

J. M. Linebarger: On "Dream Song 384"

The emotions that Henry expresses toward his father are as we would expect, ambivalent. Thrice he explicitly states his continuing love for his father (143, 145). But rage and despair dominate the last reference to the father, in the penultimate Dream Song. Henry stands before his father's grave, longing not to be darkly moved by the thought of his father's suicide. Unable to feel indifference he spits on the grave; and he ends the poem in a vicious and mad wish to re-kill his father:

I'd like to scabble till I got right down
away down under the grass and ax the
casket open ha to see just how he's taking it,
which he sought so hard . . .
& then Henry will heft the ax once more,
his final card, and fell it on the start.

Henry's presence at the gravesite is only an imagined scene if William J. Martz is correct in saying that Berryman never returned to it. The angry wish to kill the father is a result of the emotions that Henry has suffered because of his father's death—fear, angst, resentment, a sense of desertion. These are the emotions that Berryman finds dominant in the first two of Stephen Crane's "Sullivan County Sketches." Like Berryman, Crane was only a boy when his father died. Berryman feels that the sketches are based upon that loss and present a "world . . . of perfect aloneness, in which relations are possible only through rage and fear" (37-40). Henry's fear and aloneness are clear in other Dream Songs; his rage is fully expressed in the scene of axing his already-dead father. That Berryman had the "Sullivan County Sketches" in mind as he wrote Song 384 is suggested by the phrase "his final card"; the first sketch presents a mysterious old recluse who plays cards with a younger man and "cleans the little man out and howls 'GO.'" ". . . We have here," Berryman says, "a fantasy on Crane's father and the child's sense of abandonment (impoverishment) as his resented death . . ." (Stephen Crane, 39)

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