

THE UNQUIET GRAVE

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Francis James Child

- He was an American scholar, educator, and folklorist, best known today for his collection of English and Scottish ballads now known as the Child Ballads.
- Child was Boylston professor of rhetoric and oratory at Harvard University, where he produced influential editions of English poetry.
- In 1876 he was named Harvard's first Professor of English, a position which allowed him to focus on academic research.
- It was during this time that he began work on the Child Ballads



"The wind doth blow today, my love,
And a few small drops of rain;
I never had but one true-love,
In cold grave she was lain.

"I'll do as much for my true-love
As any young man may;
I'll sit and mourn all at her grave
For a twelvemonth and a day."

The twelvemonth and a day being up,
The dead began to speak:
"Oh who sits weeping on my grave,
And will not let me sleep?"

"'T is I, my love, sits on your grave,
And will not let you sleep;
For I crave one kiss of your clay-cold lips,
And that is all I seek."

"You crave one kiss of my clay-cold lips,
But my breath smells earthy strong;
If you have one kiss of my clay-cold lips,
Your time will not be long.

"'T is down in yonder garden green,
Love, where we used to walk,
The finest flower that e're was seen
Is withered to a stalk.

"The stalk is withered dry, my love,
So will our hearts decay;
So make yourself content, my love,
Till God calls you away."



SO WILL OUR HEARTS DECAY
AN UNQUIET GRAVE

The poem is among the most beautiful of the "Child" ballads. It's an unusually compact and harmonious narrative, constructed around a conversation between a young man and the ghost of his beloved, and with very little extraneous or expository material. In fact, the focused intensity is almost that of a lyric poem rather than a storytelling ballad.

Child prints a number of variants for "The Unquiet Grave". This one, the favourite of many folksingers and anthologists, is numbered 78A.

Refrain – “true-love” “clay-cold lips” The ballad repeats these lines three times each throughout the ballad.

Supernatural Events – “The dead began to speak” The young man’s lover begins to talk to him somehow even though she is dead.

The theme of this poem is a man who is incredibly attached to his wife, even after she dies, and does not allow her to rest peacefully.

The images are memorably simple, almost archetypal. Intermittently liquid sounds and the flowing, predominantly iambic rhythm suggest at times a lullaby.

The first two stanzas are spoken by the young man.

At first, it seems he directly addresses the dead woman, although it's not impossible that he's talking to a new, living beloved: "The wind doth blow today, my love,/ And a few small drops of rain.,,

The speaker continues in lines three and four either to address his new lover: "I never had but one true-love./ In cold grave she was lain."

At first, the woman's death seems recent. But the pledged period of mourning ("a twelvemonth and a day") passes between stanzas two and three. The belief that graves become "unquiet", and the restless ghosts enact an angry or violent haunting because excessive grief prevents their leaving the earth, is an ancient one, far older than the poem.

The mourner refuses to accept that his time is up, and, as a result, "the dead began to speak".

Thank you for your attention!

Sources:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/may/13/poem-of-the-week-the-unquiet-grave>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unquiet_Grave_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unquiet_Grave_(book))

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