

The struggle of the modern individual: analyzing the poetry of frost and komunyak...

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We all experience hardship. No matter who you are or where you're from, you're bound to face some sort of struggle. Whether it's something as small and inconvenient as your car breaking down or as big and monumental as the death of someone close to you, struggle is inevitable. Not everyone deals with their struggles the same way. What may serve as a great outlet for one may not work as well for others. Nonetheless, art and writing in particular tend to be a very useful way of expressing one's emotions and dealing with the hardship they face. The issue of struggle faced by the modern individual is seen in poems "Home Burial" and "Out, Out" by Robert Frost as well as in "My Father's Love Letters" and "Facing It" by Yusef Komunyakaa.

Throughout life, experiencing struggle in any form is inevitable. There are not many poets that understand this as well as Robert Frost. His poem "Home Burial" speaks of a couple who have lost a child. As the child's mother makes her way down the staircase, she sees her child's grave outside the window in the yard. This is the first time she noticed it from this viewpoint. The couple has had a hard time dealing with this loss. Catching sight of the grave leaves the woman distraught, and at first her husband is confused as to what is bothering her. This causes her to want to flee the house, but her husband begs her to stay, saying "Amy! Don't go to someone else this time./ Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs" (Frost). The loss of a child puts enough strain on a couple. What's even worse is their inability to properly communicate and work through their issues. The husband says "My words are nearly always an offense./ I don't know how to speak of anything/ So as to please you" (Frost). He claims that no matter what he says, it's always not what Amy wants to hear. He can't figure out what exactly he

needs to do differently. Amy goes on to vent and share some of her frustration with him, but to no avail. The piece ends with the husband calling out to his wife as she makes her way through the door.

Another poem in which Frost touches on the topic of struggle is “ Out, Out”. It tells of a young boy living in New England who is out cutting firewood in his yard. He is just old enough to be working. Whilst cutting the wood, he hears his sister yell to him that supper is ready. In his excitement he jumps and badly cuts his hand, nearly chopping it off. “ The boy’s first outcry was a rueful laugh,/ As he swung toward them holding up the hand/ Half in appeal, but half as if to keep/ The life from spilling” (Frost). The boy almost laughs until he realizes how horribly injured he is. He then begins to beg his family to help him stop his hand from bleeding. A doctor soon comes to the house, and the boy begs his sister to not let him get rid of his hand. “ The doctor put him in the dark of ether./ He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath./ And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright./ No one believed. They listened to his heart./ Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it” (Frost). The boy is put under anesthesia and the doctor amputates the injured hand. During the process his heart rate slows and eventually comes to a stop as he dies. It is unfortunate enough that this boy had to begin working at such a young age in order for his family to survive. He missed out on having a normal childhood that he could enjoy. To make matters worse, one false move gave him an injury that cost him his life. Despite his struggle to work to keep his family alive, in the end the boy still is unable to avoid death; and an early death at that.

When it comes to inspiration, Yusef Komunyaaka builds his poems upon his own personal experiences and how he finds meaning in them. Mainly, he writes about the many struggles he has faced throughout his life. In “ My Father’s Love Letters”, Komunyakaa writes about growing up with a dysfunctional family. He tells of his father who works hard at the mill and comes home asking Yusef to write letters for him to his mother. “ On Fridays he’d open a can of Jax/ After coming home from the mill,/ & ask me to write a letter to my mother/ Who sent postcards of desert flowers/ Taller than men” (Komunyakaa). It is clear that his father is illiterate, which is why he can’t write the letters himself. Also the two are separated, which is why his father is writing letters to his mother. We can see his use of personification here when he describes the desert flowers as being taller than men. There is a big juxtaposition here as well. While his father is doing hard labor trying to support himself and his son, his partner seems to have found a new and better life without him. Komunyakaa goes on to say “ He would beg,/ Promising to never beat her/ Again” (Komunyakaa). This line reveals that the reason why his parents are separated is because his father is abusive. In line 12 he says “ His carpenter’s apron always bulged/ With old nails, a claw hammer/ Looped at his side & extension cords Coiled around his feet./ Words rolled from under the pressure/ Of my ballpoint...” (Komunyakaa).

Komunyakaa uses concrete imagery to describe the setting of the tool shed as well as the way his father looks. The shed is littered with objects just as his mind is littered with his emotions. The use of hard and sharp objects in this description conjures up the feeling that Yusef is intimidated by, and possibly afraid of his father. The imagery surely describes his father’s

character. The choice of language is particularly important here. He mentions writing with a ballpoint pen, a tool that writes very smoothly and easily. Yet, he is putting a lot of pressure on the pen. This shows the tension of the scene, signaling that Yusef does not want to be writing this letter.

Komunyakaa speaks about more than his struggles as a child. He also recounts the time he spent as a correspondent in the Vietnam War. “Facing It” is a poem telling of his experience visiting the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D. C. The piece opens with the lines “ My black face fades,/ hiding inside the black granite” (Komunyakaa). Yusef connects himself to the memorial by stating how both the memorial and his skin are black. This makes the experience all the more personal to him. There is slight alliteration with the use of the words “ face fades”. He goes on to say “ I said I wouldn’t/ dammit: No tears./ I’m stone. I’m flesh.” (Komunyakaa). Yusef told himself he wouldn’t get emotional, but he does. He uses a simile to compare his strength to that of the granite, then to claim he’s weak like flesh. Yusef is identifying contrast between who he wants to be and who he actually is. He goes on to say “ My clouded reflection eyes me/ like a bird of prey, the profile of night/ slanted against morning” (Komunyakaa). Again, we see a simile used when he compares his reflection to a “ bird of prey”. Then Komunyakaa sees a fellow veteran, saying “ A white vet’s image floats/ closer to me, then his pale eyes/ look through mine. I’m a window./ He’s lost his right arm/ inside the stone” (Komunyakaa). Once comparing himself to stone and flesh, Yusef is now using a metaphor to say he is a window. This fellow veteran can see through him, possibly seeing his past on the

battlefield since he had some of the same experiences. Also he has lost an arm 'inside the stone', signaling that the loss was a causality of war.

Struggle continues to be a big influence on all artists, especially writers. In a journal article named "A Conversation with Yusef Komunyakaa", the interviewer Mena Mitrano mentions Yusef's piece "My Father's Love Letters". Mitrano is recounting the poem, saying "Your father comes back home from the mill...He is laboring over simple words, focusing on wooing back his reader- your mother...it stages- in the best sense of the word- a scene of apprenticeship in which a parent or ancestor who sometimes can only sign his name, nevertheless becomes the young writer's mentor and first teacher. That seems to happen in your poem. As he stands there, "redeemed by what he tried to say", the father transmits to the child a core knowledge about language. The achievement of the poem to me lies in its capacity to preserve the power of this transmission despite the violence of the father..." (Mitrano). Mitrano expresses how despite the fact that Yusef's father was violent and illiterate, he still managed to make a big impact on his life. He was a mentor to him, and Yusef drew inspiration from him as well as their relationship. It is one of the many struggles that inspired his future work, such as "My Father's Love Letters" and "Facing It". Robert Frost also faced his fair share of struggles throughout his life, beginning during his youth. A biography written by Ellen Bailey says his father William "...was an alcoholic and a womanizer, and was unpredictably brutal. When Robert was two years old, pregnant Isabelle left William for several months...From early childhood, Robert had been beset by nervous illnesses, and he was usually

kept home from school as a result. Although his mother tried to teach lessons at home, he received very little formal schooling as a young child” (Ellen). Beginning at only two years old, Robert dealt with issues at home. He seemed to be unable to escape his troubles as he aged, considering his daughter died of puerperal fever and his wife died after suffering from a heart attack and then cancer (Ellen). These events definitely inspired Frost’s work, with his biography stating “ Not much of Frost’s poetry is cheerful. Works such as “ An Old Man’s Winter Night” (“ Mountain Interval,” 1916) and “ Death of the Hired Man” (“ North of Boston,” 1914) deal with the fear of alienation, loneliness and death. “ Home Burial” (“ North of Boston,” 1914) is a highly emotional poem about the death of both a child and a marriage” (Ellen).

The poems “ Out, Out” and “ Home Burial” by Robert Frost as well as “ My Father’s Love Letters” and “ Facing It” by Yusef Komunyakaa exemplify the issue of struggle faced by the modern individual. In Frost’s “ Home Burial”, we meet a couple trying to come to terms with the loss of a child. Their situation only snowballs as they struggle to communicate with each other effectively while they are grieving. Rather than being there for each other during this difficult time, they only add to each other’s frustration. In Frost’s “ Out, Out” we see a young boy who has to begin working from a very young age to support his family. His normal childhood has been stolen from him. It only gets worse for him once he injures himself while working, and eventually dies from his injury. In Komunyakaa’s “ My Father’s Love Letters”, a boy has to face the reality of his parents separating. When living with his

abusive and illiterate father, he is forced to help him write love letters to send to his mother. The boy struggles to deal with his emotions. Finally in Komunyakaa's "Facing It", the author recounts the time he spent fighting in the Vietnam war. This experience has had a huge impact on him, and to this day still affects him emotionally. He struggles to figure out who he is as a person.