

Richard Poirier: On "The Witch of Coös"

Frost's sense of the plight of women who have nothing but a home to keep - with too little work if childless, too much if there are boarders or workers on the farm - is responsible for a series of remarkable poems about the frustrations of imagination and its consequent expression in the distorted forms of obsession, lies, or madness. Very often "home" is the prison of madness, recognized as such by the keepers and so acknowledged by the victims. . . .

A pattern seems to emerge from these poems. In "The Witch of Coös". . . we have a woman imagining a figure of insane, frustrated, and obscene sexuality caged in a house with a married couple. And this married couple, too, is ever so subtly characterized as possibly sexless, possibly frigid, and therefore potentially obscene. On the night of her vision

The bulkhead double doors were double-locked
And swollen tight and buried under snow.
The cellar windows were banked up with sawdust
And swollen tight and buried under snow.

The repetitions give an emotional intensity that might be expected from a woman who wants to interpret the always unsteady movements of a skeleton, reputed to be her former lover, as a "balancing with emotion." This is the same women who, before she offers her images of something "swollen tight and buried under snow," admits that

The only fault my husband found with me --
I went to sleep before I went to bed,
Especially in winter when the bed
Might just as well be ice and the clothes snow.
The night the bones came up the cellar stairs
Toffile had gone to bed alone and left me,
But left an open door to cool the room off
So as to sort of turn me out of it.

A widow now, with a son who seems surprised at her willingness to tell a stranger that the skeleton was of a man who once had his way with her, she at least has the pleasure, having

also put her husband in the grave, of a bed to herself and some distraught bones that at night sometimes come down from the attic to "stand perplexed / Behind the door and headboard of the bed / Brushing their chalky skull with chalky fingers."

. . . .

The story is of a skeleton who, in the words of the son,

left the cellar forty years ago

And carried itself like a pile of dishes

Up one flight from the cellar to the kitchen,

Another from the kitchen to the bedroom,

Another from the bedroom to the attic,

Right past both father and mother, and neither stopped it.

Father had gone upstairs; mother was downstairs.

I was a baby: I don't know where I was.

Once more we have an account of something by somebody who did not see it and who, perhaps for that reason, extemporizes in vivid and show-off metaphors, such as the memorable skeleton that, according to the son, "carried itself like a pile of dishes." Understandably, the mother, in her account, chooses a metaphor no less inventive but somewhat more romantic - the bones are put together "like a chandelier":

I had a vision of them put together

Not like a man, but like a chandelier.

So suddenly I flung the door wide on him.

A moment he stood balancing with emotion,

And all but lost himself. (A tongue of fire

Flashed out and licked along his upper teeth.

Smoke rolled inside the sockets of his eyes.)

Then he came at me with one hand outstretched,

The way he did in life once; but this time

I struck the hand off brittle on the floor,

And fell back from him on the floor myself.

The finger-pieces slid in all directions.

The telltale keepsake bone cannot be found in the button box, and even if it could it would not prove that the skeleton was a former lover killed by her husband, Toffile. All Toffile does, even by her account, is act like an unusually indulgent mate, willing to believe his wife's claim that a skeleton has come up from the basement, though he cannot see it or hear it. He is then willing to bolt the attic, never to open it again, as if to support her further claim, never more substantiated than any of the others, that the skeleton has chosen to go there.

. . . .

In a peculiar way, his treatment of women recalls a nineteenth-century novelistic convention in which the repression of women, and the restriction on their active participation in the outdoor world, force them into exercises of free imagination and fancy.

From Robert Frost: *The Work of Knowing*. Copyright © 1977 by Oxford University Press.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Robert Frost [2]

Author:

Richard Poirier [3]

Poem:

The Witch of Coos [4]

Tags:

feminism [5]

insanity [6]

madness [7]

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/richard-poirier-witch-co%C3%B6s>

Links

[1] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/robert-frost>

[3] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/richard-poirier>

[4] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/witch-coos>

[5] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/feminism>

[6] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/insanity>

[7] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/madness>