

Analyzing Robert Frost's "Home Burial" Using Reader Response Literary Theory

Cecilia Ollhoff

THE POEM "HOME BURIAL" by Robert Frost¹ is a poem about a man and woman whose baby has died. The poem tells about the burial of the baby and how the parents react to the loss of their son. The poem shows how the communication between the parents is very distant after their loss because they are both dealing with the pain they are feeling so differently. They have been through this tragic experience together, but have only grown more apart from one another because they are trying to deal with the pain they are feeling by themselves instead of helping each other get through this tragedy together. "Home Burial" is an extremely emotional poem that all people who have lost a loved one could probably relate to in some way. Whether it is their own child they lost, like the couple in the poem, or it is a sibling, close friend, or relative that has died, I think this poem would be one they could understand. I also think that this poem would have an affect on women who have had an abortion or on the men who lost their children to an abortion. This poem might also help people to realize how precious human life is at all stages, no matter how small it is.

Most of Robert Frost's poetry is centered on the subject of death, as this poem is. Frost had to deal with many deaths in his family and among his friends throughout his life. Knowing this can help us understand the passion he used in writing some of his poetry as well as the warped morbid way he wrote sometimes. "Home Burial" is about the death of his son, probably one of the hardest deaths he ever had to deal with. This poem tells specifically about his emotions and how he dealt with his pain when his son died. Even though he acted rather heartlessly at times when talking to his wife about their son, I believe he was just as affected as the

mother was by their son's death, but he was dealing with the pain he felt differently than she was. This is why they found it so hard to understand each other; they grew more apart when they needed support from each other the most.

I really liked this particular poem of Frost's because I was able to relate to it. This poem was not just a bunch of words written by a poet; its words came from the heart of Frost describing a real situation he had to live through. The words of this poem were so meaningful to me that I was completely taken in by them to the point I almost felt as though I was not reading a poem written about a time in Frost's life, but a poem that was written specifically about my family, me, and an experience we had been through. This poem was making me relive the time in my life when my family and I had been through a situation very similar to the one Frost was describing in this poem. I have never lost a child, but I watched my parents suffer through the loss of one of their children. This was not just a son taken from my parents by death, but a life taken from all of the family, and we were all affected by it. My grandfather had lost a grandson, my ten brothers and sisters and I had lost a brother, and I had lost my godchild. Reading this poem brought to mind all of the things I had once dwelled upon and then later tried so hard to forget about the time when my family and I had to go through such a terrible time in our lives.

On March 12, 2002 my mom went to the doctor for a regular checkup for the baby she was expecting. She and Dad came home after they were through there to ask my siblings and me to pray because the doctor could not find the heartbeat of the baby. They were sure everything was fine because it was common not to be able to find a heartbeat right away at this time during the pregnancy, but urged us to pray for the baby anyway. She had to go back to the hospital later that day to have more tests done in hope of finding the heartbeat, so that they would know that the baby was alive and well. After a long day of praying and waiting to find out how the tests had gone at the hospital, my parents finally arrived home to give us the news. As soon as they walked in the door I immediately knew what they were going to tell all of us. They looked exhausted and like they had been crying. Things had not

gone well at the hospital and a heartbeat was never found. The baby was indeed dead. Mom would have to go back to the hospital to have her labor induced, so as to deliver a baby that was already dead. She was almost, but not yet, four months along, and we knew that the birth of the baby would still be considered a miscarriage instead of a stillbirth, which meant that the baby would not have the privilege of having a burial in a consecrated cemetery. There was no way my parents were going to leave their son or daughter at the hospital to be thrown aside and disposed of there, being treated with no respect and not having a proper Christian burial. The least they could give to their child was a proper burial. So, before Mom could go back to the hospital to have her baby, she and Dad had to figure out what to bury the baby in and where to bury him, and to arrange with a priest to have the ceremony. They decided that the baby would be buried in our yard because there was no other place they could have a grave for their child. The next day my family went shopping for a nice jewelry box that could be used as a casket. The baby would not need anything any bigger than this since he was probably no more than six inches long. A casket was found and a priest had been contacted so the baby could be baptized and buried once he was born.

In Frost's poem "Home Burial" the words he wrote did not mean that much to me until I got to the lines "There are three stones of slate and one of marble, / it is not the stones, / But the child's mound—" (Frost 272). This is when I really thought about what the couple was arguing about, and it made me think of the time when my little brother had died. When Frost began talking about the grave that they could see when looking out the window of his house, I immediately thought of the grave that can be seen when looking out the window of our house. Once I had an image of the grave in my head, I began to relive and bring to memory all of the things my family and I had gone through when we lost a baby as I re-read the poem. The grave that Frost is describing is similar to that of my brother. As I read this, I was envisioning the stones that lay around my brother's grave. I saw the stones that lay in a circle surrounding the place where he was buried and the two special plaques that are in the middle. The one plaque had his name on it, Anthony Martin, and the date of his birth, March 14, 2002. The one that was

beside it had a special prayer my mother had written: “I prayed for this child and the Lord granted my request. Now I, in turn, give him to the Lord....”

As I read on through the poem, I realized everything that was written about was similar to something that had occurred at the time of Anthony’s death. When the man says to his wife, “Can’t a man speak of his own child he’s lost?” (Frost 273), it brought to mind of how often my own father as well as my mother and all of my siblings could often not speak of the son and brother we had lost. I thought of the day my father came home from work very early, only a couple of days after we had buried Anthony. He walked into the house looking very agitated because some of the guys he worked with had made such rude and upsetting comments to him about Anthony and how he was dealing with it that he could not stay at work for the rest of the day. People did not understand our loss and they thought it was ridiculously absurd for us to continue to think about Anthony. It was no big deal; just another baby. It did not matter any way. My parents could have more children, but they already had enough. How could people be so heartless as to say this to a couple who had just lost their child? Also, when the man makes the comment to his wife, “I do think, though, you overdo it a little. / You’d think his memory might be satisfied—” (Frost 273), it reminded me of all of the rude comments people made to our family, such as “That was two weeks ago. Shouldn’t you be over that by now?” Of course, these people were “over it.” They could not possibly understand what we had been through unless they had been through it themselves. They had not been in a hospital laboring for eight miserable hours to give birth to a dead baby. They were not waiting in the hospital waiting for the child to be born because they were to be the godparents of the baby and were to be there for his baptism as well as to be there to support their parents. These people obviously could not understand what we had been through, and their obnoxious comments really hurt and were unnecessary. Robert Frost could understand what we had been through, which we know through reading his poetry. This is why his poem meant so much to me, because he understood, like few others could, what my family and I had been through.

When the woman is speaking to her husband and she sneers at him saying, “If you had any feelings, you that dug / With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave” (Frost 274), I was very saddened as I once again saw the scene when my father and brother, with their own hands, were in our yard digging a hole to lay the little body of Anthony in. My father had to dig this hole knowing that it is the place where he soon would lay his own little boy’s body to rest eternally. I saw the sad faces of my father and brother as they trudged into the house after completing the difficult task of digging a grave for their son and brother. I thought of how my father’s usually strong hands were weakened and shaky as he laid Anthony’s body into the hole he had himself just dug and mounded the dirt over it again. This part of the poem meant the most to me because I cannot even begin to imagine how hard it must be for a father to have to dig his own child’s grave knowing that he soon would have to place his son in it and he would never see him again. I still can envision the scene so well of when Anthony was buried, and I watched as he was lowered into the ground by Dad, with Mom standing at his side, weeping, and all of the family gathered around, as well as Anthony’s godfather, a good friend of the family, and the priest.

This poem spoke to me as no other poem had because it was good to read the words of someone who had been through a situation like the one my family and I had been through. Although I do not want any one to have to experience what we did, since someone had been through a situation similar to what we had been through, it was good that he decided to share his story with the world. I am glad he shared his story because I realized there were people who could understand what we had been through. I also think, if people cared and actually listened to what Frost is saying in this poem, they could learn a lot from it. Even if they could not fully grasp what he had been through, they could learn from his words to be less judgmental of people’s actions when they are mourning the loss of a loved one because people do and say things they do not mean when they are upset or angered.

I think that if people had some concept of what Frost went through and what my family had been through, it might help more people to oppose abortion because they would realize what an awesome precious

gift God gave us by giving us the gift of life. It is not something we should mess around with. It is not for us on our own to decide whether we should take a life. If they could see a fetus at the different stages of its life before it was born, it would help them understand that the fetus is indeed a human life even before it is born into this world. If women really knew what they were killing when they had an abortion, many of them would probably not be able to go through with it. They are told that they are not really even carrying a baby, but that it is just a bunch of cells called a fetus and is not yet really a human life. Therefore, it is not killing a person, but simply aborting some cells that are not really anything yet. Many women have had babies murdered through abortion that were just as far along as Anthony was. If they saw Anthony the way I did, and they could see what the fetus looked like at this time during the pregnancy, I do not think women would so easily be able to kill that child. They would see that what they are carrying is and even looks like a baby. Millions of babies whose lives are stolen from them through the evil of abortion could have had their lives spared if women were more educated on what abortion was and if they were informed of what they were doing and what the consequences would be if they went through with the procedure. People talk of abortion so lightly that it sounds like it is not a big deal and that it is the easiest way out. What women do not realize is it is only a temporary fix and it will eventually cause them a lot more hurt and pain.

When Anthony was born, he was only fifteen weeks along. His little body was no more than six and a quarter inches long, and he only weighed 4.2 ounces. Although so young and so little, he was still a complete person in body and soul. He was fully developed and only needed more time to allow his little body and all of its parts to finish growing. All of his fingers and toes were there. His little nose, mouth, ears, and eyes were developed. If women could hold in their hand a baby at this time during the baby's life, they would see that they are killing a real live person. Women would see that they are murdering an innocent person who is completely developed and totally real. They would see that the baby should have a right to life because he or she is just as much of a person as they themselves are, only smaller. I was able to hold a

baby in my hand that should not have been brought into this world yet, and through this baby I was able to see how precious human life is at all stages.

I have always known that life should be treated with respect, being such an awesome precious gift given to us from God. I was raised to respect life at all stages from the moment of conception to natural death. Through my religion I was taught that practices such as abortion and euthanasia were wrong. I never realized how sacred this gift of life was until I saw and held the limp lifeless body of my little brother. When I looked at him, I wondered how anybody could kill such a beautiful innocent being. I realized people can be so cruel as to kill babies because they do not know and realize how beautiful and precious life is.

But I never realized, until I lost my little brother, how much love you could have for a person you had never known. I had never met him and had only known about him for a very short time, but I already fully loved him. When I realized he was gone from us forever, I missed him, yet I had never known him. Through watching my parents suffer I saw the kind of love parents have for their unborn children, and I saw the deep love and bonding relationship mothers have with the life they carry within them. They have already nurtured and cared for the baby. They have felt the touch of their child already from the kicking and moving the baby does inside of them. These are memories only a mother would have of her child, so she would feel the loss of that child in a completely different way than anybody else would.

Before women have an abortion they are not told that the memories they have of the child they carry will one day come back to haunt them. They are told and believe that once the abortion is done they will be through with the problem of the unwanted child and everything will once again be fine for them. Things may be fine for a little while until the mother realizes, sometimes years after she has had the abortion, what she has done. Women should be more informed about what they are doing before they are so quickly advised to have an abortion because that is what is best for them and the only way to solve their problem. These women that are not informed about what abortion is doing to them and their baby have to find out on their own that they will experience an

abundance of physical pain as well as even more emotional pain later on in life from the actions they had previously taken.

Although the loss of Anthony was a major loss to the entire family and we all have lost someone we had so much love for, I cannot even begin to imagine the pain that parents must feel when it is their child that has died. The couple in the poem were so lost and hurt after their son died. They were so lost and had so much hurt, resentment, and anger built up inside of them that they could not even turn to each other for comfort. When dealing with the loss of a child, whether it was taken by natural death or abortion, the only one to find true peace and comfort in is God. Sometimes it is hard to turn to the Lord knowing that he took the life that was so desperately wanted and so joyfully welcomed into the hearts of the parents and family, but we must realize that God gave us life and He can take it away. We must also realize that God is the only one that should take life and we should not decide among ourselves which people should have the right to live and which should not. God does everything for a reason. When we start to play with His ultimate plan by taking lives that He put on earth for a reason, it really messes things up. God puts each individual person on earth for a reason and we should not take a life away because there is something wrong with a person, such as if the person it is mentally handicapped in some way or just because that person seems to be a bother to us at the time. I know God put Anthony into the life of my family and me for a reason. Although we do not understand right now what that reason is, maybe one day we will or maybe we will never know. We just have to trust God and take what he gives us and learn to grow and learn from the experiences he puts us through during our lives. Maybe Anthony's story will one day touch the heart of a woman who was going to end her own child's life through the abortion and God put Anthony into this world for a short time to save the life of that baby.

Whatever God intended for Anthony to do, I know he has already made an impact in my life. Although I never really knew Anthony, he has taught me so much. Through his short life I realized the love one could have for a person he or she never knew, and I saw the love parents have for their unborn children. More importantly, I saw what a precious

and beautiful gift life is. As time goes on, the pain I felt when Anthony died has lessened, but I will never forget him and his memory will always live in me. You never forget a child that has died whether it is through natural death or abortion, but you keep that baby in your memory and a part of your life always.

i. Robert Frost, "Home Burial" in *Perrine's Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, 10th ed., edited by Thomas R. Arp and Greg Johnson (Fort Worth: Harcourt College, 2001), pp. 272-75.