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INDIFFERENCE OF THE UNIVERSE TOWARDS AN INDIVIDUAL IN “HOME BURIAL”

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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the indifference of the two main characters of the poem Home Burial towards each other and their agonies. The said poem by Robert Frost is highly emotional, revealing the deep grieving and the different reactions of a married couple on the death of their child. It shows how communication between the parents is very distant after their loss, because they are both dealing with their pain in such drastically different ways, although the couple is going through this tragic experience together. They are trying to deal with the pain by themselves instead of helping each other to get through this tragedy together. Both of them are indifferent in trying to understand each other's pain and to console each other to recover from the tragedy. It is natural that the mother suffers more emotionally because she is a woman who lost her first child. However, man's pain is subtler. He expresses it in a subdued way. Despite his grief, he is still guided by common sense, unlike his wife who seems to be blind with the pain of her loss. She even blames her husband because of her indifference towards his way of dealing with his suffering. Her husband also blames her of overdoing it as he is unable to empathize with the pain of a mother who has recently lost her little first child. However, both characters are dramatic heroes. They represent the human's morbid inclination towards self-torment, blaming and cursing when they are unable to avoid fate. "But the world's evil," as the mother says, "I won't have grief so/ If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!"

Key Words: Indifference, Individual, Agony, Grief, Pain

Introduction

The poem depicts two different patterns of expressing grief in a man and a woman over the loss of their first child. Their patterns are so contrastive to each other in doing so, that they do not hesitate to blame each other and start a fight over the issue and finally consider to part forever. Thus they act indifferently towards each other while going through the most tragic time of their lives instead of consoling each other. The wife blames her husband as she is indifferent towards his way of dealing with his woe. The husband also blames her of overdoing it as he is unable to empathize with the pain of a mother who has recently lost her little first child. The lack of communication between them makes the wife feel suffocated and eager to get out of the house. The husband initially tries to pacify her and then threatens to bring her back by force as she

prepares to leave the house. So in the troubled marriage, the difference prevails over even the worst tragedy of their lives which could have brought them together.

Amy's Indifference towards Her Husband

As Amy is terrified seeing something through the window, her husband tries earnestly to know what could be the reason which is haunting her like this. Amy is indifferent towards his concern about her.

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.'

Amy doesn't provide him with any information; rather she remains silent with stiffening of her neck which is a body language of ignoring someone. She doesn't say, "Yes," nor does she say, "No." Her refusal of answering is worse than almost any verbal answer. "The least stiffening of her neck," in its concise reserve, its slight precision, is more nearly conclusive than any greater gesture of rejection. She is confident that he won't find out the reason even though he himself tries to look for it. Whenever he utters the phrase, "Just that I see", she replies with absolute confidence that he doesn't see. "Blind creature", the last phrase quoted from her mind, is her contemptuous summing up of his blindness. Her indifference towards his feelings and understanding is of an extreme level.

He asks her, 'Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?' She replies, 'Not you! Oh, where's my hat? / Oh, I don't need it!' It means she regards him as a heartless man and believes that he doesn't have the right to talk about the dead child, and thus deprives him of his right. "His own child he's lost" is a way of saying: "You act as if he were just yours, but he's just as much mine," which is an established fact. Her indifference towards his rights and feelings makes him feel insecure, shaky, reluctant and doubtful. Immediately afterwards, he seeks permission to ask about the reason for which Amy is so terrified. Amy once more gives a direct, crushing, specific answer: "You don't know how to ask it." and "Anyone may be allowed to ask, but you are not because you are not able to ask." This is akin to saying that we do not need to refuse an animal the right to ask, since if we give him the right he cannot exercise it. The man's "Help me, then," has an absolute, almost abject helplessness, a controlled child-like simplicity that we pity and sympathize with.

The man now begins his long appeal with the slow, heavy, hopeless admission that "My words are nearly always an offence." This means that she is to be blamed for nearly always finding reasons for offence in his words that certainly are not meant to offend. "I don't know how to speak of anything/So as to please you," the man admits, sadly blaming himself for his baffled ignorance. But it also subtly suggests that she is unreasonably, awfully hard to please—if the phrase came a little later in his long speech he might emphasize the pronoun 'you'. The man's aggrieved blaming, "But I might be taught, / I should suppose", is another revelation of his eagerness to communicate with her, to get into her grief, to share her sorrows and her indifference towards his efforts and towards him in person as shown in her moving the latch in reply.

He goes on:

"I'm not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there
Apart would make me out."

The "standing there apart" is an imitative, expressive form that makes her apart, shows her apart. Really her apartness makes him out to be like other folks, all those others who make pretense of accompanying one to the grave, but who before one's back is turned have made their way back to life; but he necessarily misunderstands her, since for him being like others is necessarily good, being unlike them necessarily bad. His "give me my chance"—he doesn't say a chance—reminds one of those masculine qualities, fairness and sportsmanship, and makes one think of the child's demand for justice, equal shares, which follows his original

demand for exclusive possession, the lion's share. "Give me my chance" means: "You, like everybody else, must admit that anybody deserves a chance—so give me mine;" he deserves his chance not by any particular qualities, personal merit, but just by virtue of being a human being. The pleading of the husband actually reflects the stubborn indifference of Amy towards the man.

Husband's indifference towards Amy

The couple's relationship is not smooth. It is full of stress and misunderstandings. It should not be only Amy to be blamed of indifference, but her husband also is indifferent towards her. He tries to share her sorrow and immediately after having failed to do so, he accuses her of overdoing things, i.e. overreacting at the child's loss.

"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."

A mother can never be accused of overreacting at the loss of her first child. The misery, the despair, the distress, the agony is inexplicable, and it cannot be shared by anyone else. Even the father of the child cannot go through the same pain which the mother goes through. So, it is utterly inhumane on the part of Amy's husband as he says she cannot forget the pain and she is overdoing the practice of being melancholic. He is indifferent towards Amy in not trying to understand what she is going through. Her outburst, "There you go sneering now!" implies that he has often before "sneered" at her and her excessive sensitivity. It proves nothing but his indifference towards Amy and her feelings.

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."

The husband, after the unexpected death of their child, remains very calm and collected. He is preparing to bury the child; his spade continues to work on. According to Randel Jarrel, it gives the man's tool a dead, mechanical life of its own; it keeps on and on, crudely, remorselessly, neither guided nor halted by spirit. The man similarly seems remorseless and indifferent towards this painful event of his life. Coming back home from the graveyard, he continues to talk about the everyday concerns, which devastates Amy. She feels alienated from the person. She thinks, if her husband can do something so impossibly alien to all her expectations, he has never really been anything but alien; all her repressed antagonistic knowledge about his insensitivity comes to the surface and masks what had masked it before.

At the end of the poem, the husband threatens Amy to bring her back home by force, if she goes somewhere else out of the house to heave a sigh of relief.

'Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.
I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will!—'

It indicates his male chauvinism and indifference towards Amy's stressed out mind which needs some fresh air.

Husband's Indifference towards the Grave

Amy's husband is very accustomed to in seeing the graveyard in front of his home and never noticing it specially. In his own words,

'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 side hill. We haven't to mind those."

His ancestors are lying under the graves but he is leading his life ceaselessly and does not even bother to think about them or the graveyard itself. It reveals his indifferent attitude towards something which should result in some material or spiritual gain but does not do so in his case.

People's Indifference towards Individual

Amy says,

"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". People in this world are really self-centered. When a close one dies from a long illness, people pretend to be utterly depressed and wanting to follow the close one to their grave, but eventually, the love of life make them turn their backs. They cannot ignore the appeal of life though it initially seems life will become unbearable after the demise of a close one. They cannot even give much time when a close one is ill for a long time and hankers for their company during the worst phase of their lives.

Conclusion

As stated in Contemporary Literary Criticism, "Frost's best work explores fundamental questions of existence, depicting with chilling starkness the loneliness of the individual in an indifferent universe." The poem Home Burial maintains the same tone. Here the two characters Amy and her husband are suffering from loneliness after their child's death because they are not sharing their grief with each other; rather they are quite indifferent to each other's grief. Neither of them is trying to feel the pain the other is going through. So instead of consoling and relieving each other, they are fighting with each other as two antagonists.

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