answer him. It sure doesn't sound like he's taking her feelings into consideration here.

This is our first clue that the communication in this relationship isn't the best. Not only does the man have to directly ask the woman what's bothering her because she won't confide in him on her own, but his way of asking is a bit egotistical.

At this point, we're not sure what the relationship between these two people is, but the word "always" hints that they know each other pretty well, and probably live together. And we get the feeling that domestic bliss doesn't really describe this scenario.

One more thing: Now that we've got seven lines under our belts, and we know that these lines are written in iambic pentameter, we should be looking for a rhyme scheme, too. Did you spot one?

No? That's because this poem is written in unrhymed iambic pentameter, a.k.a. blank verse, which just so happens to be a Frost favorite.

Lines 8-9

She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,
And her face changed from terrified to dull.

Two things happen when this guy finally interrupts this woman's strange stupor:

(1) She turns and sinks upon her skirts. We don't know about you, but Shmoop is visualizing her sitting down on the step, with her fancy 1914-style skirts billowing around her.

(2) The terrified expression she wore when she was looking at "some fear" changes to a dull one.

What do we make of these changes?

For one thing, it seems like this woman doesn't feel too comfy around this man. Maybe she's trying to hide her fear, or maybe the fact that she doesn't feel kindly toward this guy simply overpowers her fear.

We're guessing that, either way, she's not much of a fan of his pushy way of asking questions. Let's keep reading to see if we guessed correctly.

Lines 10-12

He said to gain time: "What is it you see,"
Mounting until she cowered under him.
"I will find out now—you must tell me, dear."

In Line 10, "to gain time" while he walks up the stairs, or maybe to fill up the silence, the man in this poem repeats his question, and asks the woman again what she's looking at. This lets us know that not only is this man pushy with his questions, but he's totally incapable of allowing awkward silences, even if it means he has to repeat himself.

Line 11 is a little scary. He walks up the stairs towards her, which makes her cower, or shrink back in fear. Even though she started at the top of the stairs, now she's shrinking underneath him. We get the sense that he's standing, while she's sitting, which makes for an interesting image. Could this say something about the power dynamics of their relationship?

After he has walked up to and intimidated her, he doesn't ask, but rather states, that he'll find out what she's been looking at. Basically, he's like, hon' you gotta tell me, because I'm gonna find out anyway.

In other words, he's acting even pushier than before. And even though he tacked a "dear" on the end of the statement to make his words sound affectionate, it doesn't seem all that sincere.

Lines 13-16

She, in her place, refused him any help
With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,
Blind creature; and awhile he didn't see.

These lines show the woman's reaction to the man's pushiness. "In her place," or, in both her position on the stairs and in her turn, she slightly tenses her muscles and doesn't speak in order to show that she won't give in to his demand.

She won't help him. If he's going to figure out what she's looking at, he's going to have to do it himself. She lets him look where she had been gazing, confident that he wouldn't be able to see what she saw.

In line 16, the man is called a "blind creature." The narrator of the poem is telling us what the woman thinks about this man, using free indirect discourse. The word "blind" refers to the man's perception, not his eyesight. Sure, physically, he's perfectly capable of seeing what the woman is afraid of. But she doesn't think much of his mental or emotional abilities.

Line 16 ends by telling us that, for at least a little while, the woman was right. For a few moments, he doesn't get it. He's clearly slow on the uptake...of a lot of things.

Lines 17-20

But at last he murmured, "Oh," and again, "Oh."

"What is it—what?" she said.

"Just that I see."

"You don't," she challenged. "Tell me what it is."

Okay, so the woman wasn't totally right. Now the guy's gone and figured it all out. The speaker of the poem is letting us follow the exact flow of this conversation, showing us how, at first, the man simply murmurs "Oh" twice. That's the moment of discovery.

The woman asks him what he thinks she sees. She seems unable to believe that he would actually be able to guess what's bothering her. She wants to make sure that he's actually on target before she gives him the satisfaction of knowing her fear.

He answers her with a kind of snarky tone, telling her only that he sees, and not what he sees.

Is he holding on to a position of power here? Or is he doubting himself?

She still won't believe the man, and challenges him. She wants to know exactly what he thinks she sees. She really doesn't trust this guy to understand her emotions.

Or maybe she just doesn't want to share her feelings, and she's hoping he'll still be wrong. In any case, this structure leaves the readers in suspense. The woman, of course, knows what she fears, and the man finally does too. Now we're the odd ones out here.

Finally, let's take a second to talk about form again. We mentioned earlier that this poem is written in blank verse. But now the lines are starting to look a bit wonky. What's with all the indentations?

That's actually Frost trying to preserve the iambic pentameter of the lines. So, for example, line 18 isn't quite long enough, so line 19, with its indentation, swoops in for the rescue.

Lines 21-23

"The wonder is I didn't see at once.
I never noticed it from here before.
I must be wanted to it—that's the reason.

In line 21, the man says something that the woman would probably scoff at, which only makes the guy seem more ignorant: He's amazed he didn't see what she had been looking at immediately.

He says, instead, that he's never before noticed "it" (we poor readers are still in the dark about what "it" is) from that particular spot on the stairs.

Why didn't he see it? Because he's "wonted to it." Wonted, in this case, means accustomed to, or used to. Basically, he's saying that he hadn't noticed what was bothering this woman so much because he's used to it—whatever it is.

This realization opens up a couple of possibilities:

For one thing, it tells us that this guy has lived here in this house for a while. He's used to the things he sees. So used to them, in fact, that he hardly notices them anymore.

And it tells us that maybe this woman is new to the house. She notices things he doesn't because she's not used to them.

Lines 24-26

The little graveyard where my people are!
So small the window frames the whole of it.
Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?

Finally. The moment we've all been waiting for. We get the lowdown on what this "fear" is, over twenty lines later. Or we get the beginning of the lowdown, at least.

At a certain point on the stairs, the man tells us, we can look through the window and see the graveyard where his people, or his family and ancestors, are buried. The graveyard is so small that it's possible to see the whole plot through that one window.

The man casually comments that the graveyard isn't even much bigger than a bedroom. Now, we don't like to think of graveyards in bedroom terms, but that's how he sees it. We're guessing that he's so used to this house, and to the graveyard outside the window, that seeing this graveyard is just like seeing a normal garden.

For the woman, though, it packs quite the punch.

Lines 27-31

There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight
On the sidehill. We haven't to mind those.
But I understand: it is not the stones,
But the child's mound—"

Slowly but surely, the "fear" is being revealed to us. The man is describing the graveyard, where three of the stones are made out of slate and one out of marble, which are both common materials to use for gravestones. With only four gravestones, this is, as we've been told, a pretty small graveyard.

It's a little creepy the way he talks about these gravestones in lines 28 and 29, don't you think?

He's almost affectionate towards them. He personifies them, saying that they have broad shoulders. Picture the gravestones as wide at the top, then narrowing on the way down, just like a man's torso would.

The way he says they're in the sunlight on the sidehill (note the alliteration of the letter "s" in these lines) makes the graveyard seem quaint, even pretty.

But just when we think we've figured out that it's the graveyard that's scaring the woman, the man tells us not to "mind," or worry about, the gravestones he has just described.

This seems a little dismissive of the people in his family who are buried there, and of the general creepiness of having a graveyard in the backyard (although that was fairly common in ye olden times).

But in any case, the man tells the woman that he "understands," and moves on to say that it can't be the stones that are bugging her so much. So what is? He sure is taking awhile to get to the point.

We get the answer (at last) in line 31. It's a child's grave that is really bothering the woman. With the words "child's mound," we can start to construct the characters and the scene of this poem a lot more than we've been able to so far.

First, the word "mound" lets us know that this isn't a full-blown grave. There's not even a stone on it, as far as we know. This probably means that this isn't a grown child, but probably a baby, possibly a stillborn baby.

We can also guess, because the grave still is a "mound," that the dirt has been recently shoveled on top of it. The ground has not yet sunk back to level. It's a fresh gravesite. With the information that the woman is upset about the child's mound, we can guess that these two characters are husband and wife.

The husband said earlier that he's used to seeing the graveyard, which implies that the wife is not used to seeing it. That means they're probably in a new marriage, and that the wife has just moved into her husband's home recently.

Line 32

"Don't, don't, don't, don't," she cried.

Well, now. Things sure are getting interesting. And dramatic.

This is quite a violent reaction to her husband's mention of the child's grave. That tells us that this is a sore subject for her; she really really doesn't want to talk about it.

Her tone changes from defiant to pleading. This can't be headed anywhere good.

Lines 33-34

She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm

That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;

Here's the physical reaction that goes with her desperate verbal plea. In these lines, we see the man's arm on the banister, or railing for the stairs, above her. She draws back from him, away from underneath his arm.

The use of the word "shrinking" in this line fits with the word "withdrew," in that she's both shrinking away from him and is shrinking in size, showing that he's overpowering her. For most of this poem, the woman has been shrinking and withdrawing, not just here in line 33. In line 8, we see her sinking into her skirts, and in line 11, she's cowering in fear.

After she shrinks from the man's arm on the banister, she slides down the stairs. We wish we could say this means that she slid down the railing like a little kid, but we think it just means she slips under her husband's arm, and scuttles down those steps as fast as she can to get away from her hubby.

The tables sure have turned, haven't they? We begin the poem with the woman at the top of the stairs, when she still has knowledge that the man doesn't have about what she sees out the window. This gives her power in the relationship, which matches with her position above him on the stairs.

Then, in line 11, the man walks up the stairway, and the power begins to shift as the woman starts to shrink from him.

Now that the man has found out what the woman was looking at, he has taken away all her power by taking his place at the top of the stairs.

Lines 35-37

And turned on him with such a daunting look,
He said twice over before he knew himself:
"Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?"

The woman rounds on her husband, and makes him quake in his boots.

Then, she gives him a look to make him quiver. The word "daunting" means intimidating, or frightening. So now, after she's done all of the cowering, she's scaring him with just a look.

Whoa.

His reaction to this look is to repeat himself, which he's already done several times in this poem. Here, though, it's almost as if he's stuttering or something. He repeats line 37 "before he knew himself," or unintentionally, because the look his wife just gave him made him just that nervous. The line he says not once, but twice, may have a question mark at the end, but it's really more of a statement than a question. And you know what that means, it's a rhetorical question.

The way he phrases the statement expresses his frustration; it seems like they've had this fight before.

He says this child is "his own," reminding his wife that it's his loss, too. And that word, "lost" stands out. He says he's "lost" the kid, not that the kid's dead. By doing so, he sidesteps around the brutal facts of the issue, and makes the loss seem more personal to him somehow. We'll see what his wife thinks about the way he has dealt with this loss as the poem continues.

Also note how he does not say, "Can't I," but generalizes the statement by saying, "Can't a man." Keep that in mind as you read the rest of their exchange.

Lines 38-40

Not you! Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air.
I don't know rightly whether any man can."

The wife's answer to her husband's question is a big, fat N.O. In response to his general "Can't a man" speech, she says something along the lines of, "even if other men can talk about the loss of a child, you, hubby, most definitely can't."

And then she changes the subject. Classic fight move. In fact, she actually seems to be talking to herself here on some level. That's definitely the behavior of a flustered, upset person. She's so frazzled by this confrontation that she just has to get out of the house. But, being a lady, she needs her hat, of course.

And the fact that she needs some air tells us she's feeling trapped in this house.

Once she's expressed her need to get out of the house, she returns to the issue at hand.

She's already told the man that he can't talk about the loss of his child, in line 40, she questions whether any man can talk about such a thing. Perhaps she feels that in this situation, the loss for the woman involved is much greater than the loss for the man. Or she feels that people just shouldn't talk about loss at all, and stick to their own private grief.

At this point, it's pretty clear that these two aren't going to successfully chat out their problems today. This woman seems desperate to flee her husband's company. And as we'll see in the next few lines, he's desperate to keep her around.

Lines 41-44

"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.
"There's something I should like to ask you, dear."

A-ha. A name. In these lines, the husband pleads with his wife, Amy, not to go to someone else, presumably to talk about her grief. He wants her to stick around and listen to him instead. Yep, that's right—he wants her to listen to him. He's not promising to listen to her, though.

He also refuses to compromise with her, saying that he won't come after her down the stairs. Instead, he sits on the stairs, and, in the image we picture, he puts his arms on his knees, moves his hands into fists, and uses them to support his chin.

Imagine what the husband looks like now. He's making himself comfortable, settling into a position as if he expects to have a long conversation. He's still in the seat of power at the top of the stairs. But he's made himself smaller by sitting in what looks like a form of compromise, yet is also a way to show that he's serious when he says that he's not going to come down the stairs to her. He's sitting down, staying put. And that's just what he wants her to do.

After he has put himself into a smaller, but more stubborn, position, he proceeds to try and appeal to her, calling her "dear" and then giving her a heads up that he wants to ask a question.

Lines 45-47

"You don't know how to ask it."

"Help me, then."

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

The woman shoots her husband down, saying that even if he would like to ask her a question, he wouldn't even know how to phrase it. As we already know, she doesn't think too highly of his communication skills.

But the husband isn't not trying. He asks his wife to help him ask his question, admitting that he's having trouble reaching her, and needs her help to do so.

Alas, that effort fails miserably.

The wife just ain't havin' it. Instead of responding to her husband, she just unlocks the door. Get the picture, hubby?

Sure, she may not storm out of the room angrily, but she definitely dismisses him in no uncertain terms.

Lines 48-51

"My words are nearly always an offense.

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.

Again, we see that this man is seriously frustrated. He complains that almost everything he says offends his wife, making it so that he doesn't know how to talk to her.

This seems to pin the problem with the woman; it's her fault that she's offended by what he says, that she's so hard to please.

Even though he's complaining about how hard it is to please the woman, he seems to suggest that he could be taught how to speak to her in a way that won't offend her.

Yet, as soon as he suggests this, he takes it back, saying that he can't see how he could be taught. He tries to have an open mind, saying that he would be receptive to being taught, but really, he doesn't think it's feasible.

You've probably figured this out by now, but this marriage is seriously complicated.

Lines 52-58

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.
Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.
Two that don't love can't live together without them.
But two that do can't live together with them."

Now we're really getting into it. Ol' hubby's gathering steam.

The man continues his complaints, saying that he has trouble communicating with not only her, but with all women. Apparently, he has to sacrifice a little manliness if he wants to get through to the ladies.

But he's not without solutions.

He's so frustrated that he's offending her all the time that he suggests he'll even promise to (metaphorically speaking) "keep hands off," or not talk about, subjects that she's "a-mind to name," which are basically the ones she doesn't want him to talk about.

Again, though, as soon as he's suggested this compromise, he takes it back. He says that he doesn't like arrangements like that "'twixt," or between, people who love each other. Interesting that he would use the word "love," because we haven't seen too much of it in this poem.

See, he doesn't like agreeing to not talk about sore subjects because this is a method that people who don't love each other rely on. But people who do love each other shouldn't.

By having agreements in place not to talk about certain subjects, this couple would put themselves into the man's definition of two people who don't love each other.

Even though it was his idea for them to establish such a system in the first place, he seems uncomfortable about actually using it. You might see this as his attempting to seem like he'd be willing to compromise even though he's really not.

As you read, think about which category you'd put this couple into.

Do you think they're in love?

Lines 59-64

She moved the latch a little. "Don't—don't go.
Don't carry it to someone else this time.
Tell me about it if it's something human.
Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there
Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.

The woman is just not havin' it. Her response to his words is to fiddle with the latch on the door some more, proving him right—nothing he can say will please her.

As she's moving the latch, still showing that she wants to leave (but without actually leaving), he says, repeating the word "don't," that she shouldn't go. Is this a plea or a command?

Whatever it is, he also tells her not to carry it—her grief—to someone else. He wants her to tell him about it "if it's something human." This is a whammy of a phrase, which really shows his frustration.

Think back to lines 52-53, when he said that men have to give up being wholly men to get along with women. Add line 61 to that, and it makes it seem as though he thinks women—or at least this woman—are practically from another species. It's not technically possible for her to have a thought that's not human, since she certainly is a human.

But he seems to think that if she doesn't feel comfortable telling it to him, then it must not even be human. Or at least it's not something he can relate to as a man.

He wants to be let into her grief, as if it's an exclusive club, which, judging by her reactions, it seems like it kind of is. She's hardly responded to him at all for most of the poem.

He claims that he's like other people, and we might assume he's referring to people with whom she feels comfortable talking about her grief. It seems like this guy's feeling really excluded.

He asks her to give him his chance, which makes us wonder if she hasn't tried to talk to him about her grief before at all. Maybe, from the start, she preferred to go to other people to talk it out.

Lines 65-69

I do think, though, you overdo it a little.
What was it brought you up to think it the thing
To take your mother-loss of a first child
So inconsolably—in the face of love.
You'd think his memory might be satisfied— —"

After he has pleaded with her to give him a chance, he doesn't stop talking and allow her to try to talk to him. Instead, he keeps plowing forward, and says that he thinks she overdoes it, referring to her grief.

But he's no fool, and he knows that's not going to go over well. So he treads carefully, hedging his statement with words like "though" and "a little."

Then, the caution in his words is thrown to the wind. The tone of line 66 is downright condescending. He makes it seem like she's putting on a show of grieving, just because that's how she was brought up.

Calling the loss a "mother-loss" makes it seem as if it's a generalized thing that happens to every mother. But it also separates that loss from whatever feelings he's experiencing about the tragedy. This isn't a father-loss, in other words.

And here comes his real beef with the whole situation. He doesn't understand why his wife is so inconsolable "in the face of love." In other words, her grief shouldn't be so extreme when the woman has a man who loves her. Love and grief, going by this phrase, should not and cannot co-exist for this character.

To top it off, he says that the memory of the child, whom we now know was their first child, and male, should be satisfied. The idea here is that the child's memory is only worth a finite amount of pain. And she's reached the quota.

Think back to how this whole conversation started—with him seeing her pausing to look out the window. According to him, she shouldn't even be bothered by the sight of her first child's grave, because she has grieved enough already.

Yeah, it's not exactly the most understanding and supportive stance a husband can take. And it probably isn't winning him any points with wifey.

Line 70

"There you go sneering now!"

The woman cuts off her husband, saying that he's sneering. She says, "there you go" and "now," hinting that this is typical behavior for the guy.

This is one of the few times we get a loud verbal reaction from her in the poem, rather than a gesture.

What's she so irked about? About his "enough already" comments from the previous stanza.

She's hurt because he thinks she reached the grief quota for her dead kid. She begs to differ.

Lines 71-74

"I'm not, I'm not!
You make me angry. I'll come down to you.
God, what a woman! And it's come to this,
A man can't speak of his own child that's dead."

The fight is reaching a fever pitch.

The wife has accused her husband of sneering at her, but he flatly denies it, and blames her for his reaction. It's all because she makes him angry.

He's ready to bring the fight to her, and says he's coming down the stairs to where she's standing near the door.

He's so angry that he declares, using God's name, "what a woman!" He seems to be talking to no one in particular—he's just venting his frustrations.

He then delivers the ultimate line, that "it's come to this," and then repeats himself from line 37, complaining that he can't talk about his own dead kid.

But wait a second. Look back at line 37. There, he phrased this statement a bit more gently, masking it behind a question, and speaking about the child as "lost," not dead.

But he's not walking on eggshells anymore. Instead of gingerly speaking around a sore subject, he drops it right smack dab in the middle of the conversation (although, again, at this point, he's practically talking to himself).

Lines 75-77

"You can't because you don't know how to speak.
If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;

Ah, the time has come for this lady to take a stand. No, she tells her husband, you can't speak about your dead child, because you don't know how to. Zing!

She ends the sentence at the word "speak," leaving the "you don't know how to speak" accusation open to interpretation. Maybe it's not just the dead child that he doesn't know how to speak about, but a whole slew of things.

But it's clear this guy does know how to talk about their dead child—just not in the way his wife likes.

Apparently, that's because she doesn't think her husband has any feelings. Yikes. That's quite the low blow.

Basically, she thinks it's impossible for him to have feelings, because he's the one who dug the child's grave with his "own hand." In a way, it almost sounds as if she thinks her husband has some sort of responsibility in her son's death. Well, he's certainly responsible for burying him at the very least. Maybe that was too final an act for her.

Then she refers to his "little" grave, which echoes the way her husband referred to the "little graveyard" in line 24, and the "broad-shouldered little slabs" of stone in the graveyard in line 28.

Yet the way that he used the word "little" was casual. He used it to paint the scene of the graveyard as quaint and comfortable, whereas her "little" shows her emotional connection to the child, and her heartbreak. No grave should be little, because it means a child is in it.

Before you join the speaker in her shock that her husband dug his own child's grave, remember that this poem was written a long time ago, and about a family that seems to be in a rural area. In the early 1900s, it was much more common for families to bury their own dead at home (the title of the poem is "Home Burial," after all).

For the man, who has lived in this house with a graveyard viewable from the window for a long time, digging the grave for this child may have just followed life as he knew it. But for the woman, his ability to dig his own child's grave was horrifying.

These are two very different peas in a very uncomfortable pod. If this goes any further, definitely going to recommend marriage counseling.

Lines 78-81

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.

Line 78 shows us yet another reason why the woman was frightened by what she could see through the window on the staircase. Not only does she see the grave of her child through the window every time she walks up and down that staircase, but she also watched her child's grave get dug through this very window. She's probably reminded of that traumatic day every time she walks downstairs.

But what really bothers her is the way her husband dug the grave. He was a bit too jolly about it, in her humble opinion.

All of the lightness and leaping (note the alliteration of the letter "l" in these lines) makes these movements sound unburdened, even joyful, as an average day's good work could be. When she says "like that, like that," we can even picture her gesturing, as if to show her husband what he really looked like as he was gravedigging.

Of course, the more light and joyful the motion, the more offensive it is to her grief. That her baby's grave is being dug at all is bad enough, but that it's being dug without a heavy hand, or even the occasional pause for reflection, is what makes the whole thing truly unbearable.

Lines 82-84

I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.

Ah, now we're really getting down to it, aren't we?

The woman is so hurt by the manner in which her husband dug their son's grave that she finds herself wondering if she even knows the guy anymore. This is not a revelation that you want to

have about anyone you thought you were close to, much less someone you're married to and living with.

These lines have got to be tough for the husband to hear. Don't forget that the man is hearing everything we're reading. Talk about drama.

She was in such disbelief at the sight that she had to look twice, just to be sure that her husband really was digging their child's grave in such a lighthearted way. And don't forget the opening scene. Her hesitant reversal on the stairs here is exactly what she did at the beginning of the poem. She's repeating herself.

Lines 85-87

Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice
Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,
But I went near to see with my own eyes.

Now we get even more of the scene. According to the wife, after her husband was done gravedigging, he came into the kitchen and was chatting it up with someone, or perhaps he's talking to himself.

So she decided to do a little spying.
Let's see what she found out.

Lines 88-92

You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave
And talk about your everyday concerns.
You had stood the spade up against the wall
Outside there in the entry, for I saw it."

What she sees when she walks down to the kitchen doesn't please her. Surprise, surprise. She spies her husband sitting, with, as she points out, dirt on his shoes from his child's grave.

He doesn't seem all that bummed about what he's just had to do. In fact, he's talking about everyday matters as if there's nothing to the fact that he just dug his own kid's grave. And he's left the spade up against the wall in the entry, as if it's just another household tool. The fact that he could do this—that he could be so blasé—is what really gets this woman's goat.

She's so affected by her grief, so unable to carry on with her everyday life, that it shocks and repulses her that her husband is able to dig a grave for his dead child and carry on with his. No wonder these two can't get along. They disagree about something that seems pretty important. We're willing to bet that he, too, was saddened by this loss, and merely didn't show his grief in the same way or to the same magnitude that she did. But we're also willing to bet that this woman doesn't see it that way.

Also remember that he's probably grown up with a graveyard on his property. Death is a presence in his everyday life, and always has been, so while it may affect him, it might not affect him as much.

Lines 93-94

"I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.
I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed."

After listening to his wife speak for eighteen lines, the man has to get his two in. He chooses the route of cynical humor, saying that he will laugh the "worst" laugh he's ever laughed. He thinks the things she has said are laughable.

"Worst" is not an adjective that we'd normally pair with laughing. Here, it shows that this chuckle is a nervous and cynical reaction, not a comic one. We're guessing he finds this in no way hilarious. We certainly don't.

That suspicion is confirmed when he tells his wife he thinks he's cursed. And there's God again, entering his speech when he's frustrated and in disbelief. He seems to be thinking something along the lines of, "welp, no matter how hard I try, I can't get through to her."

Lines 95-100

"I can repeat the very words you were saying.
'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'
Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
What had how long it takes a birch to rot
To do with what was in the darkened parlor.

No matter what the man says, his wife is not done having her say. She plows right on through to the rest of her argument.

She's so traumatized by the whole deal that she can remember every detail, including exactly what he said in the kitchen, which was some mundane comment about fences. Fences! She's so appalled by the timing of this talk that she says, "Think of it," and calls it "talk like that."

There's even an exclamation point to show just how much she means it. Her tone is even more impressive because for the first part of the poem, she communicated mostly through gestures.

And she does make a fair point. His talk about fences and rotting birches has nothing to do with their dead child. She refers to their son's body using a euphemism, calling his corpse "what was in the darkened parlor," rather than talking about it directly.

There is one thing that connects rotting birch trees to the dead child in the parlor, but it's a little grizzly: the birch fence, like the child, is an example of a living thing that is no longer living, and now subject to decay. Yep, we went there.

But to be fair, maybe talking about everyday things was just his way of coping with the pain. Maybe he was trying to distract himself from the tragedy. What do you think—should his wife cut him some slack?

Lines 101-105

You couldn't care! The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all.
No, from the time when one is sick to death,
One is alone, and he dies more alone.

In line 101, the woman comes to a conclusion that we readers may or may not agree with—that her husband couldn't possibly care about their dead kid.

This seems like a pretty wild accusation to make, but after we've heard him tell his wife that the memory of her dead child should be satisfied by now, we can see where she's coming from.

But then she expands her criticism to just about everyone—not just her husband.

She says some pretty depressing things in the next few lines, so you may want to have some chocolate (or friends) at hand to cheer you up.

In saying that the nearest that one's friends can go to another's death is not even worth the try, she's basically declaring that friends can't go anywhere close to death. In fact, she says, from the time a person becomes terminally ill, they are alone, and die even more alone. Don't say we didn't warn you about the big bummer these lines pack.

She means "alone" in the sense of friendless, without anyone who really understands. It is very possible to be alone in this way even if you are in a room full of people. We get the sense from this poem that these two people are very alone, even though they're living together and are right there in the same room.

There are a couple of ways to take these lines. One is that the woman is upset because she feels sick to death with grief, and her husband (who is likely even more than a friend) can't follow her.

Another is that she's feeling particularly bummed because she couldn't go with her child to death—she tried to follow, but came up short.

Either way, it's not exactly warm and fuzzy. This woman has a long way to slog through the five stages of grief.

Lines 106-111

Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand.
But the world's evil. I won't have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!"

Even after delivering the whammy of a line "One is alone, and one dies more alone," the woman continues to push her point about friends not being able to go near to death with a dying person, no matter how dear to them that person is.

The woman says that friends may pretend, to follow a dying person to the grave, but they never really can. Soon enough, they slink back to the real world of the living.

According to her perspective, before a person dies, his or her friends have already, at least in their minds, turned on their heels, back to the world of life. Friends can understand the world of the living, unlike the mysterious world of the dead.

So what does this all mean? That the world's evil, apparently. Well, that's one way of looking at it, lady.

On the same line that she claims the world is evil, she states that she "won't have grief so." This thought is continued in the next line, which is an example of enjambment (when a thought is split between two lines). The woman then qualifies her statement by saying that if she can change it she won't have grief so. In other words, if she could change grief to be a little different, a little less evil, she just might.

She feels so strongly, and is so overtaken by her despair, that she loses some control, resorting to saying "Oh," and repeating the words "I won't" to get her point across. This reminds us of when she said "don't" four times in a row in line 32. Once again, these are not the words of a happy person.

Note the repetition of the long, lonely "o" sounds in this line. That assonance makes the line seem even more lonely and sad.

While she's talking generally here, these lines totally shed some light on what has made her so mad at her husband. Basically, he's doing what these friends are doing—pretending to follow the dead person to the grave, but really turning back to the world of the living and falling short of that promise. Maybe that's what bothered her so much about the fact that he could talk about fences when he should be mourning the death of his son.

Lines 112-115

"There, you have said it all and you feel better.
You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door.
The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up.
Amy! There's someone coming down the road!"

Now that the woman has exploded in this long rant, we can get this fight over with, right? Well, her husband certainly thinks so.

Without replying to anything specific that she's said, he just assumes that, because she has said everything, she must feel better now. He assumes that she won't leave, because she's crying, and so he tells her to close the door. He reads into her emotions, telling her that her heart's no longer in storming out.

Obviously, though, he's saying what he wishes she were feeling, and not what she's actually feeling, even though he doesn't seem to be aware of this. She's not collapsing into his arms in relief, but still standing with the door open.

We can see that she's hardly listening to him, as he still needs to say her name urgently, which we know thanks to the exclamation mark. He points out that there's someone coming down the road as if it's a big surprise to him. Maybe he's relieved that someone's coming to interrupt their fight, or maybe he's afraid of another person seeing them in such a state. Either way, we know this scene has to come to a close somehow.

Lines 116-117

"You—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—
Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you—"

After she hears the urgency in her husband's voice, the woman at least gives him a verbal response.

This response attempts to show him how he's wrong. She hardly knows what to say to him, perhaps because his words are so far from right about what she's feeling. So, with a little stumbling that shows her frustration in the form of the words "You," and "oh," and her short, choppy statements, she accuses him of thinking that "the talk is all."

What is wrong about his words, she is saying, is that he's assuming that just by talking about her dead child, she'll feel better about it. Her reaction is telling him, clearly, that he is dead wrong. Just talking about it won't make it instantly better. She's hurt and grieving deeply, so deeply that this loss has warped her thoughts about life, death, and friendship in general. For her, right now, no amount of talking about it will make her pain go away, no matter whom she's talking to.

She frantically claims that she must go somewhere out of the house. This gives us the sense that she feels trapped inside this place, alone with this man, whom she no longer feels that she knows.

She starts to say "How can I make you," but he cuts her off.

Think about how you would fill in the rest of this sentence. It could read, "How could I make you understand," or "How could I make you let me go," or a number of things. But no matter how it would have been finished, its chopped off, urgent nature shows us how frustrated she is, and how hopeless she feels.

These last few lines are the dramatic climax of this poem. The long monologues are over and we're into short, frantic dialogue. Someone is coming down the road, which makes for tension—will he convince her to stay, or will she make like a banana and split?

Lines 118-120

"If—you—do!" She was opening the door wider.
"Where do you mean to go? First tell me that."

I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will!—"

In response to her frustration and her wish to leave the house, the man threatens her with an unknown "if," implying that something bad will happen if she leaves. The dashes in the middle of his words show that he's annunciating each word very clearly and slowly. He is furious—if we were the woman, we would totally be scared.

She is brave, though, and in response to his threat, she opens the door even wider. She's really threatening to peace out, now.

At this, he cools it on the anger a little, and asks her where she is going, which, we'd agree, is something that you should probably tell your husband before you storm out of the house, just to save him from worrying.

But before you go thinking he's just worried about her safety, the real reason comes out in the next line. No matter where she's headed, he intends to follow her and haul her back to the house.

He ends the poem with this threat, and, in the fashion of the rest of the poem, a line that shows how true the narrator is sticking to real life dialogue.

He yells, "I will," which is followed by a dash. We can imagine the woman running out the door at this point, escaping him as he's yelling after her. Or we can imagine any number of endings, since we don't actually see what goes down.

We don't know what happens to this couple, but are left hanging in suspense and fear at the end of this poem. We have a feeling that whatever happens next is not going to be good.