Home Burial

POEM TEXT

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

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

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

She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm
That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;
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?'

'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.'

'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.'

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

'Help me, then.'

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

'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.
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.'
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.
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—'

'There you go sneering now!'

'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.'

'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;
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.
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.
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.
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.'

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

'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?
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.
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!'

'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!'

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

'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!*—'

SUMMARY

The man saw his wife at the top of the stairs, from where he was standing down at the foot, before she could see him. She was beginning to descend, but looked back over her shoulder at something that upset her. She took a step down, hesitantly, but then stepped right back up to look again at what she'd been looking at before. Her husband said, while walking up the stairs toward her, "What are you always looking at from the window up there? I want to know." His wife turned toward him and sat down on the steps, her skirt ballooning around her, and her expression shifted from fear to blankness. Her husband repeated himself, stalling for time—"What do you see up there?"—and kept climbing the stairs until he loomed over his wife and she trembled beneath him. "I'm going to take a look myself now," he said, "so you have to tell me what you see, my dear." But she, in return, refused to give him any clues, responding only with icy body language and silence. She let him look at what she'd been looking at, certain he would not see what she saw, the pitiful blind thing; and for a while, he did not. But finally he whispered, "Oh," and then again, "Oh."

"What? What?" she asked.

"Well, I get it now."

"No, you don't," she retorted. "Tell me what's out there."

"Honestly, it's surprising I didn't understand what you were looking at from the start," he replied. "I never realized until now that you could see it from this spot, here at the top of the stairs. I just must be used to it—that's why. Because there it is, the little graveyard, where all my family is buried! It's so small that this tiny window shows the whole thing. Not much bigger than a bedroom, huh? There are three headstones made of slate, and one made of marble, wide little blocks of stone shining in the sun, over there on the hillside. We don't need to pay attention to *those* graves. I understand now: it's not the headstones you're looking at, but our child's grave—"

"Stop, stop, stop, stop," she shouted.

She pulled away, out from under his arm that was propped over her on the stair rail, rushed down the staircase, and turned to look back at her husband with such an intimidating expression that he said—twice in a row, before he even realized the words

had left his mouth—"Can't a man talk about his own dead child?"

"*You* can't! Oh, where did I put my hat? Oh, never mind, I don't need it! I have to get out of this house. I need fresh air. Honestly, I don't know if *any* man can speak about that kind of loss."

"Amy! Don't seek help or reassurance from somebody else again, instead of me. Hear me out. I refuse to chase after you." He sat down on the stairs and propped his chin resolutely on his hands. "I want to ask you something, dear."

"You have no idea what the right way is to ask it."

"So help me," he said.

Her only response was to reach for the latch on the door.

"Look, almost everything I say upsets you. I don't know how to talk about our loss in a way that satisfies you. Maybe I could be taught, though honestly I don't understand how. Men have to lose some masculinity in order to be around women. Or we could strike some deal, in which I'd promise not to bring up anything you'd like me to avoid. But I don't like that kind of arrangement, between two people in love. Couples that don't love each other probably can't tolerate one another without those sorts of deals, but a couple that *is* in love shouldn't need one, in my opinion." She fumbled with the latch on the door. "Don't—don't leave. Don't take your grief to somebody else this time. Talk to me about it, help me to relate, if that's possible. Let me share your sorrow. I'm not as different from other people as you make me seem, standing over there warily. Give me a shot. That said, it does seem to me you're making more fuss than necessary. What in your childhood made you believe this was the right way to grieve, to be so heartbroken over the loss of your first child as to be unreachable, especially when you have a loving husband right here? You would think, by now, that our son had been properly mourned—"

"Ah, there you go, now you're belittling me!"

"I'm not, I'm not! You make so angry; I swear I'll come down there after you! God, what a difficult woman you are! Here's where we've ended up, in a situation where a man can't even talk about his own dead child."

"You can't talk about it because you don't how. You don't have any feelings, you who dug his grave by hand—how could you do it?—his poor little grave. And yet, I watched you from that exact window at the top of the stairs, heedlessly tossing dirt in the air, flinging it every which way, so carelessly that it spilled back into the grave. And I thought to myself, Who is that man? I don't really know him at all. I climbed up and down the stairs, I couldn't look away—and still your shovel kept on digging in that same careless way. And then you came into the house. I heard your loud voice in the kitchen, and I can't explain why I did it, but I crept closer so that I could see you myself. You were able to sit there, with mud-stained shoes from the dirt you'd just dug out of your own baby's grave, and talk about ordinary stuff, day-to-day things. And you just left the shovel lying there, like it was no big deal, propped up against the wall, right over there, in the front hall. I know because I saw it there."

"I don't know what else to do but laugh. I can't win! I'm cursed! My God, I can't ever win with you."

"I can literally recite the words you said that day: 'Three foggy mornings plus one rainy day will rot even the strongest birch fence.' Can you believe that? Chatting about rotting fences, on the day of your son's funeral? What on earth did rotting fences have to do with your son's coffin, laid out in the living room for the wake? You didn't care *at all!* You know, even people's best efforts to comfort the grieving are so insufficient, they might as well not try. Nope, from the moment someone gets sick until the moment they die, they are alone, and in death even more so. Friends pretend to comfort you, to keep close, but before death has even arrived, they're distracted and drawn back to daily life, and living people, and things they know best. But the world is a far darker place than they know. I won't grieve by half-measures, the way most people do, not if I can help it. I refuse!"

"All right, you've said everything you needed to say, you've gotten it all out of your system, and now you must feel better. You won't leave now, for goodness sake, you're crying. Close the door. You've lost your momentum: no need to keep being so dramatic. Amy! Who's that I see, walking down the road?"

"*You*—ugh, you think talking is all there is to it. I have to get out of here—out of this house. There's no way to make you understand—"

"I swear—if you leave—!" he shouted, even as she opened the door. "Where do you think you're going? You better tell me. I'll chase after you and drag you back if I have to. I swear, I will!—"

THEMES

THE COST OF MISCOMMUNICATION

Language and communication are central to “Home Burial,” which focuses on a couple’s failure to understand each other in the wake of their child’s death. This breakdown in communication—even more than their grief itself—threatens to destroy the couple's marriage, as neither person is able to recognize, let alone empathize with, the other’s pain and perspective. That the couple’s inability to listen to one another ultimately leads to an unresolved shouting match hammers home the poem’s message that communication is vital to the survival and success of any relationship.

Despite the poem’s extensive use of dialogue, the husband and wife never seem to truly hear each other over the course of the poem. The poem starts out with the husband apparently trying to understand his wife better—"There’s something I should like to ask you, dear”—but the fact that he ignores his wife’s

repeated requests to drop the subject indicates he is not *really* listening.

In return, his wife rejects her husband's plea to find a way to talk about their grief, characterizing what he has to say as "sneering" and accusing him of not "know[ing] how to speak." Crucially, she also implies that she does not believe *any* words or language can begin to capture the depth of her grief—a mindset that makes any attempt at communication impossible from the start.

In short, neither spouse is willing to give the other's perspective full attention or respect. Both are more eager to air their own grievances than hear the other's out.

This communication breakdown only heightens the conflict between the two, leading them both to leap to assumptions about the other's depth of grief. For example, even as he requests that *she* "give [him his] chance," the husband accuses his wife of "overdo[ing] it a little" with her "mother-loss," her maternal grief. For her part, the wife excoriates her husband for his behavior on the day of their son's burial, which she interprets as insufficiently mournful.

Unsurprisingly, these accusations only fan the flames of the couple's argument—making communication between the two of them even harder, and creating a cycle of anger and misunderstanding that seems impossible for them to escape. The hints throughout the poem that the wife is taking her grief elsewhere—"Don't go to someone else this time. / Listen to me," the husband pleads—only further emphasize that this is an argument the couple has had over and over, without any progress or breakthrough.

The cost of this miscommunication is devastatingly high. As the poem's conclusion illustrates, the couple's marriage is at a breaking point. The wife threatens to leave, and her husband threatens to drag her "back by force." Tragically and ironically, in the final lines, he shouts, "Where do you mean to go? First tell me that." He is still trying fruitlessly to talk (or shout) things out, even though his wife has made clear this approach will not work for her.

Their inability to even communicate about their different communication needs—he's seeking the right words, while she wishes words were not on the table at all—emphasizes how vital it is to a couple's success that the two partners be able to express themselves to one another. This couple cannot even begin tackle their shared grief over the loss of their child—the pain at the source of their marriage's rupture—without first learning to listen to and speak with each another.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-32
- Lines 36-120

DEATH AND GRIEF

"Home Burial," as the title suggests, is a poem concerned with death. The poem revolves around a husband and wife who are coping with the death of their first child very differently, and who wrestle with their seemingly irreconcilable approaches to grief. The poem does not favor one grieving process over the other, but it does capture how the couple's inability to recognize, respect, or empathize with their partner's individual response to the tragic loss of their child leads to pain and conflict.

Throughout the poem, the wife's approach to grief is depicted as deeply emotional and still quite raw. The poem opens with her standing at a window at the top of the stairs. "What is it you see / From up there always?" her husband asks, only to discover she has been keeping constant watch over their son's grave. She shuts down his attempts to discuss their shared loss, and seeks again and again to escape the conversation, ultimately condemning her husband for "think[ing] the talk is all." Her grief, she implies, goes beyond words, and is so profound that she cannot begin to understand those who "mak[e] the best of their way back to life" after a loved one's death. For the wife, the loss of a child is a blow so great that one can never recover from it.

The husband takes a much more active approach to grief. He literally buries their child with his own hands, and afterwards is able to "talk about [his] everyday concerns" with funeral goers—much to his wife's horror. Though he does initially try to understand his wife's mourning process ("Let me into your grief," he asks), his ability to move on from this great loss renders him unable to fully empathize with or accept his wife's slower approach. At one point, he even suggests she is taking "mother-loss of a first child" too hard.

Unsurprisingly, then, the couple's conversation escalates over the course of the poem into full-blown argument, as they each criticize and condemn the other's grieving process rather than seeking to understand or empathize with it. "You make me angry [...] God, what a woman!" the husband explodes, while his wife sneers that he hasn't "any feelings" and "*couldn't* care" about their son's death at all. In short, their different ways of mourning are seemingly incompatible.

Importantly, however, though the poem does not shy away from the couple's mismatched mourning styles, it presents *both* approaches to grief as equally valid. The breakdown in the couple's marriage, therefore, is not the result of one or the other pursuing the "wrong" approach to death and loss, but rather because of both partners' unwillingness to extend empathy or respect toward the other's grieving process.

Fittingly, the poem ends at an impasse, with the wife attempting to leave the house and her husband threatening to "bring [her] back by force." The poem offers no hope of resolving the pain and conflict between the two of them, lending these final lines an ominous undertone that suggests their marriage is as dead

as the child buried in the graveyard.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 6-7
- Line 12
- Lines 13-17
- Lines 21-31
- Line 32
- Lines 33-37
- Lines 38-40
- Lines 41-42
- Lines 53-55
- Lines 59-69
- Line 70
- Lines 71-74
- Lines 75-92
- Lines 93-94
- Lines 95-115
- Lines 116-117
- Lines 118-120

GENDER ROLES

Gender affects every aspect of the relationship between the two characters in "Home Burial," as well as their approaches to grief and loss. Written in the early 20th century, the poem invokes traditional, even stereotypical, gender roles, focusing on a dominant, stoic husband and an emotional wife. Crucially, the characters themselves believe in and consistently invoke these same stereotypes, further complicating their struggle to understand one another. Intentionally or not, the poem thus demonstrates some of the dangers of rigid gender stereotypes.

Gender shapes how the husband and wife approach the poem's central conflict: how to grieve a lost child. The husband relies on dominance and physical force, two stereotypically masculine attributes. For instance, at the poem's opening, he "mount[s]" the stairs "until [his wife] cower[s] under him" and commands her to tell him why she stares out the window. In contrast, his wife takes what might be called a stereotypically feminine approach. She resists and undermines her husband, weeps, and uses her emotions as weapons.

The characters justify their behavior by invoking deeply-rooted gender norms. "A man must partly give up being a man / With women-folk," the husband says in explanation of his difficulty accessing more vulnerable emotions. Similarly, his wife dismisses the notion that men can feel grief the way women do: "I don't know rightly whether any man can." Thus, these characters not only act on but deeply trust in stereotypes about men and women, setting them up for misunderstanding and miscommunication from the get-go.

No surprise, then, that gender norms have also greatly affected the couple's different approaches to grief. The husband, for instance, sees his wife's long-lasting response to the loss of their son as "overdo[ing] it a little," whereas she is appalled at his repressed response, suggesting he does not have "any feelings" at all and indeed "*couldn't* care" about their son's death as much as she does.

But try as both characters might to pin the blame of their troubled marriage on each other's gendered faults—"God, what a woman!" the husband exclaims; "Who is that man? I didn't know you," the wife laments—the poem on the whole suggests that it is their inability to communicate, not gender differences, that is the true source of their troubles. Both characters' perspectives receive an equal share of the poem's attention, and the text does not suggest that one approach to grief is better or worse than the other.

Rather, it is the couple's reliance on stereotype—their assumptions about each other—that keeps them in the dark about each other. In other words, gender need not be an obstacle between the two of them—except that this couple lets it be, using gender stereotypes as an excuse for their mistrust and misunderstanding of each other.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-14
- Lines 15-16
- Line 20
- Line 32
- Lines 33-37
- Line 40
- Lines 44-46
- Line 47
- Lines 48-58
- Lines 65-69
- Line 70
- Lines 72-74
- Lines 75-77
- Line 82
- Lines 88-92
- Line 94
- Lines 95-101
- Lines 106-111
- Lines 112-114
- Lines 116-117
- Lines 118-120

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-7

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.
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.'

The opening lines of "Home Burial" introduce the poem's dramatic style—and the sad story that style will serve.

Right away, the reader notices that this poem is written in blank verse, a steady rhythm of iambic pentameter (that is, five da-DUM feet per line) without a regular rhyme scheme. This pattern might feel familiar to readers of Shakespeare, who wrote long passages of his plays in blank verse. Already, readers might almost feel they're watching a play.

These lines also introduce a third-person speaker, who watches as two characters, a man and a woman, meet on their staircase—and who listens as the man speaks the poem's first line of dialogue. All together, these literary devices make it clear that this will be a narrative poem, a poem that tells a story.

Lines 1-7 also introduce us to the characters at the center of this story, described here as standing at opposite ends of a flight of stairs. The imagery in this opening section is rich with detail: the speaker reports that the husband spots his wife on the stairs before she notices him, because she is more preoccupied with "looking back over her shoulder at some fear." From the get-go, then, these characters are defined in opposition to one another, both standing and looking in opposite directions.

But if that symbolism (and the tension of the word "fear") weren't clear enough, these lines also create mood through dialogue. When the husband asks, "'What is it you see / From up there always,'" his words sound less like a question (note that there's no question mark!) and more like a demand, especially given his pushy "I want to know."

At the same time, this opening remains mysterious. Like the husband, readers don't know what the wife sees "from up there" at the top of the stairs. What they do notice, however, is the wife's inability to look away. In lines 4-5, she "start[s] down" the stairs "doubtful[ly]," only to return to her original spot and "look again," as though drawn back by an invisible force. What's more, the husband's dialogue states that she stands there "always." Clearly, whatever compels her to keep watch at this spot is deeply important to her—but also a mystery to her husband, who must "advance" menacingly up the stairs in order to find out.

LINES 8-14

She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,
And her face changed from terrified to dull.
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.'
She, in her place, refused him any help
With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.

In lines 8-17, the argument at the center of the poem kicks off in earnest. The wife is instantly characterized by her reluctance to speak. When her husband asks what she's looking at from the top of the stairs, she "turn[s] and [sinks] upon her skirts" in response. The speaker describes her face as changing "from terrified to dull," suggesting that she is already steeling herself for a confrontation, defensively blanking out her expression.

Her husband doesn't back down. Instead, he asks again what she is looking at, and "mount[s]" the stairs "until she cower[s] under him." This threatening posture is made all the more aggressive by the poem's use of assonance to link his actions to his words, using grating /ow/ sounds in "mounting," "cowered," "out" and "now."

His dialogue is domineering as well: the "dear" at the end of his speech does little to negate his tyrannical insistence that he "will find out now" and so his wife "must tell" him what she is looking at. No surprise, then, that in lines 13-14 she continues to stonewall him: "She, in her place, refused him any help / With the least stiffening of her neck and silence."

This exchange, or lack thereof, establishes one of the poem's biggest themes: miscommunication. From the very first stanza, this couple is utterly unable to communicate with each other. The wife refuses to answer her husband, he dismisses or fails to read her body language, and they both stubbornly persist in their own ways rather than try to make themselves better understood.

LINES 15-20

She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,
Blind creature; and awhile he didn't see.
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.'

Lines 15-20 capture the moment when the husband discovers what his wife has been looking at from the top of the stairs. But readers remain in the dark until the following stanza. Instead of making a big reveal, the poem stays with the sorrow of the couple's fraught relationship and their inability to communicate.

Though they're still told from the perspective of the third-person speaker, these lines give readers a glimpse of the wife's contempt for her husband. The wife may "let him look" but she remains "sure that he wouldn't see, / Blind creature." As this moment of free indirect speech reveals, she feels that the man she married is like a dumb beast, so unperceptive that he can't see what's right in front of him. And it does indeed take the husband a minute to recognize what his wife has been looking at. But when he finally cottons on in line 17, his wife meets him

only with more disdain.

The form of these lines helps to create dramatic tension. For instance, lines 18-20 read more like drama than poetry. The use of caesurae, including semi-colons, commas, quotation marks, dashes, and even a sudden line break and indentation in lines 18-19, creates a crackling sense of momentum, while remaining true to the way ordinary people speak. The dialogue itself also emphasizes the conflict between the two characters, from the husband's muted epiphany ("Oh [...] oh") and evasive response ("Just that I see") to the wife's turning of the tables ("What is it—what?") as she demands her husband tell *her* what *he* sees ("Tell me what it is"). In the absence of a big reveal, which might tell readers what "it" is, the only thing to see here is the couple's utter inability to talk to each other. Whatever's troubling the wife remains ominously hidden.

LINES 21-32

'The wonder is I didn't see at once.
I never noticed it from here before.
I must be wonted to it—that's the reason.
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?
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—'
'Don't, don't, don't, don't,' she cried.

In lines 21-32, readers finally learn what lies at the heart of the couple's conflict: the death of their child. The husband takes his time getting to this tragic revelation, instead delivering a meandering monologue peppered with alliteration, assonance, and consonance. It's as though he's doing his best to avoid the *real* subject at hand by describing what he sees from the window at the top of the stairs with poetic flair:

'The wonder is I didn't see at once.
I never noticed it from here before.
I must be wonted to it—that's the reason.
The little graveyard where my people are!
So small the window frames the whole of it.

The house the two live in is apparently his childhood home, since he's so "wonted" (or accustomed) to the view out the window that he's never even noticed it looks onto the family graveyard. Perhaps this sense of ownership and familiarity also has something to do with the way he behaves: he might feel he's the rightful head of this, his old family household.

But even after finally acknowledging that his wife, for whom this view is new and troubling, has been keeping vigilant watch over the graveyard, the husband for some reason goes on describing it in vivid detail. It's as though he is more concerned with hearing himself talk than with the pain this view of the graveyard inflicts on his wife:

Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?
There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight
On the sidehill.

But after this melodious digression, the husband finally gets to the point in lines 30-31: "'But I understand: it is not the stones, / But the child's mound—'"

This explicit mention of their child's grave (presumably recent, since it's a "mound" of earth rather than a stone slab) rouses his wife, who has been silent for 10 lines. She now bursts out: "'Don't, don't, don't, don't.'" In this, the poem's first instance of epizeuxis, the quick repetition of the wife's cry captures the force of her distress. So does the caesura of the dash at the end of line 31, which mirrors the wife's vehement interruption; and, last but certainly not least, the break from iambic pentameter:

'[...] But the child's mound—'
'Don't, don't, don't, don't,' she cried.

By deviating from the poem's regular meter here, these lines suggest that the couple is also deviating from their pattern of silence and avoidance on this tragic subject. The heavy weight of the additional stresses in "child's mound" and "Don't, don't, don't, don't" evokes the seriousness of this moment, the tragedy at the heart of the couple's conflict. Once again, form mirrors feeling, and suggests the conversation has come to a dangerous head.

LINES 33-40

She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm
That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;
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?'
'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.'

Lines 33-40 double down on the symbolism of the house, first introduced in the poem's opening when the couple stands on opposite ends of a flight of stairs. Though the husband eventually climbs those stairs in an effort to literally see from his wife's point of view, in these lines his explicit mention of their dead child's grave sends her flying down to the bottom, once again putting them at odds as she "turn[s] on him with [...] a daunting look." She even raises the possibility of leaving the

house altogether, searching for her hat as she exclaims, "'I must get out of here.'" Both her husband and the view of the graveyard loom from the top of the stairs, and a conversation she never wanted to have takes shape; her only solution seems to be leaving the house (and, metaphorically speaking, their relationship) altogether.

Before she threatens to go, her husband interjects: "'Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?'" This rhetorical question, repeated "twice over," is not really meant to be answered. Rather, it gives voice to the husband's frustration, dismay, and grief. Nonetheless, in lines 38-40, his wife replies anyway, condemning him with the swift retort, "'Not you!'" and concluding, "'I don't know rightly whether any man can.'"

Though gender stereotypes—the husband's "masculine" aggression and his wife's "feminine" resistance—have already put in an appearance, here those stereotypes are an explicit source of conflict. Over the course of these opening stanzas, it's become clear that husband and wife do not see eye to eye on grief. Attentive readers can see that miscommunication and misunderstanding lie at the heart of this couple's issues: but here, the wife bluntly blames masculinity as a whole for their rupture. She turns to gender stereotypes as an easy explanation of her husband's behavior, rather than trying to understand his point of view.

LINES 41-47

'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.'
'You don't know how to ask it.'
'Help me, then.'
Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

"'Amy!'" the husband cries, revealing his wife's name for the first time. "'Don't go to someone else this time.'" This line is poignant; not only does the husband beg his wife not to leave, he also reveals that she has been seeking solace elsewhere, much to his dismay. But rather than offer comfort, the husband instead follows up with a warning: "'Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs.'" Though the assonant long /oh/ echoed in "don't" and "won't" suggests the husband's loneliness and isolation, he won't reach out: instead, he sits down and inflexibly "[fixes] his chin between his fists." When he goes on to say, "'There's something I should like to ask you, dear,'" his rigid posture makes that question feel less than genuine.

"'You don't know how to ask it,'" Amy snaps in reply; when her husband asks for help, she only "mov[es] the latch" on the door, threatening once again to leave.

These lines build on the symbolism of the house, which more and more seems like an image of the couple's marriage: they're both in it together, but they inhabit it very differently. The pair could have met on the stairs, but don't: instead, they switch positions to remain opposite each other, in an image of their ever-deepening conflict. While the husband stubbornly sits down, fixed in his position, the wife seems ready to dash out the door: evasion seems like her only way to express herself (or avoid expressing herself).

LINES 48-58

'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.
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.'

The husband now begins his longest monologue—indeed, the longest monologue in the poem. He begins:

> '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.
> A man must partly give up being a man
> With women-folk.

Though he appears to be trying to bridge the gap between himself and his wife, he nevertheless keeps airing ***his*** opinions rather than listening to his wife's. (As he commanded a few lines earlier: "'Listen to me.'") He turns to gender stereotypes as an excuse for his difficulty in discussing their child's death. These lines further explain the couple's communication breakdown. Here, the husband abdicates responsibility, saying he probably can't even "be taught" to talk with his wife—and that the whole idea sounds emasculating, anyway.

This section of the husband's speech relies on submerged metaphor, another sign of his inability to discuss their issues head-on. He imagines striking a deal "'By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off / Anything special you're a-mind to name.'" In this image of restriction, he imagines holding himself back, as if his tongue were tied down. But he doesn't like this idea very much: "'two that do'" love each other can't possibly live without talking to each other, he says. There's something poignant in the assonance of "two" and "do" here: those matching /oo/ sounds suggest a shared love, something this couple seems to have lost.

Unfortunately, he and his wife are already struggling to "live together" even before this proposed restraint.

LINES 59-69

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.
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—'

The husband's attempt to foster dialogue clearly isn't working—perhaps because he can't seem to stop talking. His wife once again threatens to leave by fiddling with the "latch," or lock, on the door, reinforcing the house as a symbol of their relationship: she's trying to find a way out even as he tries to persuade her to stay.

He pleads: "'Don't—don't go. / Don't carry it to someone else this time. / Tell me about it if it's something human.'" But by referring to their shared grief as an unspecific "it," the husband displays the very squeamishness his wife condemns. Over the following lines, his tone grows less conciliatory and more accusatory, as he pointedly informs his wife that he feels grief just like she does ("'I'm not so much / Unlike other folks as you [...] would make me out'") and, what's more, that he thinks ***she*** is taking her mourning too far:

> 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—'

Between the hurtful rhetorical question, which insultingly implies that the wife expresses her grief the "wrong" way, and the hissing sibilance underlying these lines ("mother-loss," "so inconsolably," "satisfied"), there is no denying that the husband is close to abandoning his pretense of sympathy. His anger is only just beneath the surface here.

LINES 70-74

'There you go sneering now!'
'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.'

As the conversation escalates into full-blown argument, there's another lightning-quick exchange between husband and wife: she accuses him of belittling her grief, and he denies it. Fittingly, a sharp end-stop breaks a single five-foot line into two shards:

> 'There you go sneering now!'
> 'I'm not, I'm not!

The husband's quick repetition of his denial—a moment of epizeuxis—reveals the force of his anger (and undermines his claim to being more levelheaded than his wife). Indeed, in the following lines he warns, "'You make me angry,'" then threatens to "'come down to you,'" hinting that he might use physical force against his wife—or at least make her "cower" again as she did in line 11.

Then, once again, he blames gender for their conflict:

> God, what a woman! And it's come to this,
> A man can't speak of his own child that's dead.

As he sees it, the conflict is all his wife's fault, because she makes too much of her maternal grief. As he is quick to add, he too feels grief over a child that was also "his own," but under his wife's supposed female tyranny, "'A man can't speak of his own child that's dead.'"

LINES 75-84

'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;
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.
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.

After mostly communicating through body language and brief outbursts, the wife at last launches into a full-length speech that reveals how she *really* feels about her husband. In sum? She thinks he is not only incapable of speaking about their baby's death, but indeed has no feelings at all. At line 76, she begins to retell the story of how her husband dug their baby's grave while she watched from the window. These lines, layered with repeated words and sounds, have a hypnotic quality:

> 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.
> 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.

Here, the singsongy diacope of "'leap,'" the epizeuxis of "'like that, like that,'" and the /l/ alliteration between these words and "'land so lightly'" make the wife sound almost possessed by her memory—one she's clearly relived many times. The reader might even be able to envision her imitating her husband's digging at she says, "'like that, like that.'" And there's a nasty hollowness to the /ow/ assonance in "'down the mound"' that suggests the depth of the little grave. In the wife's vision of this scene, her husband is digging away energetically, jolly as can be, not even feeling the weight of their family tragedy, not even noticing what kind of a hole he's digging.

Rich in imagery, these lines also introduce the symbol of the spade (or shovel) with which the husband buried their baby. This spade will become a point of contention between husband and wife, representing an active approach to grief that the husband finds sensible and the wife finds appalling. The husband seems to have coped with his grief through this spade, finding comfort in physically digging the grave in which his baby was laid to rest.

This active approach to mourning seems to have helped him quickly recover from the loss—so quickly, indeed, that he's horrifying to his wife, who mourns privately, internally, and persistently. Her two rhetorical questions in this passage—"'How could you?'" and "'Who is that man?'"—are indictments of her husband's character and behavior. He's become like a cruel stranger to her.

LINES 85-92

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.
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.'

The wife's first monologue comes to a damning conclusion. Here, urgent enjambments suggest the gathering speed and intensity of her speech:

> 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.
> 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.'

She cannot believe her husband could speak about ordinary things on the same day he buried their son, and condemns him for his callousness, the lines tumbling forth in an angry, horrified rush. (There is also a notable lack of caesurae in these lines—a lack unusual in this poem, and another sign of the wife's vehemence.)

The wife is letting out her long-repressed outrage at last. But she's also treating her husband with just as little sympathy as he treated her, accusing him of insufficient grief to counter his criticism of her *excessive* grief. The rift between the couple, like the remembered grave, just keeps getting deeper and deeper.

LINES 93-101

'I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.
I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed.'
'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?
You
couldn't
care!

The husband doesn't even try to respond to his wife's accusations. Instead, he just talks to himself, despairing: "'I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed. / I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed.'" He seems to have given up altogether on trying to understand or be understood.

As though her husband had not even spoken, the wife carries on. Here, she remembers what her husband said on the fateful day of the funeral, and the sounds of her words cut across the sounds of his:

> '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?
> You *couldn't* care!

The blunt alliterative /b/ sounds of the husband's reflections on "'the best birch fence a man can build'" contrast sharply with the harsh /k/ and /t/ sounds of the wife's accusation: "'talk like that at such a time!'" "'You *couldn't* care!'" The reader can hear her almost spitting with fury and disdain.

Meanwhile, she can't bring herself to speak directly of "'what was in the darkened parlor'": her baby's body, laid out in its coffin, awaiting burial. The assonance and consonance of the /ar/ sound in "'darkened parlor'" makes that room feel all the grimmer.

Readers, of course, can easily spot what "'how long it takes a birch to rot'" has to do with "'what was in the darkened parlor'":

these are two images of things built or brought up with loving care, only to be destroyed in days. The metaphor suggests not only the couple's loss, but the suddenness of that loss—a sadly common experience in the early 20th century, when many children were speedily carried off by now-curable diseases.

But the wife isn't able to hear the grief buried in her husband's normal-sounding words. As her rhetorical question demonstrates, *she* has already decided these words were a sign of her husband's insensitivity to both their son's death and her grief. Now, she can't see past her own interpretation.

Perhaps, then, there's also an irony in the metaphor of the fallen fence. Here, a fence seems to have gone ***up*** between husband and wife—and one built of sturdier stuff than birch.

LINES 101-111

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.
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!'

The wife now turns from her husband's inadequacy as a mourner to a condemnation of the whole world's uselessness in the face of death. Using a metaphor that imagines grief and dying as a journey, she complains that well-meaning friends' attempts to comfort her fall "'so far short'" that "'they might as well not try to go at all.'" And yet, this isolation clearly hurts her. The long assonant /oh/ sounds she uses here, and her diacope on the word "alone," make her sound like she's moaning in pain: "No, from the time when one is sick to death / One is alone, and he dies more alone."

Her words reach beyond her specific grief and into the whole human experience. The living and well, she says, have no idea what to do with sickness, death, or grief: ***everyone's*** eventual "journey" will be a lonely one. Perhaps she even feels the loneliness of her baby in his grave; after all, she can't follow him there, any more than her friends can follow her into her own grief. This moment almost steps outside the poem's world: it's a haunting reflection on the real human problem of what to do in the face of death, a phenomenon that's both inevitable and incomprehensible.

But the wife is not done berating her husband, either. Though she speaks of "'friends [who] make pretense of following to the grave,'" there is no doubt that she includes him in the group of people who cope with grief by "'making the best of their way back to life.'" This is just what she refuses to do, and those mournful assonant /oh/ sounds return as she cries out: "I won't have grief so / If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!"

The epizeuxis in that final phrase makes it clear that, with these words, she's making a last stand. She has no intention of changing the way she grieves, and never did. This conversation, now a full-blown argument, has been futile from the start.

LINES 112-117

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

With that, the husband tries to insist that the argument is over.

"'There, you have said it all and you feel better,'" he says, patronizingly. In response to his wife's vulnerable admission of her deep grief and anger, he remains unable to empathize or offer comfort, and dismisses everything she's just said by claiming "'the heart's gone out of it.'" "'You won't go now,'" he claims (or commands), adding, "'Close the door'"—only to notice, in line 115, that "'There's someone coming down the road!'" This, presumably, is the "'someone else'" the wife has been turning to for comfort.

At this, the wife explodes, in a passage made all the angrier by sharp caesurae and an interruption to the steady iambic pentameter:

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

Her fragmented thoughts and heavy, irregular stresses capture the intensity of her outburst. In these lines, she also sums up the ultimate problem in her marriage: she and her husband can't even agree on whether talking helps at all. He "'think[s] the talk is all,'" and searches for the right words to solve their conflict; she believes words can't even touch true grief.

Here at the end, the symbolism of the house returns in force. The husband doesn't want the wife to leave the house, and indeed orders her to stay. He is clearly threatened by the arrival of "'someone coming down the road,'" as well. She, on the other hand, insists that she "'must go— / Somewhere out of this house.'" The house that is their relationship cannot hold them both.

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!
—'

As the poem ends, there is no resolution in sight for this troubled couple. Instead, the last three lines leave the husband and wife at an impasse. Again, caesurae and jagged stresses evoke the moment's terrible tension:

> '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!*—'

The pair's worst traits—his domineering anger, her avoidant passive-aggression—are on full display as she opens the door to flee and he threatens to "'bring [her] back by force.'" This unhappy couple seems past any hope of finding a meeting-place between their two attitudes, their two personalities, their two griefs.

The poem ends unresolved, on a dash that suggests this argument isn't over: it's as if the lights in the poem's "theater" suddenly fade to black in the middle of this tense moment. But while the reader doesn't know what happens next, there's not much to suggest that things will ever get better for this pair. The "Home Burial" of the title refers to their lost baby, yes—but also to their buried conflict, and the eventual burial of their home itself, the end of a shared life in a shared house. Both grief and miscommunication finally rip this couple apart.

SYMBOLS

THE HOUSE

The house in which "Home Burial" is set symbolizes the endangered marriage at the poem's heart. The couple live in the same "house," the same relationship, the same grief—but they position themselves very differently within that charged space.

The poem opens with the couple on opposite ends of a flight of a stairs, an image that establishes their opposite perspectives on grief. The wife literally has a different view than her husband: she is staring out the window that overlooks the graveyard, while her husband must climb the stairs and metaphorically look through her eyes in order to understand what draws her to that spot. He even reveals that he has "never noticed" the view from that window before, whereas his wife cannot keep away from it.

As the couple's argument develops, their movements around the house—the wife "opening the door wider" and the husband threatening to chase after her—suggest their irresolvable dilemma. The wife can only think of escape; the husband can only respond with violence. The relationship that their house represents just can't contain their different ways of being and grieving.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "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. / She took a doubtful step and then undid it / To raise herself and look again."
- **Lines 5-7:** "He spoke / Advancing toward her: 'What is it you see / From up there always—for I want to know.'"
- **Lines 15-17:** "She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see, / Blind creature; and awhile he didn't see. / But at last he murmured, 'Oh,' and again, 'Oh.'"
- **Lines 21-31:** "'The wonder is I didn't see at once. / I never noticed it from here before. / I must be wonted to it—that's the reason. / 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? / 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—'"
- **Lines 33-34:** "She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm / That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;"
- **Line 39:** "I must get out of here."
- **Line 42:** "I won't come down the stairs.'"
- **Line 43:** "He sat and fixed his chin between his fists."
- **Line 47:** "Her fingers moved the latch for all reply."
- **Line 72:** "I'll come down to you."
- **Lines 76-92:** "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. / 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. / 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. / 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.'"
- **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?"
- **Line 113:** "You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door."
- **Lines 116-117:** "I must go— / Somewhere out of this house."
- **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! / —'"

THE SPADE

The spade (or shovel) with which the husband digs the grave symbolizes his approach to grief: concrete, active, and hands-on. By physically digging his son's grave with the spade, putting his hands on the tool that buries his baby, the husband channels his grief into a productive and transformative physical act. This, for him, appears to be an important part of the mourning process, seemingly enabling him to recover from his loss.

From his wife's perspective, however, this approach to mourning is insufficient and unfathomable: she asks, rhetorically, "How could you?" And when her husband returns to the house and stands "'the spade up against the wall / Outside there in the entry,'" she becomes even more upset. For her, the active grieving symbolized by the spade is an appallingly casual approach to the loss of a child, and it only deepens the division between her and her husband.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 84:** "and still your spade kept lifting."
- **Lines 91-92:** "You had stood the spade up against the wall / Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.'"

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

Assonance, often used as an intensifier of language and emotion, is used sparingly throughout "Home Burial," and is more common in the lines spoken by the wife, the more emotional of the pair. For instance, in lines 78-81, assonance helps emphasize the bitter way she criticizes her husband for the way he buried their child:

> 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.

The rare end rhyme of "there" and "air" helps show the way the wife has gotten up in the recollection of this moment; she is recounting a memory so familiar that she's slipped into a storytelling cadence. The assonance of the long /ow/ sound in "down" and "mound," a sound that is more painful than plaintive, serves as an important reminder that underneath all this—the wife's rebuke and reproach, her well-worn grievances toward her husband—is a deep well of grief and sorrow.

Assonance plays this role throughout the poem, serving as an emotional weather vane, emphasizing the feelings that underpin both characters' choice of words as they struggle to express themselves. Long /oh/ sounds in particular are prominent, appearing several times throughout the poem. In line 111, for example, the wife passionately cries, "Oh, I won't, I won't!" Here, she literally cries out with a long, sad "Oh," expressing the sound's grief-stricken qualities to the fullest, before echoing it twice in the word "won't," as she vows to stay true to her unending sorrow.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Looking"
- **Line 4:** "took"
- **Line 5:** "look"
- **Line 7:** "up "
- **Line 8:** "upon"
- **Line 9:** "face," "changed"
- **Line 10:** "gain"
- **Line 11:** "Mounting"
- **Line 12:** "out ," "now"
- **Line 14:** "neck"
- **Line 15:** "let," "see"
- **Line 16:** "Blind ," "creature," "awhile"
- **Line 21:** "wonder," "once"
- **Line 24:** "graveyard," "are"
- **Line 25:** "frames "
- **Line 29:** "those"
- **Line 30:** "stones"
- **Line 40:** "don't ," "know ," "man can"
- **Line 43:** "fixed," "chin," "fists"
- **Line 49:** "speak"
- **Line 50:** "please"
- **Line 54:** "bind"
- **Line 55:** "mind"
- **Line 58:** "two," "do"
- **Line 59:** "Don't—don't go."
- **Line 60:** "Don't "
- **Line 66:** "think," "thing"
- **Line 78:** "there"
- **Line 79:** "air"
- **Line 80:** "that," "that," "and," "land," "so"
- **Line 81:** "roll," "back," "down," "mound," "hole"
- **Line 84:** "spade"
- **Line 85:** "came"
- **Line 88:** "stains"
- **Line 89:** "baby's ," "grave"
- **Line 90:** "everyday"
- **Line 91:** "spade"
- **Line 95:** "repeat," "saying"
- **Line 96:** "Three ," "day"
- **Line 97:** "best," "fence," "man," "can"
- **Line 104:** "No," "time "

- **Line 105:** “alone,” “dies ,” “alone”
- **Line 108:** “making,” “way”
- **Line 110:** “evil,” “grief”
- **Line 117:** “out,” “house”
- **Line 118:** “you,” “do”

ALLITERATION

Besides lending some melodious sounds to an otherwise pretty prosy poem, alliteration also reveals something about the poem's characters.

For example, the husband, who speaks at greater length than his wife, has a tendency to dress up his speech with alliteration, hinting at his desire to talk rather than listen. Take the opening to his first monologue, from lines 21-25:

> ‘The wonder is I didn’t see at once.
> I never noticed it from here before.
> I must be wonted to it—that’s the reason.
> The little graveyard where my people are!
> So small the window frames the whole of it.

The repeated /w/ sounds across four of the five lines, as well as the quick alliteration of "never noticed" in the second, add a musicality to his speech. And yet, readers might ask, what does the husband need to be musical for, in this moment? The lyricism of his description of the view—which has so transfixed and troubled his wife—might suggest that he is more interested in hearing himself talk than really understanding what his wife is going through.

The same can be said in lines 51-57, when once again alliteration peppers his speech, giving his words a grandiose air that seems like an attempt to hide the fact that he can't bring himself to explicitly name the subject at hand: their shared grief over the loss of their son:

> 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.
> Though I don’t like such things ’twixt those that love.
> Two that don’t love can’t live together without them.

For her part, the wife in the poem seems to turn to alliteration at moments of heightened emotion, such as in lines 77-80, when she describes what she saw when her husband buried their baby:

> 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

She, too, reaches a new level of lyricism in this moment. But this lyricism is less self-important and more hypnotic. The wife seems to have revisited this memory so often that it's taken on the sing-song quality of an oft-told tale. The repeated sounds add drama to the retelling—an effect that reappears in the alliterative /r/, /b/, /c/, and /w/ sounds of the wife's second long speech.

Alliteration thus both characterizes the poem's speakers and gives their speeches their poignant atmosphere.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “bottom,” “stairs”
- **Line 2:** “Before ,” “starting ”
- **Line 3:** “back”
- **Line 13:** “him,” “help”
- **Line 14:** “least”
- **Line 15:** “let,” “look”
- **Line 21:** “wonder,” “once”
- **Line 22:** “never noticed”
- **Line 23:** “wonted”
- **Line 24:** “where”
- **Line 25:** “So,” “small,” “window”
- **Line 27:** “stones,” “slate”
- **Line 28:** “slabs,” “sunlight”
- **Line 29:** “sidehill”
- **Line 30:** “stones”
- **Line 33:** “beneath”
- **Line 34:** “banister”
- **Line 43:** “fixed,” “fists”
- **Line 51:** “suppose,” “say,” “see”
- **Line 52:** “man must,” “man”
- **Line 53:** “With,” “women,” “We”
- **Line 54:** “By,” “bind”
- **Line 56:** “Though,” “things,” “those that”
- **Line 57:** “love,” “live”
- **Line 59:** “latch,” “little”
- **Line 64:** “make me,” “me my”
- **Line 66:** “think,” “thing”
- **Line 69:** “memory might”
- **Line 72:** “make me”
- **Line 73:** “what,” “woman”
- **Line 77:** “hand,” “how,” “his”
- **Line 79:** “leap,” “leap”
- **Line 80:** “Leap,” “like,” “like,” “land,” “lightly”
- **Line 83:** “stairs,” “stairs”
- **Line 84:** “still,” “spade”
- **Line 88:** “sit,” “stains”
- **Line 89:** “fresh,” “from”
- **Line 91:** “stood,” “spade”

- **Line 96:** "rainy"
- **Line 97:** "rot," "best birch," "build"
- **Lines 101-101:** "couldn't / care"
- **Line 107:** "But before"
- **Line 108:** "best," "back"
- **Line 110:** "world's," "won't"
- **Line 113:** "crying," "Close"
- **Line 114:** "keep"
- **Line 115:** "coming"
- **Line 117:** "house," "How"
- **Line 120:** "bring," "back"

CAESURA

The caesurae that break up the lines of poetry in "Home Burial" create sentences that feel much more like prose or even stage direction than poetry—which makes sense, considering the poem's narrative style. The interrupted lines give the poem a naturalistic feeling, bringing it closer to everyday speech and cutting against the grain of the poem's iambic pentameter.

This effect is especially strong in the characters' dialogue. In those cases, the punctuation in the middle of each poetic line helps to capture the normal starts, stops, interruptions, and pauses of regular people's speech. For instance, lines 38-39:

> 'Not you! Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
> I must get out of here. I must get air.

Similarly, lines 76-82 use lots of caesura as the wife recalls a memory layered with emotion and reproach. It's as if she's on the verge of tears, choking up:

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

Last but not least, caesura heightens drama and emotion by drawing readers' attention to key moments in the poem. Take lines 31-32, when the husband first explicitly speaks of the dead baby's grave, and his wife cries out desperately to stop him:

> But the child's mound—'
> 'Don't, don't, don't, don't,' she cried.

Here, the dramatic dash, and the short sharp line that follows, create a break as shocking as the wife's interruption. Then come those commas, splitting her reply into short, staccato cries of horror.

In short, caesura makes the poem's language both more natural and more shocking.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "him. She"
- **Line 5:** "again. He"
- **Line 6:** " her: 'What"
- **Line 7:** "always—for"
- **Line 10:** "time: 'What"
- **Line 12:** "now—you"
- **Line 13:** "She, in her place, refused"
- **Line 15:** " look, sure"
- **Line 16:** "creature; and"
- **Line 17:** "murmured, 'Oh,' and again, 'Oh.'"
- **Line 18:** "is it—what?' she"
- **Line 20:** "don't,' she challenged. 'Tell me"
- **Line 23:** "it—that's"
- **Line 29:** "sidehill. We"
- **Line 30:** "understand: it"
- **Lines 31-32:** "child's mound—' / 'Don't, don't, don't, don't,' she "
- **Line 34:** "banister, and"
- **Line 38:** "'Not you! Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't"
- **Line 39:** "here. I"
- **Line 41:** "'Amy! Don't go"
- **Line 42:** "me. I"
- **Line 44:** "ask you, dear.'"
- **Line 46:** "'Help me, then.'"
- **Line 50:** " you. But"
- **Line 51:** "suppose. I"
- **Line 53:** "folk. We"
- **Line 59:** "She moved the latch a little. 'Don't—don't go."
- **Line 62:** "grief. I'm"
- **Line 64:** "out. Give"
- **Line 65:** " think, though, you"
- **Line 68:** "So inconsolably—in the face of love."
- **Line 71:** " 'I'm not, I'm not!"
- **Line 72:** " angry. I'll "
- **Line 73:** "God, what a woman! And"
- **Line 76:** " feelings, you"
- **Line 77:** "hand—how could you?—his"
- **Line 80:** "up, like that, like that, and land"
- **Line 82:** "I thought, Who is that man? I didn't"
- **Line 84:** "again, and"
- **Line 92:** "entry, for"
- **Line 94:** "cursed. God, if"
- **Line 98:** " it, talk"
- **Line 101:** "care! The"
- **Line 102:** "death, comes"
- **Line 104:** "No, from"
- **Line 105:** "alone, and"

- **Line 107:** "it, their"
- **Line 109:** "people, and"
- **Line 110:** "evil. I"
- **Line 111:** " it. Oh, I won't, I "
- **Line 112:** "There, you"
- **Line 113:** "now. You're"
- **Line 114:** " it: why"
- **Line 115:** "Amy! There's"
- **Lines 116-116:** "' / You / —oh, "
- **Line 116:** "all. I "
- **Line 117:** "house. How"
- **Line 118:** "'If—you—do!' She"
- **Line 119:** "go? First"
- **Lines 120-120:** "force. I / will! / —'"

DIALOGUE

Perhaps the most significant poetic device in "Home Burial" is its dialogue. Of the poem's 120 lines, only 18 contain no dialogue at all. The rest are partially or entirely made up of dialogue between a husband and wife, alternating between their voices as they argue over their differing approaches to grief.

Dialogue isn't often treated as a poetic device: it turns up far more often in prose. However, "Home Burial" is a narrative poem, one that tells a story, and that story is not only about grief, but about miscommunication. As such, it makes sense that the poem is primarily made up of dialogue, as the husband and wife struggle to express themselves, and fail to listen to or empathize with each other.

The poem is careful to give equal weight to each character's perspective, and its reliance on dialogue helps with that goal. Dialogue gives both characters the opportunity to have their say, and allows readers to see through the eyes of both members of this broken marriage.

Dialogue also captures the poem's increasing emotional stakes. At the beginning of the poem, the dialogue is often marked with tags like "he murmured" and "she said," and sandwiched between third-person description of the characters' actions and thoughts. As the conversation between the couple becomes more fraught, however, those tags disappear, leaving long stanzas of dialogue to stand alone. This throws readers into the deep end of the argument, leaving it up to them to keep track of who is speaking when, and conveying the intensity of a serious fight.

Where Dialogue appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-7
- Line 10
- Line 12
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Lines 21-31
- Line 32
- Line 37
- Lines 38-40
- Lines 41-42
- Line 44
- Line 45
- Line 46
- Lines 48-69
- Line 70
- Lines 71-74
- Lines 75-92
- Lines 93-94
- Lines 95-111
- Lines 112-115
- Lines 116-117
- Line 118
- Lines 119-120

ENJAMBMENT

At the beginning of "Home Burial," when the third-person speaker plays a bigger role, enjambment creates long descriptive sentences. These set the scene, introduce the characters, and establish the poem as a narrative:

> 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.
> 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.'

Broken down into sentences rather than lines, this heavily enjambed passage wouldn't be out of place in a novel, setting the poem's storytelling tone. But enjambment also creates momentum here, urging readers on swiftly and mirroring the poem's gathering tension.

Later, when the poem transitions entirely into dialogue, enjambment drives the couple's argument forward and emphasizes its intensity, as in this powerful moment:

> 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.

Earlier in the conversation, enjambment is rarer, and end-stopped lines suggest bottled-up emotion, especially in the husband's speeches. But as the tension escalates, enjambment

breaks through, and the couple's argument begins to feel out of control as it careens toward an explosive ending.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "stairs / Before"
- **Lines 4-5:** "it / To"
- **Lines 5-6:** "spoke / Advancing"
- **Lines 6-7:** "see / From"
- **Lines 13-14:** "help / With"
- **Lines 33-34:** "arm / That"
- **Lines 49-50:** "anything / So"
- **Lines 50-51:** "taught / I "
- **Lines 52-53:** "man / With"
- **Lines 53-54:** "arrangement / By"
- **Lines 54-55:** "off / Anything"
- **Lines 62-63:** "much / Unlike"
- **Lines 63-64:** "there / Apart"
- **Lines 66-67:** "thing / To"
- **Lines 67-68:** "child / So"
- **Lines 76-77:** "dug / With"
- **Lines 80-81:** "lightly / And"
- **Lines 83-84:** "stairs / To"
- **Lines 85-86:** "voice / Out"
- **Lines 88-89:** "shoes / Of"
- **Lines 89-90:** "grave / And"
- **Lines 91-92:** "wall / Outside"
- **Lines 96-97:** "day / Will"
- **Lines 99-100:** "rot / To"
- **Lines 101-102:** " go / With"
- **Lines 102-103:** "short / They"
- **Lines 108-109:** "life / And"

EPIZEUXIS

"Home Burial" uses epizeuxis to convey intense emotion. The first and most dramatic example appears in line 32, when the wife shouts "Don't, don't, don't, don't!" in response to her husband's attempt to talk about their dead son's grave. This abrupt, forceful repetition leaves no doubt that she does not want to have this conversation with her husband.

Later in the poem, the wife uses epizeuxis twice more. In line 80, remembering her son's burial, she repeats "like that, like that," describing the careless way her husband dug the grave. Her repetition feels almost hypnotic, as if she's lost in memory. Perhaps she's even acting out her husband's digging as she speaks, possessed by this awful moment.

Meanwhile, in line 111, the wife's repeated cry—"Oh, I won't, I won't!"—works more like her repeated "don't," suggesting the intensity of her pain.

Epizeuxis also crops up in the husband's dialogue in a moment of emotion. When his wife accuses him of "sneering" at her, he shouts, "I'm not, I'm not!" The quick repetition reveals the force of his anger (and rather undermines his claim to being more calm and collected than his wife).

Overall, then, epizeuxis lends the poem force, emphasis, and drama.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 32:** " 'Don't, don't, don't, don't,'"
- **Line 71:** " 'I'm not, I'm not!"
- **Line 80:** " like that, like that,"
- **Line 111:** "I won't, I won't!'"

IMAGERY

The imagery in "Home Burial" is largely concerned with the poem's setting, and the characters' reactions to that setting. The poem's first lines (1-6) paint a picture of a couple standing on a flight of stairs, already in opposite positions:

> 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.
> She took a doubtful step and then undid it
> To raise herself and look again. He spoke
> Advancing toward her [...]

While the characters speak like ordinary people of their day and age, they are also prone to detailed description, using imagery to bring to life their unique perspectives and memories. For instance, in lines 24-29 the husband waxes lyrical about the view of his family graveyard from the window at the top of the stairs—apparently overlooking the way his painstaking attention to detail must hurt his wife:

> 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?
> There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
> Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight
> On the sidehill.

Later, in lines 76-92, his wife also uses imagery to inflict pain, describing her husband's hand-burial of their son in brutal detail. Detailing everything from his energetic digging, which "[made] the gravel leap and leap in air," to the casual way he "stood the spade up against the wall" when he was done, she layers grief and disdain into her retelling of this memory, turning the richly-detailed imagery into a reproach:

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

This use of imagery not only helps give readers insight into each character's perspective and personality, it also enhances "Home Burial's" poetic quality, helping counterbalance the more prosaic aspects of its narrative style—such as its reliance on dialogue, and its lack of a rhyme scheme.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "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. / She took a doubtful step and then undid it / To raise herself and look again. He spoke / Advancing toward her:"
- **Lines 8-9:** "She turned and sank upon her skirts at that, / And her face changed from terrified to dull."
- **Line 11:** "Mounting until she cowered under him."
- **Lines 13-15:** "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,"
- **Lines 24-29:** "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? / There are three stones of slate and one of marble, / Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight / On the sidehill."
- **Lines 33-35:** "She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm / That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs; / And turned on him with such a daunting look,"
- **Line 43:** "He sat and fixed his chin between his fists."
- **Line 47:** "Her fingers moved the latch for all reply."
- **Line 59:** "She moved the latch a little"
- **Lines 76-92:** "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. / 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. / 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. / 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.'"
- **Lines 96-97:** ""Three foggy mornings and one rainy day / Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.""
- **Line 100:** "what was in the darkened parlor?"
- **Lines 113-114:** "You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door. / The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up."
- **Line 115:** "Amy! There's someone coming down the road!'"
- **Line 118:** "She was opening the door wider."
- **Line 120:** "I'll follow and bring you back by force."

CONSONANCE

Consonance in "Home Burial" helps establish and reinforce the violence of the couple's argument. For instance, lines 1-9 are full of sharp /t/ and biting /k/ sounds, which hint ominously at the discord between the couple even before their fight has begun:

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

Sharp, brittle, combative consonants are some of the most prominent sounds not just in this stanza, but in the poem as a whole, consistently adding tension to lines that are already full of conflict.

The poem also uses sibilance, or consonance on /s/ sounds, which creates a slippery hiss. This, too, evokes the disdain and conflict between the couple. For example, take lines 67-74:

> To take your mother-loss of a first child
> So inconsolably—in the face of love.
> You'd think his memory might be satisfied—'
> 'There you go sneering now!'

The word "sneering" is particularly apt here, since its /s/ sound evokes the very thing that it describes: the scornful hiss of the husband's remark that his wife is taking her maternal grief too seriously.

These are not the only instances of consonance in the poem, but they are among the most notable. Regardless of where it appears, consonance subtly reinforces the conflict at the heart of the poem.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "bottom," "stairs"
- **Line 2:** "Before," "starting"
- **Line 3:** "Looking," "back"
- **Line 4:** "took," "doubtful," "step," "it"
- **Line 5:** "To," "look," "spoke"

- **Line 6:** “toward,” “What,” “it”
- **Line 7:** “want,” “to”
- **Line 8:** “turned ,” “sank,” “skirts,” “at,” “that”
- **Line 9:** “terrified,” “to”
- **Line 10:** “time,” “What”
- **Line 11:** “Mounting,” “cowered”
- **Line 12:** “out,” “must,” “tell”
- **Line 13:** “him,” “help”
- **Line 14:** “least,” “stiffening,” “neck ”
- **Line 15:** “let,” “look”
- **Line 17:** “But,” “last”
- **Line 18:** “What,” “what”
- **Line 67:** “loss,” “first”
- **Line 68:** “So,” “inconsolably,” “face”
- **Line 69:** “satisfied”
- **Line 70:** “sneering”

METAPHOR

Metaphors in "Home Burial" stretch from the all-encompassing symbolism of the house, which stands for the couple's relationship, to smaller moments in the poem whose meanings are extended through comparison and figurative language. (See the "Symbols" section for more on the house.)

The poem's characters often express their less-comfortable feelings through metaphor. For instance, when the wife privately thinks of her husband as a "blind creature" in line 16, readers get a glimpse of her contempt for him: to her, he's like some blundering eyeless cave-beast, unable to see what's right in front of him.

Most prominently, in her speech at lines 101-109, the wife compares death and grief to a journey. "Friends make pretense of following to the grave," she says, but even "the nearest friends" cannot truly accompany someone else on this path. Before the journey is complete, they are already "making the best of their way back to life," falling "so far short" of the wife's expectations for comfort and solace that "they might as well not try to go."

The husband also turns to metaphor when struggling to express himself. For instance, in line 54 he suggests striking a deal in which he no longer brings up the loss of their son, but does so through a metaphor that compares such verbal restraint to "bind[ing his] hands" and keeping them "off" any subject she's "a-mind to name." As he goes on to note, this image of binding and restricting feels more like the problem here than a solution to it.

A few lines later, the husband talks about grief itself in a similarly indirect way: "Don't carry it to someone else," he pleads. "Tell me about it if it's something human." This depiction of sorrow as an object to be carried illustrates the husband's discomfort with grief. To him, grief seems to be a heavy burden his wife is lugging around—and it's just an "it," something too uncomfortable to name more clearly.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** “Blind creature”
- **Line 54:** “ I’d bind myself to keep hands off”
- **Line 60:** “Don’t carry it to someone else”
- **Lines 101-103:** “The nearest friends can go / With anyone to death, comes so far short / They might as well not try to go at all.”
- **Lines 104-105:** “No, from the time when one is sick to death, / One is alone, and he dies more alone.”
- **Lines 106-109:** “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.”

RHETORICAL QUESTION

"Home Burial" contains several rhetorical questions—most of them coded accusations and emotional outbursts.

Perhaps the most important of these rhetorical questions is the husband's cry in line 37: "Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?" Though his wife does go on to answer the question—"Not you!" she exclaims—the way the husband poses this question, repeated "twice over before he knew himself," suggests that he's asking in frustration, making a point.

The same is true in lines 66-68, when he asks his wife "What was it brought you up [...] to take your mother-loss [...] so inconsolably?" He cannot really believe his wife is going to answer this question, or that she would even be able to point to something in her upbringing that shaped her perception of grief. Instead, this is a thinly-veiled insult, disguised as a rhetorical question so the husband can hammer home his point. He's already made clear that *he* thinks she's taking this grief too hard, no matter what kind of answer she might produce.

The wife gets in a few intensifying rhetorical questions of her own, interjecting two—"How could you?" and "Who is that man?"—in the middle of her monologue recalling the way her husband buried their baby. Along those same lines, in line 99, she bursts out, "What had how long it takes a birch to rot / To do with what was in the darkened parlor?" She already has an answer to this question: in the wife's eyes, a rotting fence has nothing to do with their son's death. But the choice to phrase this rebuke as a question puts the blame squarely at her husband's feet, forcing him to evaluate his words and actions on that fateful day.

Indeed, all of the rhetorical questions serve as cruel indicators of the couple's discord. Questions may *look* like invitations to communication. But the fact that these questions aren't really seeking honest answers suggests that both husband and wife are more concerned with saying what *they* believe than in really listening to each other.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 26:** "Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?"
- **Line 37:** "'Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?'"
- **Lines 66-68:** "What was it brought you up to think it the thing / To take your mother-loss of a first child / So inconsolably"
- **Line 77:** "how could you?"
- **Line 82:** " Who is that man?"
- **Lines 99-100:** "What had how long it takes a birch to rot / To do with what was in the darkened parlor?"
- **Line 117:** "How can I make you—"

VOCABULARY

Pretense () - A false show, a make-believe.

Mounting (Line 11) - Going up, climbing, ascending.

Cowered (Line 11) - Shrank away; crouched for shelter from something menacing.

Wonted (Line 23) - Usual or ordinary. Here, the husband is saying he's used to seeing the graveyard.

Slate (Line 27) - A dark, dense kind of rock.

Sidehill (Line 29) - Hillside.

Mound (Line 31) - The raised ground over a burial site.

Daunting (Line 35) - Overwhelming or intimidating.

Fixed (Line 43) - Firmly set or placed.

Bind (Line 54) - Confine, restrain, restrict.

A-mind (Line 55) - "Of a mind," or inclined. The husband is saying he'd be happy to stop talking about anything the wife cares to suggest.

'Twixt (Line 56) - Between

Inconsolably (Line 68) - To be "inconsolable" is to be incapable of being comforted.

Sneering (Line 70) - Speaking scornfully or contemptfully.

Spade (Line 84, Line 91) - A small shovel.

'what was in the darkened parlor' (Line 100) - An implied reference to the baby's body, laid out for viewing in the parlor during the wake.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Home Burial" is a narrative poem that tells the story of a couple grieving the death of their son. Unusually for a work of poetry, it is made up almost entirely of dialogue between the husband and wife.

This dialogue shapes the poem's 21 irregular stanzas, which, as the poem develops, begin to go on as for as long as the characters speak. For example, their back-and-forth in lines 18-20 forms three brief, one-line stanzas:

> 'What is it—what?' she said.
> 'Just that I see.'
> 'You don't,' she challenged. 'Tell me what it is.'

On the other hand, the poem's longest stanza—one of the husband's monologues—runs for 21 whole lines (48-69). The reader might at first notice that the husband speaks in much longer stanzas than the wife, suggesting the difference between their approaches to grief (and each other): while he lectures and pries, she stonewalls and evades.

But as the argument builds and the wife gets angrier, she makes her own long speeches at lines 75-92 and 95-111, when she remembers the day her husband buried their son. Then, the end of the poem returns to quick, sharp back-and-forth between the pair in lines 112-120.

The poem's movement between longer, more immersive stanzas and lightning-quick exchanges mirrors the movement of the argument—from the initial provocation to the detailed hashing-out to the final breakdown of communication.

METER

"Home Burial" is written in blank verse, a poetic form that doesn't rhyme but follows a strict meter. In this case, as in most examples of blank verse, that meter is iambic pentameter. While the characters of the poem speak in ordinary voices, this meter lends their words some gravitas and some drama: iambic pentameter, famously, is the meter in which Shakespeare wrote his plays. This is a major moment in this couple's shared life, and the stately meter reflects the seriousness of their conversation.

Iambic pentameter is a meter with five iambs—poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm—per line. For the most part, "Home Burial" sticks closely to this rhythm—an impressive feat considering that these characters don't talk like poets, but like everyday folks. Look at how steady the iambic pentameter is in the passage of perfectly natural (if old-fashioned) dialogue at lines 21-24:

> 'The won- | der is | I did- | n't see | at once.
> I ne- | ver no- | ticed it | from here | before.
> I must | be won- | ted to | it—that's | the reason.
> The lit- | tle grave- | yard where | my peo- | ple are!

When the poem does break from iambic pentameter, the surprising change often highlights tense or tragic moments in the couple's conversation. For example, take lines 31-32, which can be thought of as a single 10-syllable line, broken into two halves:

'[...] But the child's mound—'
'Don't, don't, don't, don't,' she cried.

Here, both words in "child's mound" are stressed, making this poetic foot a spondee rather than an iamb. This makes sense: it's the poem's first explicit mention of the dead child's grave, and the heavy weight of those two stresses evokes this moment's seriousness.

The wife's outburst—"'Don't, don't, don't, don't'"—also makes a dramatic break from iambic pentameter. Those four heavy stresses hammer home her fierce resistance to the conversation that's about to unfold.

Mostly, though, the poem sticks to steady iambic pentameter, saving its metrical fireworks for moments of violent emotion. The intersection between the formal drama of blank verse and the everyday language of the couple suggests the significance of even the most normal lives.

RHYME SCHEME

Since it's written in blank verse, "Home Burial" doesn't use a regular rhyme scheme. Blank verse suits the poem's shape and tone: the vast majority of the poem is in naturalistic dialogue, and most people's conversations don't rhyme. But there are a few small moments of end rhyme, such as in lines 78-79, when the wife describes how she watched her husband burying their son:

I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,

This little moment of rhyme, a surprise in the pattern of blank verse the reader has gotten accustomed to, suggests the intensity of the wife's experience. As she describes her husband energetically digging their baby's grave, her rhyme makes her seem almost entranced by the horror of the memory, as if she's seeing it all unfold before her again.

SPEAKER

"Home Burial" is mostly a dialogue between a wife, Amy, and her husband, whose name the reader never learns. But there's really another speaker: the third-person watcher who introduces these characters. This speaker plays the role of a narrator, describing the distraught couple and letting readers spy on their conversation.

This speaker pays close attention to the couple's body language and tones of voice, noticing their "murmur[s]," "challenge[s]," and "crie[s]," and the way they move up and down the stairs, advancing and retreating like two armies in battle.

The speaker also occasionally provides some insight into a character's thoughts and feelings. For instance, in line 15, they describe the wife as "sure that [her husband] wouldn't see, / blind creature," giving readers a glimpse of the despair and contempt Amy feels over her husband's cluelessness.

As the couple's conversation gets more and more heated, the speaker gets quieter. Dialogue starts to flow into dialogue, without even a "he said" or "she said" from the speaker. By the poem's conclusion, the speaker has been silent for over 70 lines. This heightens the drama of the poem by more deeply immersing readers in the couple's conflict. It's as if the watching speaker, like the readers, has gotten sucked into the drama of the argument, and is now just listening, fascinated. Here, the speaker seems less like an omniscient narrator, and more like just another onlooker, caught up in the moment.

SETTING

"Home Burial" is set in a married couple's home—and the family home of the husband, who grew up in that very house. The family graveyard is located on the property, a fact that lays the foundation for the entire poem.

The poem unfolds rather like a play, and the action all takes place on a staircase, where a window overlooks the grave of the couple's dead son. The speaker carefully tracks the couple's movements as their argument takes them up and down these stairs: the pair move like battling armies, advancing and retreating.

The rest of the house plays a role here, too, even if it doesn't show up "onstage." For instance, the wife's contempt for her husband's grief (or lack thereof) takes root in a scene she witnessed from "the kitchen," when the sight of her husband casually leaning the shovel he used to dig their baby's grave in the "entry" struck her with horror. Worse still is the living room where the child's coffin once lay—the thought of which so haunts the wife that she can only refer indirectly to "what was in the darkened parlor." The house comes to feel like a claustrophobic world of grief: every room contains another terrible memory.

More broadly, readers can assume the poem is set around the time when it was written—the early 20th century—or perhaps even a little earlier, considering the description of the wife's "skirts" and the characters' old-fashioned voices. There are also plenty of hints that the poem takes place in New England—a frequent setting in Robert Frost's work, and the sort of place where a rural home, a family cemetery, rotting birch fences, and foggy mornings are commonplace.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Frost became one of the most celebrated American

poets of his lifetime and remains renowned to this day. Born in 1874 and raised in New England, Frost began his poetic career in earnest when he traveled to England as a young man. There he rubbed shoulders with modernist poets like Edward Thomas, Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, and Ezra Pound. Pound in particular became an important advocate of Frost's work and helped establish his literary reputation.

After publishing two poetry collections while living abroad (including the well-received *North of Boston*, in which "Home Burial" was first published in 1914), Frost returned to New England, a landscape that inspired his work throughout his life. Between 1920 and 1970, he published 24 volumes of poetry. Frost's poetry was formally traditional but thematically innovative and invested in the lives of ordinary people.

Frost drew from his own background as a farmer, a resident of rural New England, and, in the case of "Home Burial," a father who lost several children. His poems are notable for their psychological complexity, irony, and ambiguity, as well as their persistent interest in plumbing the depths of the human experience, without shying away from dark or difficult themes.

Over the course of his career, Frost won four Pulitzer Prizes (an achievement unmatched by any other American poet), a Congressional Gold Medal, and the poet laureateship of Vermont. He also delivered a poem at President John F. Kennedy's inauguration, who lauded Frost for having "bequeathed his nation a body of imperishable verse from which Americans will forever gain joy and understanding."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Robert Frost's life and career spanned some of the most dynamic decades of American history. Frost lived through both World Wars, the Great Depression, and a revolution in social norms, including the rise of the civil rights movement.

When "Home Burial" was written in 1914, however, Frost was still at the beginning of his poetic career, and Europe was just descending into the horrors of World War I. While America didn't enter the war until 1917, Frost, who lived in England for a time, would have been well aware of the mass death and misery on the horizon. Not long after "Home Burial" was written, grief over the loss of a young son would become an all-too-common experience.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Home Burial" Short Film — Watch a short film adaptation of "Home Burial." Notice how easily the poem's dialogue translates to drama! (https://vimeo.com/116100705)
- Close Readings of "Home Burial" — Explore literary scholars' analysis of "Home Burial." (https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/home-burial)
- "Darkness or Light?" — Read an essay on the dark complexity of Frost's poetry. (https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/robert-frost-darkness-or-light)
- Robert Frost's New England — Explore the region that inspired Frost's work in a contemporary photo essay. (https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/mysterious-beauty-robert-frost-new-england-180972502/)
- Robert Frost's Biography — Read about the poet's life and work. (https://poets.org/poet/robert-frost)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- Acquainted with the Night
- After Apple-Picking
- Birches
- Desert Places
- Design
- Dust of Snow
- Fire and Ice
- Mending Wall
- My November Guest
- Nothing Gold Can Stay
- Out, Out—
- Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
- The Oven Bird
- The Road Not Taken
- The Sound of the Trees
- The Tuft of Flowers
- The Wood-Pile

HOW TO CITE

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