

1-1-1990

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Recommended Citation

Amelinckx, Carol Cedar (1990) "Death, Darkness, Desolation: Negative House-Imagery in the Poems of E. A. Robinson," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 8 , Article 8.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol8/iss1/8

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**DEATH, DARKNESS, DESOLATION:
NEGATIVE HOUSE-IMAGERY IN THE POEMS OF
E. A. ROBINSON**

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For most of us, the words "house" and "home" have positive connotations. As Gaston Bachelard points out, "a house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proof or illusions of stability."¹ Symbolism of house/home in literature is most often used to produce images of warmth, comfort, protection, shelter. In Bachelard's words, a house is "the human being's first world." "It maintains him through the storms of heaven and through those of life." "When we dream of the house we were born in,...we participate in the original warmth..." (p. 7).

House-imagery in the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson, however, stands in sharp contrast to these traditional positive connotations. He writes often about houses, but they tend to be dark, deserted, desolate, barren, and sepulchral. They sometimes represent scenes of violent death, at other times evoke a prison image. I will explore here a sampling of the negative house-imagery used by Robinson.

Cavender's House, a narrative of murder, intrigue, and coming to terms with self, is the story of a man, who, after many years of wandering, returns to the house he once shared with his wife, Laramie. Early in the poem Cavender opens the door of the house he had closed twelve years before, "the house of self," as Martin puts it.² The hour is midnight; the house is dark and silent, filled with painful memories of the past. We sense Cavender's deepest thoughts as he stands there. Some lines from Maurice Blanchot's "L'arret de mort" seem aptly to describe the situation: "About this room, which was plunged in utter darkness I knew everything. I had entered into it, I bore it within me, I made it live with a life that is not life, but which is stronger than life, and which no force in the world can vanquish" (Bachelard, pp. 288-289). Or, as Robinson himself tells us:

Into that house where no men went, he went
Alone; and in that house where day was night,
Midnight was like a darkness that had fingers.
He felt them holding him as if time's hands
Had found him; and he waited as one waits
Hooded for death, and with no fear to die.

Carol Cedar Amelinckx

73

It was not time and dying that frightened him,
Nor was it yet the night that was around him;
It was a darker night, and one within him....³

And so the house, the darkness, the solitude, the opening of a door upon the past, are used as symbols of a life, an inner darkness, a loneliness, a turning back:

He stood by the same door that he had closed
Twelve years ago, and waited; and again
He closed the door, slowly and silently,
And was himself part of the darkness there,
There in his own dark house.

(p. 961)

Cavender waits in the all-encompassing silence, and senses in the apparently barren atmosphere a kind of negative vitality, an alien triumph, a furtive force conspiring against him. He feels the terror of the silence; in his paranoiac state he fears it is spying on him, that it is listening to his very thoughts and will disclose them to demonic beings who may be lurking in the shadows of the dark room. Bachelard refers to the kind of uneasy quiet which Robinson uses so effectively as "uneasy waves of silence that vibrate in poems." He speaks as well of "complicated forms which, even when they are at rest, make...creaking contortions" (Bachelard, pp. 178-179).

Cavender shudders; the house is cold, bereft of the cozy hearth-fire which had once brought warmth and comfort, sense of home:

...He was colder, now,
And shivered as he turned again to see
Where moonlight filled a desolate hearth,
So many a time alive with fire that once
Had hummed a comfortable song of home.

(p. 964)

In these lines Robinson deepens the negative image of the house no longer home by emphasizing the present, intense coldness. He does this by having Cavender shiver, and by replacing the warm image of firelight, no longer present in the house, with the colder image of moonlight. Through the use of these strong negative images he involves the reader in the poem, creating a kind of empathy with Cavender, in what Kaplan refers to as his feelings of "doubt and fear."⁴

In the next stanza, the house is described to as being “dead” and referred to as a “many-chambered cenotaph” (p. 964); each room becomes a sepulchre, containing “stillness and dark of memory” (p. 964). In his reverie and self-confrontation, Cavender imagines that Laramie has returned. What appears to be a dialogue between husband and wife follows. Within her face Cavender seems to see “a menace and a merriment” (p. 975). She speaks, confronting him with the reality of who he is and what he has done. The “calamity” of his life, she tells him, has “come...upon him like a broken house,” and then continues her speech, using more house-imagery:

...In Cavender's house,
As in the Lord's house, there are many mansions,
And some that he has not so much as opened,
Having so much to learn.

(pp. 968-969)

Cavender tries in vain to possess Laramie, but she eludes him. The room becomes a battleground of unrest and unreality, familiar in aspect, but strangely different in atmosphere. Cavender realizes that the house will not, cannot ever be what it once was, because he himself is no longer the same.

In the most powerful house-image of the poem, Robinson uses an oxymoron; he describes the house as being “alive...with dying” (p. 976), a term which could as well describe the decaying mansion in Poe's “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

A nameless innovation was at work
In walls and corners; and all over it,
In all its darkneses and silences,
He could feel atoms moving and conspiring
Against him, and death rustling in the shadows.

(p. 976)

As the poem draws to its conclusion we learn that Cavender had murdered Laramie twelve years earlier because he believed she had been unfaithful to him. After the apparent reunion between husband and wife, which is actually a monologue taking place in Cavender's mind,⁵ he has a change of heart, deeply regrets what he has done, and decides to give himself up to the authorities. As he looks back at his house, he knows he can never enter it again:

He could do anything now but go again

Carol Cedar Amelinckx

75

Into that house of his where no man went,
And where he did not live. He was alone
Now, in a darker house than any light
Might enter while he lived. Yet there was light....

(p. 1007)

In "Eros Turannos," which some critics consider to be one of Robinson's greatest poems,⁶ the house symbolizes the wife's isolation, even imprisonment, in her married life. Neff describes her as "a woman of intellect, taste and wealth who has sorely blundered in marriage." She chooses to remain with her husband, even though he has betrayed her, "out of pride and fear of lonely old age" (Neff, p. 181). She thus becomes a prisoner in her own home, estranged from her husband and from the community in which her house stands—alone, and as W. R. Robinson puts it, "divested of her illusions of love,...thrown back upon the terrible truth of her being."⁷

And home, where passion lived and died,
Becomes a place where she can hide,
While all the town and harbor side
Vibrate with her seclusion.

(p. 33)

In "Tasker Norcross," the sketch of a lonely, unhappy New England character, the house is described in some detail, both inside and out:

See for yourself that house of his again
That he called home; An old house painted white,
Square as a box, and chillier than a tomb
To look at or to live in.

(p. 502)

...
Now come into his house along with me;
The four square sombre things that you see first
Around you are four walls that go as high
As to the ceiling.

(p. 505)

The poet compares Norcross to "a white rat in a box" (p. 505). Thus, once again the house is seen as prison, occupant as prisoner. Franchere describes the "prisoner" (quotes my own) thus:

76 **DEATH, DARKNESS, DESOLATION**

Norcross lives there, being neither good nor bad—nor anything....He listens to great music but it does not reach or stir him. His house and garden are filled with fine art pieces, but he can see neither their beauty nor their living quality. He knows that the world turns and is full of people whose voices he hears, but whose words have no meaning for him. (Franchere, p. 87)

Another house-as-prison image occurs in "The Dark House." Once again an individual is trapped, locked in; this imprisonment, however, is psychological in nature. The jailer is referred to as a spiderlike demonic creature who has entrapped his victim like a fly is trapped in a web (p. 44). The poem is somewhat obscure, but according to Neff, the demonic jailer is liquor, and the poem's theme is "the miracle of salvation from drink" (Neff, p. 178). In spite of its dark, depressing imagery, the poem ends on a positive note, for the narrator says that he, too, has been a prisoner in a "dark house," but has escaped; thus he sees a similar possibility for his friend:

But there lives another sound
More compelling, more profound;
There's a music, so it seems,
That assuages and redeems,
More than reason, more than dreams.

...

So if he be very still
With his demon, and one will,
Murmurs of it may be blown
To my friend who is alone
In a room that I have known.

After that from everywhere
Singing life will find him there;
Then the door will open wide,
And my friend, again outside,
Will be living, having died.

(pp. 44-45)

Another type of house-imagery in Robinson's poetry is that in which a dwelling becomes the scene of violent death. In "Stafford's Cabin," termed "melodramatic" by Neff (p. 178), this kind of imagery is briefly but vividly expressed. Stafford, we are told, was a "loner" (my quotes)—shy, retiring, apparently not the kind of person whom anyone would have expected to meet a violent death. But someone

came to his home under cover of darkness, murdered him and burned the cabin, leaving only mystery and a legend. "Once there was a cabin here, and once there was a man..." (p. 14).

In "Avon's Harvest," one of Robinson's longer dramatic poems, Avon, the protagonist, has been haunted by fear and paranoia which began when he was a schoolboy as the result of an incident between himself and a classmate. The antagonist, having sworn revenge, has succeeded in destroying Avon's peace of mind. Again there is a house which has become a prison; again there is a mysterious, violent death, though of a different nature. The poem's narrator has known Avon for many years. As he returns to the house of his friend after a long absence, he is shocked by the change in Avon, and in the atmosphere of the home which Avon shares with his wife. Looking back to a happier time, the narrator recalls:

It seemed an age ago that we were there
 One evening in the room that in the days
 When they could laugh he called the Library,

...
 But that was long ago, and there was now
 No laughing in that house.

(p. 545)

He describes the fear in Avon's eyes as "living fire that only death [m]ight one day cool" (p. 543). Death comes that very night for Avon. Neither the locked doors of his house nor of the library, his inner-sanctum, can protect him. In the words of his physician, "He died... because he was afraid—[a]nd he had been afraid for a long time" (p. 573).

In "Haunted House," as in "Stafford's Cabin," we are again told of a legend: sometime in the past a woman was killed in her home by an axe-wielding murderer. In this case the scene of the crime has remained intact, though through the years it has become deserted, silent, gloomy, run-down, an unlikely shelter. The poem's persona, however, has apparently entered the house with a companion, during a rainstorm. She describes the house not as "haunted" in the traditional sense—i.e., there are no ghosts, no footsteps, no noise at all—only a lingering legend and an overpowering sense of what has happened there:

Here was a place where none would ever come
 For shelter, save as we did from the rain.
 We saw no ghost, yet once outside again
 Each wondered why the other should be dumb;

78 **DEATH, DARKNESS, DESOLATION**

For we had fronted nothing worse than gloom
And ruin....

...

There were no trackless footsteps on the floor
Above us, and there were no sounds elsewhere,
But there was more than sound....

(p. 870)

One is reminded of "The Witch of Coos," by Robert Frost, where, as in Robinson's "Haunted House," the poem's narrator is seeking shelter and finds it in a place where violent death has occurred in the past.

The last type of house-imagery apparent in Robinson's poetry might be called the imagery of desolation or former glory. "The House on the Hill" is such a poem. The house is "shut and still," with "broken walls" (p. 81), long deserted by those who once called it home. There are no ghosts here, not even a legend, but the images are those of sadness and loss. The poet uses strong words to convey these feelings: "gone away," "shut," "still," "broken walls," "bleak," "sunken sill." He further emphasizes the sense of hopelessness and finality by his repetitive use of lines in each of the poem's stanzas: "They are all gone away" (stanzas 1, 2, 4), and "There is nothing more to say" (stanzas 1, 3, 5). In the poem's final stanza, he brings the two lines together, and the poem concludes on a note of somber desolation:

There is ruin and decay
In the House on the Hill:
They are all gone away,
There is nothing more to say.

(p. 82)

As Coxe points out, there seems to be a strong link between "the House on Lincoln Avenue [Robinson's home], decaying New England...the decay of his...family...[and] 'The House on the Hill' and other 'houses' in the long catalogue."⁸ And although, as W. R. Robinson observes, "the story of a house—symbol for an individual's life—cannot [ever] be [fully] told" (p. 86), through his skillful use of negative house-imagery, Edwin Arlington Robinson has presented his readers with some fascinating verbal glimpses into dark, deserted, desolate houses—symbolic of sad and broken lives, including, perhaps, the poet's very own.

NOTES

¹Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, 1969), p. 17.

Carol Cedar Amelinckx

79

²Jay Martin, "A Crisis of Achievement: Robinson's Late Narratives." *Edwin Arlington Robinson: Centenary Essays*, ed. Ellsworth Barnard (Athens, 1969), p. 147.

³E. A. Robinson, *Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1929), p. 961. Subsequent citations from Robinson's poetry will be from this collection.

⁴Estelle Kaplan, *Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1966), p. 96.

⁵Emery Neff, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1948, rpt. 1968), p. 229.

⁶Yvor Winters, in *Edwin Arlington Robinson*, p. 31, calls "Eros Turranos" "one of Robinson's greatest poems." Neff calls "Eros" "the condensed Drama... [Robinson] was born to write" (p. 168). Hoyt Franchere believes that "Eros" is unquestionably one of the best of Robinson's short lyrics": *Edwin Arlington Robinson*, (New York, 1968), p. 104.

⁷W. R. Robinson, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Poetry of the Act* (Cleveland, 1967), p. 86.

⁸Louis Osborne Coxe, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Life of Poetry* (New York, 1969), pp. 42-43.