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## ENG 200: The Approaches to Grief by Robert Frost & Joy Harjo

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Heaven Howard Tuesday 12:45-2:05

Heaven Howard  
Professor Hughes  
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Paper #2

In Robert Frost's "Home Burial" and Joy Harjo's "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window," readers see two drastically different approaches to the theme of loss. In Frost's poem, a couple loses their child and are learning how to survive such a tragedy, and in Harjo's piece, a woman grieves the life she has lived and the life she could have led. While both poems revolve around loss, each author uses individual methods to implement the same strategies. Robert Frost's "Home Burial" and Joy Harjo's "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window" use symbolism and form that mimic the characters' psychology to convey two different types of loss.

While both poems revolve around loss, the types of loss experienced are vastly different. In "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window," the type of loss described is the loss of oneself. Harjo's character lost her identity and control of her life and became so defeated that she found herself on the ledge of her tenement building. As devastating as it is, her loss is something that can be recovered or reclaimed. Harjo writes, "She thinks she remembers listening to her own life / break loose, as she falls from the 13<sup>th</sup> floor / window on the east side of Chicago, or as she / climbs back up to claim herself again" (lines 63-66). The author purposefully leaves the last stanza up for interpretation to show that the woman could have climbed up. On the other hand, in "Home Burial" the couple loses their only child; their loss is a physical loss, and no matter how hard they try, they will never get their child back. They must

work through their grief, learning how each other copes, with no escape. Both types of loss are valid; however, they are so different they are almost incomparable.

In “Home Burial” and “The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window,” symbolism is prevalent throughout, and it is used to express the situation that the characters find themselves in. For example, in “Home Burial” Robert Frost uses the setting and placement of the characters to symbolize the shifting dynamics throughout the poem. In the beginning of the piece, the wife, Amy, is at the top of the stairs while her husband is at the bottom. At the top, Amy can see her baby’s grave through a window, and she stares every time. Frost writes, “Looking back over her shoulder at some fear. / She took a doubtful step and then undid it / To raise herself and look again” (lines 3-5). She is so stuck to the image of her baby’s grave that she can’t make one step without going back to look. Meanwhile, at the bottom of the stairs, the husband cannot see the grave and does not know what she is looking at. Amy, who can’t descend the stairs without pausing, does not understand how her husband can’t not focus on the grave each time he passes. This placement symbolizes how Amy is separated from her husband not only physically but emotionally as well. As the poem progresses, their places are switched to emulate the different ways of processing grief. At the end, Amy finds herself by the door. Throughout the entirety of the poem, readers see Amy needing to process her grief by going to anyone other than her husband. Frost writes, “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” (lines 59-62). Amy grieves externally and keeps leaving and finding other people to talk to; in the end, her placement at the door shows that. Her husband grieves internally, though. He buries it down, and Amy misconstrues his coping mechanism as indifference. Toward the end, he is still on the stairs alone with a view of his child’s grave, and this symbolizes the fact

that he grieves internally. She has an exit to the outside world by the door, and that's how she grieves; meanwhile, he stays on the stairs to grieve alone and quietly.

Similarly, in "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window," Harjo uses liminal spaces to symbolize how "in-between" the woman has been her whole life. For example, the woman is hanging from the 13<sup>th</sup> floor, which is typically removed in buildings. It is ignored even though there is technically a thirteenth floor. The fact that the woman is hanging from the 13<sup>th</sup> floor window demonstrates how she feels like she is both existing and not existing. As a poor, Native American woman in Chicago, she can easily be looked over and feel like she doesn't exist. Another instance of liminal spaces in the poem includes the times. Harjo writes, "She thinks of the 4 a.m. loneliness that have folded / her up like death, discordant, without logical and / beautiful conclusion" (lines 56-59). 4 a.m. is liminal because it is the time between night and morning. Harjo also writes, "She sees the / sun falling west over the grey plan of Chicago" (lines 61-62). Both "grey" and "sunset" are liminal because grey is in between black and white, and the sunset is in between day and night. Throughout the poem, the woman feels torn between the life that she lived and the life she could have lived. She is stuck in this "in-between" phase, and Harjo expresses that through her symbolism. While both poems are similar in the fact that they use symbolism to convey the characters' situations, Frost uses character placement and Harjo uses liminal spaces.

Additionally, Frost and Harjo both use the form of their poems to convey how loss has affected the characters. In "Home Burial," Frost's poem is blank verse, which is unrhymed iambic pentameter. While it does not follow this structure strictly, it does have instances of iambic pentameter with feminine endings. Because "Home Burial" is more structured, it represents the ties of marriage. The poem loosely follows a form with its iambic pentameter, and

similarly, the married couple must follow the rules of marriage and society, despite having struggles because of the death of their child. This puts a strain on the characters. Alternatively, in “The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window,” Harjo’s poem is free verse, which is unrhymed and unmeasured. It represents the woman desperately wanting to free herself by any means necessary. It is not a poem that is constricted by anything, but it is free flowing, which is also representative of her thoughts as she hangs. Harjo writes, “She thinks of moonlight nights, and of cool spring storms. / Her mind chatters like neon and northside bars” (lines 54-55). Throughout the entire poem, she is thinking of everything spanning from her childhood to her ex-husbands to her children and how she has given a piece of herself to all of them; the free verse conveys that. However, when there is rhyme, it is internal and describing her different roles. Harjo says, “She thinks of Carlos, or Margaret, or Jimmy. / She thinks of her father, and of her mother. / She thinks of all the women she has been, of all / the men. She thinks of the color of her skin” (lines 49-51). Rhyme is naturally binding because when you read a rhyme, it is straight to the point with very little deviation. Harjo’s use of rhyme can be indicative of how those roles caused her to be restrained and lose bits of herself little pieces at a time. The free verse and bits of rhyme are used to convey the woman’s racing mind as the realization of her loss dawns and takes its effect on her.

The poems “Home Burial” and “The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window” both address the theme of loss. However, the approach they use are specific to each author. Robert Frost and Joy Harjo wrote “Home Burial” and “The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window” to explain two specific types of loss, and through the use of symbolism and form, they convey the effect loss has on their characters’ psychology.

Works Cited

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