UNIT 13: ROBERT FROST'S *'HOME BURIAL' AND AFTER APPLE PICKING'*

Structure:

13.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- know about the works of Robert Frost
- comprehend "Home Burial" as distinctly different from his other works
- understand human tragedy in the context of this text
- locate social forces as determining the discourse of the couple's life, hence the pragmatics of individual emotions pitted against or getting shaped by dominant social mores
- comprehend a picture of a couple who have lost their child.
    - know about the works of Robert Frost
    - comprehend "After Apple Picking" as distinctly different from his other works
    - understand the ritual of apple picking broadly in the context of this text
    - locate social forces as determining the discourse of an apple picker's life, hence the pragmatics of individual aspirations pitted against or getting shaped by dominant social mores
    - comprehend a picture of a society in England.

13.1 INTRODUCTION

13.1.1 The Writer's Bio-brief:

Robert Frost was born on March 26th, 1874. Considered one of the most celebrated poets in America, Robert Frost was an author of searching and

often dark meditations on universal themes. A quintessentially modern poet in his adherence to language as it is actually spoken. Robert Frost's work was highly associated to rural life in New England. The poet often uses the New England setting to explore intricate philosophical and social themes. As a well-known and often-quoted poet, Robert Frost was highly honored during his life-time, receiving four Pulitzer Prizes. As a city boy, Frost grew up perceptive of so many things in life and had his first poem published in Lawrence, Massachusetts. In 1892, he attended Darthmouth College for just less than a semester. In 1912 Frost went to Glasgow with his family and later lived in Beaconsfield. Subsequently, Frost published his first book titled A Boy's Will in 1913. In England, Robert Frost made important contacts including T. E. Hulme, Edward Thomas, and Ezra Pound. They were the first Americans to write a favorite review on Robert Frost's work. Some of the first pieces of his poetic works were written while living in England.

In 1915, Frost launched a career in writing, lecturing and teaching. From 1916-1938 he became an English professor at Amherst College. While a professor at Amherst College, he advised his writing students to always bring the notion of the human voices to their craft. From 1921 onwards and the next forty-two years of his life, he had three great expectations. Over the course of his career, he became popular for poems involving interplay of voices such as Death of the Hired Man or dramas. Frost's work was highly popular and it remained so. Among Frost popular shorter poems are "Mending Wall", "Directive", "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", "The Road Not Taken", "Nothing Gold Can Stay", "Fire and Ice", "After Apple Picking".

13.1.2 Summary of Home Burial:

The poem presents a few moments of emotional discourse in a strained relationship between a rural husband and wife who have lost a child. The woman is distressed after catching sight of the child's grave through the window. She breaks down when her husband does not recognize the cause of her distress. She tries to go away the house; for she feels there is nothing more in their relationship, however he importunes her to stay, and share her grief with him—to give him a chance. He fails to understand what it is he does that offends her or why she should grieve for so long. She resents him deeply for his self-possession, what she sees as his hard-heartedness. She becomes hysterical and vents some of her anger and frustration, and he receives it, but the detachment between them remains. She opens the door to leave, as he calls after her.

13.2 ANALYSIS

In terms of form, this poem is a dramatic or pastoral lyric poem, using free-form dialogue rather than strict rhythmic schemes. Frost generally uses five stressed syllables in each line and divides stanzas in terms of lines of speech.

The poem describes two tragedies: first, the death of a young child, and second, the death of a marital relationship. As such, the title "Home Burial," can be read as a tragic binary entendre. Although the death of the child is the mechanism of the couple's tribulations, the larger conflict that destroys

the marriage is the couple's incapability to commune with one another. Both characters are angst at the loss of the child, but neither of them, is able to comprehend the way that their cohort chooses to express their sorrow.

The setting of the poem is unique – a staircase with a door at the bottom and a window at the top – mechanically sets up the relationship between the characters. The wife stands at the top of the stairs, directly in front of the window overlooking the burial ground, while the husband stands at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at her. While the couple shares the tragedy of their child's death, they are at odd position in terms of dealing with their sorrow.

With her position adjoining to the window, the wife is clearly still fraught with her grief over the loss of her child. Unable to move on at this point in her life, the wife defines her individuality in terms of the loss and would rather grieve for the rest of her life than grieve as a sort of facade. The husband has dealt with his sorrow more effectively, as evidenced by his location at the bottom of the staircase, close to the door and the outside world. As a farmer, the husband is more compliant of the natural cycle of life and death in general, but also chooses to grieve in a more physical manner: by digging the grave for his child. Ironically, the husband's expression of his sorrow is utterly misunderstood by the wife; she views his behavior as a sign of his insensitive indifference.

13.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE

The title "Home Burial" denotes the death of the child, which antecedes the poem, and connotes the death of the relationship between the couple which the poem foreshadows. It utilizes the figure of speech called adianoeta, or double entendre. In this narrative poem, Frost describes a tense exchange between a rural couple whose child has recently died. The poem opens, in a dramatic manner, the wife is standing at the top of a staircase looking at her child's grave through the window. Her husband, at the bottom of the stairs, does not understand what she is looking at or why she has suddenly become so distraught. The wife resents her husband's indifference and attempts to leave the house. The husband begs her to stay and talk to him about her grief; he does not understand why she is upset with him for expressing his sorrow in a different way. Devastated, the wife lashes out at him, convinced of his lack of concern toward their dead child. The husband placidly accepts her resentment, but the fissure between them remains. She leaves the house as he angrily threatens to drag her back by force. Hence the significance of the title.

13.4 EXPLORING DIFFERENT RESPONSES TO TRAGEDY IN "HOME BURIAL"

"Home Burial" is about grief and grieving, but most of all it seems to be about the collapse and confines of communication. The husband and the wife represent two very diverse ways of grieving. The wife's sorrow infuses every part of her and does not diminish with time. She has been compared to a female character in Frost's *A Masque of Mercy,* of whom another character says, "She's had some loss she can't accept from God." The wife comments

that most people make only deceit of following a loved one to the grave, when in truth their minds are "making the best of their way back to life / And living people, and things they understand." She, however, will not accept this kind of sorrow; will not turn from the grave back to the world of living, for to do so is to accept the death. Instead she proclaims that "the world's evil."

On the other hand, the husband has accepted the death. Time has passed, and he in a more judicious manner can now say, "That's the way of the world," than, "The world's evil." He too lost his child, but the external expressions of his grief were entirely different from those of his wife. He threw himself into the awful task of digging his own child's grave—into physical work. This action further acquaintances the father with a "way-of-the-world" mentality, with the natural cycles that make up the farmer's life, with an organic view of life and death. The father did not leave the task of burial to someone else, instead, he physically dug into the earth and planted his child's body in the soil.

Frost had himself experienced the loss of his own children and could deeply feel the misery associated with the same. Therefore, there is a personal touch to the response of the man "Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?" People are taught only to experience the loss and not to vent it out as it would be conceived as brutal. Frost here voices his own views on the same as he claims that it would not depersonalize the person or fact in question. The mother is of the opinion that a man must sometimes abstain from the aspects of being a man when he is with a woman. For a man, by principle, to indulge in emotions has been stereotyped by societal norms as 'effeminacy.' However, the man in the "Home Burial" does move toward her in an act of not only to coming close to her emotionally, but also listens to her resentments. He further promises not to mention anything that would offend her, that would add more to her sorrow. He entreats with her that if he could not communicate in a manner according to her dictates, at least he be taught to do so. He frantically implores with her for an opportunity to work their strained relationship.

The reasons for the wife to be wan into a cocooned life are not limited to the present circumstances alone. She still harbors in her mind the figure of the man digging the grave of his child with his own hands. While he chose to express his love in a realistic manner, she chose to live it psychologically and sensitively. The very act of digging the grave comes across as coldblooded and callous to her, and is portrayed like the functioning of a robot.

"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 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"

The scene of the woman leaving the house and shutting the door behind her at the end of the poem is evocative of the last scene in Henrik Ibsens's *A Doll's House.* The wife in "Home Burial", like Nora, feels claustrophobic. The door is their outlet to liberty. When the man says: "Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs," it connotes more than it denotes. He assures her that he will not revert to his earlier bearing. Though he attempts to be in line with his wife's wishes, the patriarch in him eventually does assert itself as he declares:

"Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.

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

13.5 "AFTER APPLE- PICKING" BY ROBERT FROST

1. **Summary of *After Apple Picking***

   This poem is in the first person, and the narrator is a hardworking apple picker, a simple man who has been picking apples in an apple orchard all day long, and is now overcome with exhaustion, not only because of the work, but also because of his immense experience of picking apples. It is winter, and the fast-approaching night is making him drowsy. He knows he still has a lot of apples to pick, but does not want to work anymore. He feels the depth of his experience is going to make him dream vividly about apple-picking even while he is asleep. He tries to shake the drowsiness off him, and tries to concentrate on picking apples because he has to take great care and not let any apple fall to the ground, as then it will be considered worthless. The narrator thinks about how tired he is, and how he wants to let sleep wash away his fatigue, and wonders if it will be a normal 'human' sleep, or a deep, hibernating sleep like the woodchuck.

2. **Analysis**

   My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree Toward heaven still,

   The narrator, who is the apple-picker, has a long ladder which he uses to pick apples. There is a biblical allusion to the mention of the ladder standing upright, it reminds one of Jacob's dreams of a ladder that reached Heaven.

   And there's a barrel that I didn't fill

   Beside it, and there may be two or three

   Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.

   But I am done with apple-picking now.

   The apple picker has been picking apples all day, and still there are some the apples on that tree. He still has one more barrel to fill with picked apples, but he is extremely tired and exhausted. He knows he

should finish picking all the apples, but he somehow cannot continue with apple picking.

Essence of winter sleep is on the night,

The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.

These lines tells us that it is the onset of winter and night is fast approaching. To put it differently the narrator has spent all day picking apples, and is exhausted by the work. He then compares sleep to an 'essence' in the winter air, and feels this essence smells like apples, which again tells us about the effect of hard work on him. He is feeling too sleepy, and feels like as if he is going to fall asleep there on the ladder itself.

Cannot rub the strangeness from my sight

I got from looking through a pane of glass

I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough

And held against the world of hoary grass.

It melted, and I let it fall and break.

The narrator then mentions of a 'strangeness' in his sight, which is ascribed to an incident he had experienced earlier that day. The narrator had found a thin sheet of glass on his water trough (water container) when he went to get a drink water early in the morning. As he held the sheet of ice in his hands and looked through it everything appeared strange and distorted. When the ice began to melt in his hand, he let the sheet fall to the ground and break, but this did not change the strangeness in his sight, which is causing him to look at the world in a total, different way. This incident has left an indelible imprint in his mind.

But I was well

Upon my way to sleep before it fell,

And I could tell

What form my dreaming was about to take.

Though he dropped the sheet of ice in real life, the incident leaves him shaken and causes a whirlpool in his mind before he goes off to sleep. He ruminates about the entire day's activities. He is about to get ready to sleep, and tries to predict the nature of his dreams.

Magnified apples appear and disappear,

Stem end and blossom end,

And every fleck of russet showing clear.

The narrator does dream about apples—picking them and tossing them into the chosen barrels. In his dream, the apples are ''magnified'', and look very different than in real life. Even in his dream he can almost visualize the russet-colored spot (reddish-brown fleck) on the apples. His dream has become apple-laden.

My instep arch not only keeps the ache,

It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.

I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.

He has a practical dream. He can even feel the pressure of standing on the ladder on his feet, and even in his sleep feel how his feet ache by standing on the ladder through out the day. He still can feel himself standing on the ladder, and also feel the ladder moving against the apple tree's branches.

And I keep hearing from the cellar bin

The rumbling sound

Of load on load of apples coming in.

The speaker is almost living a realistic dream. He can clearly hear the sound of the apples being offloaded into the bins where they will be sorted. Even in his dream he dreams only of apples, the ache on his feet, the loading process of the apples, the sorting etc.

For I have had too much

Of apple-picking: I am overtired

Of the great harvest I myself desired.

The apple picker is worn-out of doing the same work for years. He has picked countless apples all through his life and remembers how he always looked forward to the harvest season. That is when he becomes most busy. However, he is now a changed man. He no longer feels excited about the apple-picking season.

There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,

Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.

For all

That struck the earth,

No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,

Went surely to the cider-apple heap

As of no worth.

The narrator then goes on to describe his work as an apple-picker, and the utmost care that all the apple pickers have to take when picking apples. He excitedly talks about 'ten thousand sand' fruit, (exaggeration) which had to be very carefully unloaded into the barrels. Even if one apple fell down, and touched the ground, and remained unspoiled, it was thrown into the cider heap. Interestingly the apples in the cider heap are usually considered useless.

One can see what will trouble

This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.

Were he not gone,

The woodchuck could say whether it's like his

Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,

Or just some human sleep.

The apple picker is now sure that he is going to have visions of picking apples, in his dream, dropping them, and standing on the ladder on his aching feet. He is uncertain about what kind of sleep he is going to get—the normal 'human' kind, or the kind a woodchuck

(students read: a groundhog) gets to experience in the winter. It is already winter, and the woodchuck has gone into hibernation. What The narrator is extremely worn-out, and needs some well-deserved rest. Metaphorically, this also means that the narrator is wondering whether he will even wake up to life the next morning, or not.

a. **Significance of the title:**

Thoughts about falling ice and falling apples lead to suggestions of lost innocence and worldly corruption. Throughout the poem, both rhyme and line-length are manipulated and varied with subtlety. Frost here plays with the mystery of the rhymes—when will they come and how abruptly—keeps words and sounds active and hovering over several lines. We also find the greatest separation between rhyming end-words at the end of the poem. Let us analyse deeply. *Sleep* comes seven lines after its partner, *heap,* and in the interim, *sleep* has surfaced thrice in the middle of lines. Sleep is, in fact, all over the poem; this particular word appears six times. But the way Frost has delivered here, the last rhyme shows his craftsmanship. An in-depth study shows that the word *heap* first rhymes internally with *sleep,* then again internally with *sleep,* and then again, and only pairs up with the end-word *sleep* again in the last line of the poem. After a point of time, we nearly forgot the word *heap. Sleep* seems to rhyme with itself, with its repetition, like a sleepy mantra or a sleep-inducing counting of sheep. The poet arrives at ultimate *sleep* not through a wham-bang rhyming couplet but more "sleepily."

In an essay for *The Atlantic Monthly*, "After Apple-Picking", writes Robert Frost (1946), "is about picking apples, but with its ladders pointing "[t] oward heaven still," with its great weariness, and with its rumination on the harvest, the coming of winter, and inhuman sleep, the reader feels certain that the poem harbours some "ulteriority." "Final sleep" is certainly one interpretation of the "long sleep" that the poet contrasts with human sleep. The sleep of the woodchuck is the sleep of winter, and winter, in the metaphoric language of seasons, has brawny associations with death. There are abundant hints of winter: The scent of apples is "the essence of winter sleep"; the water in the trough froze into a "pane of glass"; the grass is "hoary" (i.e., frosty, or Frosty). One ponders is the impending death destructive or creative? The harvest of apples can be interpreted as a harvest of any human effort—and the poem looks at the end of the harvest.

The sequence and tenses of the poem are a bit confusing and lead the readers to wonder what is dreamed, what is real, and where the sleep begins. The readers can comprehend that the speaker should be exhausted at the end of a day's apple picking. But the poem says that the speaker was well on his way to sleep before he dropped the sheet of ice, and this presumably occurred in the morning. The speaker has tried and failed to "rub the strangeness" from his sight. Many questions arise in our mind. One wonders as to whether this a strangeness induced by exhaustion or indicative of the fact that he is dreaming already? Has he, in fact, been dreaming as he looked through the "pane of glass" and entered a through-the-looking-glass world

of "magnified apples" and the "rumbling sound / Of load on load of apples coming in"? The readers also wonder whether the sheet of ice is simply a dizzying lens which has an enduring effect on the mind of the narrator. To put it differently, the speaker was well on his way to sleep in the morning, thus this lends a greater, more ominous weight to the long sleep "coming on" at end of the poem.

The title thus throws light on the entire poem. It is a metaphor for the changes in life that are experienced by every person. Frost's poem focuses mainly on sleep—be it the end of a hectic day, or the end of life. It could also be that the apple-picking is symbolic for all the hardships one has to face in life, before embracing death, before falling asleep forever.

13.6 SUMMING UP

To return to the beginning and sum up this Unit in the light of the 'Objectives' we had set as the preamble, you should, after reading this, be able to:

- Locate where the uniqueness of *Home Burial* lies in the light of Frost's other works
- Identify the importance of peace as a way of the lives of common people
- Situate man in society, as being both in conformity with and in opposition to social forces – the incumbent results of such positions
- To understand the workings of change in a couple's life that stands at some remove from the mainstream husband-wife relationship, and is yet affected by winds of lack of communication
- And finally, to study human emotional factors in the light of all this

To return to the beginning and sum up this Unit in the light of the 'Objectives' we had set as the preamble, you should, after reading this, be able to:

- Locate where the uniqueness of *After Apple Picking* lies in the light of Frost's other works
- Identify the importance of sleep and rest as a way of the lives of common people
- Situate an ordinary man like an apple picker in society, as being both in conformity with and in opposition to social forces – the incumbent results of such positions
- To understand the workings of an apple-picker and what he feels about his life
- And finally, to study human emotional factors in the light of all this

13.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (QUESTIONS)

(Possible questions of "Home Burial")

1. What do you think happens to the couple after the end of the poem, and why?

2. Which character in this poem do you identify with more, and why?
3. Do you agree with what the woman says in lines 101-109, that no matter what people pretend, everyone dies alone? Why, or why not?
4. Which character do you think has the most power in this relationship? Does the power shift as the poem progresses? How so?
5. Do you agree or disagree with the woman's disgust at the man's manner of digging their son's grave (lines 75-92)? What's your reasoning?
6. What's the effect of having most of the poem in dialogue? Would you have rather come at it from the wife's perspective? Or the husband's?

(Possible questions of "After Apple Picking") :

1) Comment on Frost's use of metaphors and imagery in *After Apple Picking.*
2) What is the speaker's state of mind in Robert Frost's poem *After Apple Picking*?
3) What is the main theme of Robert Frost's *After Apple Picking*?

13.8 SELECT READING LIST

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