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## The Wife's Lament: a Story of a Wife that Has Lost Her Husband

Death is not the only way to lose a person. Often in life, people are lost to their career, to their friends, to their struggles, to their countries. Death is the physical end of one's life, but people sometimes speak of losing a person who is not yet dead because their relationship has burned out emotionally. Such is the case within the Old English poem, "The Wife's Lament." This poem details a wife who is lamenting over the loss of her husband. She has not lost him to death, but to his career. She has lost him emotionally, not physically and the poem is an expression of her grief. Within the Old English poem, there is a strong sense of betrayal, disloyalty and a general loss of trust from the poet's point of view. However, there is also a sense of forgiveness and understanding, perhaps even sympathy. This empathetic side of the poem gives the idea that not only is the author speaking of only one man/husband in her life, but also that there is a hope of reconciliation between her and her husband.

It has been argued that two men are depicted within this poem. Admittedly, the body of this poem is not very clear. There is a lack of transitions between a number of the lines and the poem is somewhat vague and very unclear, particularly throughout the middle portion of the poem. It is obvious from the very first few lines that the poet is dismal because of the loss of her husband. The details about how and when her husband is lost are uncertain, at best. In lines 6-8, the author declares that her "lord forsook his family for the tossing waves" but then, in line 15, she says "my lord asked me to live with him" (Crossley-Holland 56). It has been argued by numerous critics that the first statement is about one man who left her and the second statement is about a new man who wants to stay with her. Stanley B. Greenfield notes that a theory advanced by many critics is that "three people are involved in the dramatic action" (907). But it seems to be about one man only. According to Karl P. Wentersdorf, the poet does use a myriad of words and phrases to describe the male in the poem. However, he points out that the variety of terms used is "hardly surprising if the poet conceives of the wife as running the gamut of her feelings" (493). Additionally, words such as *freond* and *hlaford* that are used within the poem to describe the man commonly denote a 'husband' or 'lover' (493). Because all of the words or phrases used in the poem refer to a 'man,' 'husband' or 'lover,' there is no reason to assume that these words are describing more than one man. The poet seems only to be using a variety of words to describe one man, which is quite natural in creative writing. The variety of words adds to the rich and artistic nature of the poem.

Though the poet uses a number of different words in describing the male lead in the poem, she never distinguishes amongst the words. She never differentiates among any of the words that

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she uses of this male. There is no reason to read into her extensive vocabulary when she makes no indication that she is describing more than one man; she only uses more than one word to describe the man. William Witherle Lawrence suggests that many critics have become mistaken around lines 42 through 45 of the poem at the mention of a young man who does not appear to be the original husband. "There appears to be no reason," he says, "for introducing a third person into the story" because these lines are only general reflections of male characteristics (389). John D. Niles notes that there is "good reason to accept the current consensus that only two main figures are involved" and those two figures are the woman and her estranged husband (1109). Niles also addresses the troublesome lines 42-45 and comes to the same conclusion as Lawrence: the lines discuss attributes that are characteristic of men, in theory (1114). Though many critics may determine that the poet is referring to a second man and that she is potentially caught up in a love triangle, there seems to be no reason to believe that the poet means any man in particular. Rather, it appears that she is speaking theoretically.

The reasons to believe that the poet is only discussing one man continue to build up if one analyzes the possibility of longevity in the poet's relationship with her estranged husband. In lines 15 and following, after the poet says that her "lord asked [her] to live with him" (Crossley-Holland 56), the narrative becomes questionable because there is no transition that describes how she got back together with her lord. She has just described a few lines earlier how her lord had forsaken her and had left her to go to the sea. Rudolph Bambas says that he has "undertaken a sea journey of some duration" (305), but now he is asking her to live with him. Robert P. Fitzgerald suggests that the husband is not actually physically present with his wife, but perhaps he is still in communication with her (773). It is possible that the poet speaks figuratively here, not literally. Either way, there is still little argument for adding a second man to the storyline.

A few lines after her lord asks her to live with him, the poet mournfully notes, "blibe gebaero, ful oft wit beotedan baet unc ne gedaelde nemne deao ana, owiht elles. Eft is baet onhworfen; is nu swa hit no waere freondscipe uncer" (Marsden 342-343) that is "how often we swore that nothing but death should ever divide us; that is all changed now; our friendship is as if it had never been" (Crossley-Holland 56). These words imply a relationship that has a past, that has fond history, that has memories. These are not the words of someone who is in a new relationship; they are the words of someone who is grieving the deterioration of a lengthy relationship. She appears to be speaking to a deeper, more intimate relationship than that of an unfaithful fling; she seems to be speaking about her marriage. The grief that is evident in her poem strongly gives the impression of a woman who has lost a longtime lover. The grief is certainly not the kind of grief that one would feel over a short-term relationship and any relationship outside of her marriage would certainly have had to have been shorter than her marriage. Additionally, if there was a second man, it is unlikely that she would be so deeply upset by the absence of her husband. The presence of a new lover would surely soothe the

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pain over the loss of the previous lover. And as it will be seen, this is very little soothing or relief to be found in this heavily mournful poem.

The second part of my argument involves reconciliation between the poet and her husband. Not only would I argue that there is great hope on the poet's part for a reconciliation with her husband, but also that this hopeful outlook further proves that the poet is in distress over one man only. The beginning of the poem uses words such as *uhtceare* ("anxiety before dawn" according to Marsden [341]) and *geomorre* ("melancholy" [341]). These words greatly exemplify the anguish of the narrator. However, about halfway through the poem, there is a shift. The wife begins to long for her husband, saying enviously, "There are lovers on earth, lovers alive who lie in bed, when I pass through this earth-cave alone and out under the oak tree at dawn;" (Crossley-Holland 57). There is clear jealousy here when the narrator begins to ponder upon lovers who can be together. The jealousy becomes even more obvious when she contrasts the togetherness of other couples with her own aloneness. The fact that she is jealous of other couples who have the luxury of being together does two things: one, it reinforces how much she wants to be with her husband again and two, it shows that any anger that she had towards her husband for leaving her all alone has dissipated and that she is ready and very clearly willing to be with him again.

After the narrator's jealousy comes her defense of young men. "Young men," she says "must always be serious in mind and stout-hearted; they must hide their heartaches, that host of constant sorrows, behind a smiling face" (Crossley-Holland 57). This is not some sort of curse directed at her husband, as some such as J.A. Ward imply when he says that this is a curse aimed at the person who has caused her distress of spirit, that is, her husband (32). Again, William Witherle Lawrence's argument that these lines describe the characteristics of young men seems much more appropriate (389). Additionally, Barrie Ruth Straus, says "Just as the wife had described herself as always suffering the hardships of her exile, she describes 'the young man' as also always sad at heart, suffering, and exiled to faraway lands" (278). Straus points out that the poet is describing the characteristics of young men in contrast with how she has just described herself. These lines of the poem are a way of defending her husband. She justifies his behavior saying that it is only proper that men are serious and sober. Additionally, she seems to be justifying his coldness towards her (i.e. abandoning her with no apparent sense of dismay about it) because, perhaps according to society, it is necessary that men control their emotions and hide behind a "smiling face" (Crossley-Holland 57). The apologetic nature of these lines is another factor that suggests that the narrator is, at the very least, defensive of her husband, if not willing to reconcile with her estranged husband.

The most convincing element of this poem that points toward a hope of reconciliation between the wife and her husband is the overall grief and longing toward her husband. The entire poem is chock full of pain and sadness from beginning to end. In the first few lines of the poem, she

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describes her geomorre and wite (“melancholy” and “terror” according to Marsden [341]). She even goes so far as to say that she has never suffered anything so painful as the pain she feels now (Crossley-Holland 56). A few lines later, she “fretted at dawn”(uhtceare), “sets out in sorrow” (ic me feran gewat folga secan) and was “seized with longings” (mec longade) (56). Then a few lines after that, she discusses the reason for her grief, the hardships she must undergo, how she is “choked with longings” (ic eom oflongad) and how she is never able to quiet the sorrows of her mind (56-57). She even concludes the poem with these lines: “Grief goes side by side with those who suffer longing for a loved one” (wa bi pam pe sceal of langope leofes abidan) (57). There is no ambiguity here; she is clearly in a lot of emotional pain. Robert D. Stevick says, “such packing of fifty-three lines with the language of lament significantly contributes to the power of the mood” (23). It is impossible to miss how sorrowful this poem is. Glenn Wright writes that the entire poem is a general comment on the “misfortune of sundered lovers” (14). The misfortune and the sundered lovers are both evident in this poem. The poet is heartbroken over the loss of her husband and because of this, it is easy to see her desire to and hope of reconciling with him. For why would she be so incredibly brokenhearted over someone with whom she did not want to reconcile? It is ludicrous to assume that the poet harbors any ill feelings towards her husband, especially to the point that she would be unwilling to reconcile with him.

The beginning of this poem does seem to hold quite a bit of anger and anguish. The speaker says that she has been “forsaken” (Crossley-Holland 56). Words such as “wretched” (lalicost) and “grief” (wa) are used more than once. Clearly, there is a lot of tension that this wife is feeling towards her husband. She obviously feels abandoned by her husband. Disloyalty would make most people feel aggravated towards the person who has betrayed their trust. About midway through the poem, however, there appears to be a shift. In line 26, she refers to her husband as her “dearest loved one” (felaleofan) (56) and a few lines later, she describes the luxuries that most lovers are able to experience with one another and how mournful she is that she is not able to partake in those same joys:

Frynd sind on eorpan, leofe lifgende, leger weardia, ponne ic on uhtan ana gonge under actreo geond pas eorpscrafu. paer ic sittan mot sumorlangne daeg, paer ic wepan maeg mine wraecspas, earfopa fela; forpon ic fre ne mpg p«re modceare minre gerestan, ne ealles paes longapes paeec mec on pissum life begeat.

Crossley-Holland translates this portion as “there are lovers on earth, lovers alive who lie in bed, when I pass through this earth-cave alone and out under the oak tree at dawn; there I must sit through the summer’s day and there I mourn my miseries, my many hardships; for I am never able to quiet the cares of my sorrowful mind, all the longings that are my life’s lot” (57). These lines have lost their anger and have become sorrowful, pitiful and remorseful. The poet is clearly feeling sorry for herself and the amount of desolation she is feeling points to how much

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she loves and misses her husband. Additionally, the final lines of the poem continue to demonstrate the sympathy that the poet feels towards her husband: *sy aet him sylfum gelong eal his worulde wyn, sy ful wide fah feorres folclondes, p«t min freond site under stanhlipe storme behrimed, wine werigmod, waetre beflowen on dreorsele. Dreoge se min wine micle modceare; he gemon to oft wynlicran wic.*

Crossley-Holland translates this portion as: “Whether he is master of his own fate or is exiled in a far-off land sitting under rocky storm-cliffs, chilled with hoar-frost, weary in mind, surrounded by the sea in some sad place, my husband is caught in the clutches of anguish; over and again he recalls a happier home” (57). She is clearly very sympathetic to her husband’s condition. She assumes that he is anguished and that he is in some sad place, cold and weary. The disappointment that she felt towards her husband in the beginning of the poem transformed into general grief and sadness over her condition during the middle of the poem. Finally, as she concludes the poem, she makes many assumptions about her husband’s condition. She seems to understand his absence and she feels very sorry for him. Though her pain is still apparent, it no longer seems to be angry. The ill feelings that she had towards her husband have vanished and in their place, we find pity, sympathy and compassion. Hope of reconciliation and desire to be together again is evident because of this empathy. Understanding these emotions (anger to self-pity to sympathy) in this poem will help understand the argument that there is hope of reconciliation in this poem and ultimately, that the reconciliation will take place with one man, and one man only, from whom she was separated at the very beginning of the poem.

It is unclear whether or not the wife joins her husband again. We are told that the “man’s kinsmen laid secret plans to part us, so that we should live most wretchedly, far from each other in this wide world” (*Ongunnon paet paes monnes magas hycgan purh dyrne gepoht, paet hy todaelden unc, paet wit gewidost in woruldrice ifdon lalicost, ond mec longade*) and then the poet continues to narrate her woe, describing how she now has to live in an “earth-cave” (*eoraesele*) and she is “choked with longings” (*oflongad*) (56-57). This language seems to be pointing to a long time apart. In fact, there is never a description of reunion between the two of them. Clearly, she wants to see him and she wants to be with him again, but it is not certain if these wishes of hers are ever actually granted.

We have seen in this poem a very sad woman who narrates her separation from her husband. She was angry and betrayed, but there is a definite progression to a sense of sympathy toward her husband. The sympathy and the empathy that is embodied in the poem are clear markers that she is not only ready and willing, but she is also very hopeful and desirous that she will reconcile with her estranged husband one day. Additionally, this great hope of reconciliation with her husband gives every indication that he is the only man and the only lover in her life. Contrastly, there is absolutely no indication that there is a second lover in her life.

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The man in her poem is described with many words, but this seems only natural for creative writing. Additionally, there is never any distinction amongst the words that she uses to describe him. Furthermore, there is very strong evidence that the poet was in a very long-term relationship. These three facts leave little room for an additional lover in her life. In addition to this, there is great hope of reconciliation to be seen in this poem. The poet is jealous of couples who are able to be together, she is defensive of the difficulties of young men, she grieves and longs for her loved one and she becomes very sympathetic in the voice of her poem. There are no longer bad feelings and this is further evidence that there is one man, and one man only, and she hopes to reconcile with him.

This poem is such a sad poem. It is so full of heartbreak, anguish and grief. The despair of the poet is clear from the very first line (“I draw these words from my deep sadness,” (ic pis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre, minre sylfre si) [Crossley-Holland 56]) to the very last line (“Grief goes side by side with those who suffer longing for a loved one” (wa bi pam pe sceal of langope leofes abidan) [57]). But there is hope. Wherever her husband is, “over and again he recalls a happier home” (he gemon to oft wynlicran wic) (57). And perhaps one day, the poet and her husband will be reconciled. Maybe not in this life, and maybe not physically, but someday, somehow, there is just a glimmer of hope that these two will be together again.

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