

## The Hill Wife

Frost was being typical Frost when he wrote “The Hill Wife”. It shows the slow deterioration of a woman’s marriage and the loss of herself to darkness. She tries multiple times to grab on to something, but everything, ultimately, falls apart in a way similar to what we see in Frost’s “The Wood Pile”. The difference is that the protagonist in “The Wood Pile” lives for finding new ways to hold on, while the wife uses it all up and falls away into chaos. Using Frost terms, she uses up all of her metaphors, her ways of keeping the darkness at bay, and is succumbed to the darkness.

“The Hill Wife” begins with the wife’s realization that the metaphor her and her husband were using is no longer going to work. “One ought not to care / So much as you and I / Care when the birds come round the house / To seem to say goodbye.” Her and her husband have been using these birds as a distraction from their failing marriage. She realizes that they cannot do so any longer.

In the same section, the wife compares her and her husband to “... birds that fill their breasts / But with each other and themselves”. I believe this means that the birds are content with who they are and with whom they spend their time with. The couple is saddened because the birds have better lives than they do. They do not have crumbling relationships and are happy with themselves.

The section titled “House Fear” in “The Hill Wife” is a little tricky, but I’ll try to work my way through it. The couple are returning “To the lonely house from far away / To lamps unlighted and fire gone gray”. They have been away for long enough that the fire has gone out and have to return to a dark house. “They learned to rattle the lock and key / To give whatever might chance to be / Warning and time to be off in flight.” At this

point, we see the couple shaking the door handle loud enough to scare off whatever hides inside. When I first read this, I thought that they were giving themselves a chance to flee from their marriage. I think it is more accurate to say that the house is a metaphor for their marriage, and the couple is trying to get all of their problems out. They do not want to face their issues head on; they want them to just disappear. The couple, or at least the wife, sees that they are not even trying to make their marriage better.

“And preferring the out- to the in-door night, / They learned to leave the house-door wide / Until they had lit the lamp inside”. Their marriage is so bad, that they prefer to be in the darkness, outside and exposed, than in the darkness within the home. They leave the door open as a path to flee from the problems within their house, within their marriage.

I think the house is the first man-made metaphor the wife uses after she realizes ignoring the problem will no longer work. She uses the metaphor to tell herself that the problems will just go away. Obviously this is just going to fall apart, because their issues will not just disappear.

I think a connection can be made between “They learned to rattle the lock and key” and “Her fingers moved the latch for all reply” in Frost’s poem “Home Burial”. The situations are very different, but I think the grabbing of the doorknob or latch signifies a vital point in the marriages of both poems. In “The Hill Wife”, this is just after the wife’s realization that there are problems in the marriage. This segment is the first time she chooses to do something to fix these issues; she chooses to just let them disappear on their own.

“The Smile” is the section that really shows the reader that the wife may be a little paranoid. “I didn’t like the way he went away. / That smile! It never came of being gay.” This beggar’s smiling really bothers the wife. She thinks there is no way the beggar could be happy, so there had to be another reason behind his smile.

Perhaps because we have him only bread  
And the wretch knew from that that we were poor.  
... Perhaps he mocked us for being wed,  
Or being very young (and he was pleased  
To have a vision of us old and dead).

She thinks this random beggar knows everything. She thinks he has seen right through her right to the issues with their marriage. This is not logical thinking, so this is the first time we see the wife as a little crazy. We also now know that they are a poor, young couple. You can infer from this that some of their problems may have sprung from their early marriage. The wife may have not been able to truly find herself before she married; regret may be part of her issue.

There is another step to her paranoia that “The Smile” reveals. “I wonder how far down the road he’s got. / He’s watching from the woods as lie as not.” Not only does the beggar know her problems, he sticks around and actively watches her. She thinks people are following her and keeping up with the drama in her life. She’s paranoid and a little bit arrogant to think that everyone is so concerned with her marital issues. But it also goes a little more than that. She thinks they like the idea of her and her husband being “old and dead.” She thinks everyone wants their marriage to fail.

I think the metaphor she uses this time around comes a little earlier in “The Smile”. “Perhaps because he let us give instead / Of seizing from us as he might have seized.” I think this is a metaphor for how poor their marriage is. The beggar did not just steal from the couple because he knew they were poor. If they had more, she believes he would have just taken what he wanted. I think this reflects the marriage, and she is trying to take comfort in this fact. Their marriage is poor, thus there is not much to take. If their marriage had been prosperous, it would have just been taken away. She is okay with the state of their marriage, because it would end up being brought down to that level no matter what.

“The Oft-Repeated Dream” finds the couple in their bedroom. This is important because the bedroom is considered the most sacred place for a married couple and symbolizes the extent of their love. “For the dark pine that kept / Forever trying the window-latch / Of the room where they slept.” This is a fairly common occurrence. There is a tree outside the window sounding like someone scratching, trying to get in. The wife thinks people are trying to pry and get inside, not just their marriage, but also the deepest part of it. “The tireless but ineffectual hands / That with every futile pass / Made the great tree seem as a little bird”. This is the wife’s next and final metaphor. Everyone is trying to pry into their marriage, yet because they cannot get in, she turns them into just a bird. The real reason no one is getting in, is because nobody is actually trying to, but she consoles herself by turning these prying, peeping toms into a simple bird. I think this could be calling back on the birds that her and her husband used as distractions. The invasion of their marriage is just a distraction.

“And only one of the two / Was afraid in an oft-repeated dream / Of what the tree might do.” This is the kicker here. This is where the reader knows for certain that the wife is paranoid, and all of the previous things were in here head. Although he probably notices his wife acting strangely, the husband does not think anything is wrong. He does not see the people analyzing their marriage and trying to break in. The whole problem is her paranoia.

The final segment, “The Impulse”, lacks a metaphor, which I think is very important. This is when we see the destruction of the marriage and the wife giving herself up to the chaos. I get brought back to the bedroom scene with this line: “And since there were but two of them, / And no child”. I think the wife believes that a child is the only thing that can actually fix her marriage. I believe that, since she believes this, she would have a child as soon as possible, yet there is “no child”. She is unable to have children. She tries to ignore, push away, or minimize the problems in her marriage, but the only thing that can fix it is something she cannot do. She then gives up.

“And work was little in the house, / She was free”. The mention of house goes back to the metaphor she used in “House Fear”, and she is using it to describe her marriage. There is nothing more she can do to help the marriage, so she leaves. The absolutely ending of their marriage comes when “[s]he went to break a bough / Of black alder.” This sharp image is the very moment when she gives up on their marriage, and it ends. “She strayed so far she scarcely heard / When he called her – / And didn’t answer – didn’t speak – / Or return.” I don’t think she actually physically leaves. I think she just loses her mind. The husband is trying to reach out to her, but she no longer mentally

there. She completely blocks him out. He even "... asked at her mother's house / Was she there." No one can reach her; she has blocked out everyone.

The ending of the marriage is quite sad. "Sudden and swift and light as that / The ties gave, / And he learned of finalities / Besides the grave." I do not believe they actually got a divorce. Their marriage was just nothing anymore. It ended quickly and all at once. She retreated into herself, and that was that. I think the final two lines are vital. It reminds me of wedding vows: "Till death do us part." It shows that death is not the only thing that can end a marriage.

"The Impulse" is when the wife finally realizes that she has no more metaphors to create and cling to. She went through her different metaphors to hold on to the little bit of order that she had. Yet it was all a distraction from the fact that the one metaphor she needed, a child, was impossible to her. She used up all of her metaphors and thus succumbed to the chaos.