

**Author's Statement:** The assignment for this paper was to choose an art text and discuss how that text “articulates the complexities and nuances of feminism.” My main goal for this essay was to sort through Warsan Shire’s complex messages about processing trauma that exist in her poem, “The House.” I wanted to highlight the different stages of feeling trauma from an assault, and how sexual violence against women encompasses very nuanced power dynamics. I was interested in the ways the Shire manipulates control throughout her poem, moving it between her speaker and the men that harm her.

### **Healing and Humor in Warsan Shire’s Poetry**

Warsan Shire’s “The House” is a poem that tells the story of a woman’s body. It is one of trauma, violence, and disconnection. The story is not linear, and has no clear resolution. Shire’s writing, on the surface, describes a house being broken into by men. However, when viewed through Shire’s writing techniques and the ways in which she strings together emotional stages in sections throughout her poem, it becomes clear that Shire’s “house” is a metaphor for the female body, and how it experiences the occurrence of an assault. “The House” communicates the ways in which power changes form during the process of coming to terms with or healing from trauma. Through Shire’s use of figurative language and word choice, she distinguishes between the stages of processing trauma; thus, she leaves us with a better understanding of the complexity and volume of the impact that interpersonal relationships entangled with violence and inequitable structures can have on a woman and her body.

The first section of Shire’s “The House” introduces the extended metaphor that carries through the rest of the poem. The speaker’s mother shares some wisdom with her daughter, explaining that there are “locked rooms inside all women” (line 1). These rooms are all those found in a house—kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom. The mother then proceeds to elaborate that these rooms, though locked, will be entered by men throughout her daughter’s lifetime. Men enter these rooms consensually or forcefully, and these acts are depicted as men breaking into houses. Through Shire’s use of metaphor, however, we learn that she is actually writing about the different ways that men use women’s bodies. From the first section of her poem, Shire introduces

the extended metaphor of house as woman's body, one that she continues to return to and manipulate throughout the poem.

Once this metaphor is introduced, the first section develops the scene and provides the reader with a direction of how to interpret its message. Through word choice and the way that Shire ends this section, she conveys the violence and negativity associated with the methods men use to enter women's bodies. Shire uses the words "lust," "grief," and "apathy" to describe the feelings that live behind women's locked doors. These words are somber and negative in tone, and through them we get the sense that in this section, the woman, presumably the speaker, does not have power; her locks are not able to keep every man out, even though she holds secrets that she does not want to be made accessible. Shire furthers this idea by ending the section with a line about men breaking into houses with hammers. This language is violent and implies that forced entry is the norm. The men who force their way into women's houses are representative of men who force their way into women's bodies.

This entire section is a lesson from the speaker's mother. This is important to note because she is the female power figure for her daughter. In the beginning of the poem, she calls the speaker's attention, along with the reader's, to the violation of women's bodies. Her purpose is not made completely clear by Shire, and it is not made known at what point in the speaker's life her mother imparts these words upon her, but they can perhaps be interpreted as a form of warning. They are a warning about the violence of men and the inadequacy of locks, or rather consent, to stop men from entering a space where they are not desired.

The house as body metaphor is continued, but its message is drastically altered in section *viii* of "The House." Shire's figurative language remains her main method of conveying meaning in this section. The body is a house, which carries over from the first section, but what happens when men break into this house shifts focus. The speaker tells us about "her first love who found a trap door under [her] left breast nine years/ ago, fell in and hasn't been seen since" (lines 26-27). This woman's body is a house that people can get lost in. The speaker, the owner of this body, has the power to trap people and feelings within herself. Shire's employment of figurative language here, describing a trap door under the breast that sends men to the depths of the speaker's house, never to be seen again, is representative of the permanence of trauma. The man she describes in these two lines fell into the speaker's house nine years ago, and she still feels him "crawling up [her] thigh" (line 28). The men that haunt her stay inside of her body, years

after they've left her life. They may be physically gone, yet figuratively Shire points to the way that they are still stuck inside the body, as if they haven't gone anywhere. Sara Ahmed, in her piece *Living a Feminist Life*, similarly calls attention to permanence in relation to female experiences. She writes, "A significant step for a feminist movement is to recognize what has not ended ... It is a slow and painstaking step" (Ahmed, 5). Ahmed's words, when read alongside Shire's poem, serve as a reminder of the intensely demanding task that is experiencing and handling a trauma. Regardless of the distance, both physical and temporal, between Shire's speaker and the men that violated her, pieces of them will feel so immediate that they are inside of her very body years later.

Once establishing the permanence of trauma, Shire introduces a tension regarding power in this same section, through her use of word choice. She opens section *viii* with the word "love" in the first line. This is a transition from the use of "lust" in section *i*, and thus changes the connotation of this section. It becomes even more intense, that a man who the speaker fell in love with was still able to harm her like this. This speaks to the fact that most women who experience assault are the victims of men who they consider to be close to them—men they love and men who may appear to love them back. Despite this upsetting reflection that Shire's word choice causes, she then gives the speaker a moment of control. "Silly boy, chained to the/ basement of my fears" (lines 33-34), Shire writes. The word "chained" implies a prison-like environment. In this section, the man becomes imprisoned in the same house that he broke into. Is this Shire's way of suggesting that the speaker has regained some power over these men? She has control over their wellbeing, able to offer them "a slice of bread, if they're lucky a piece of fruit" (line 32), only if she wants to.

However, these men are also stuck to her in a way that almost plagues her. They cling to her, and though she has power over them, they live within her which diminishes that very control. The speaker's first love is imprisoned in her body, but in the "basement of [her] fears." The word "fear" reminds us that the speaker does not have all of the power, even after locking these men inside of her body. Ahmed reflects on a "fantasy of equality: that women can now do it, even have it, or that they would have it if they just tried hard enough" (Ahmed, 5). Ahmed's argument speaks about control, and the fantasy that if women just "tried hard enough," they'd be able to achieve it. However, we see in this section of "The House" that this fantasy is unattainable. The speaker has control, yet it is clear that these men instill fear in her; her control

is not total. She does, however, want these men to “make [themselves] known,” because she’d “probably/ let [them out]” (lines 28-29). Is this the speaker’s way of facing her demons? Would letting the men out of her body give her more control? Or, is this feeling of half-control, half-suffering the most control she will ever get to experience at the hands of the men who have harmed her? Shire does not provide us with a clear answer, but this section of her poem is a jump from the first, in the sense that it demonstrates the way that control sometimes partially shifts into the victim’s hands as time passes after a traumatic event.

Shire’s final sections introduce yet another stage of processing trauma, one that is uncomfortable and unsettling through her use of dialogue and humor. Shire’s house as body metaphor continues, remaining the focus of her poem through its conclusion. In these sections, *ix* and *x*, we see the metaphor demonstrated through the speaker inviting people into her home. “Welcome, come in, make/ yourself at home” (lines 38-39), she says. When she says this, she is pointing to her body. This line is a final confirmation of the metaphor Shire plays with throughout the poem: the speaker sees and describes her body as a house, once again drawing our attention to the way it is entered by other people.

These sections, though continuing the metaphor, also change the tone of the speaker. Shire implements dialogue and humor here, first through the use of a ‘knock knock’ joke in section *ix*. She writes, “Knock knock./ Who’s there?/ No one” (lines 35-37). This joke, typically a children’s joke that ends with a funny play on words, has a twisted ending. Shire’s version of this joke is not funny, and is instead rather unsettling. The simple, casual language in this section, referencing the structure of a joke that every reader is likely familiar with, resonates and hangs in the air. Somehow, it is even more striking because of its simplicity. This section conveys the beginning of a stage in which the speaker loses connection with her identity. Through ending this section with “No one,” Shire turns a child’s joke into a comment on losing oneself through assault. This section is off-putting, and the situation that the speaker has dealt with throughout the poem becomes a sick joke. Her words convey a complete loss of connection with herself, as if she has to turn to humor in order to express how she is experiencing the trauma. Could this be a form of coping? It seems as though Shire’s speaker is resorting to making a joke out of her circumstances because she may have reached a stage in which it has become clear that there is nothing to be done for her. The world is not on her side—not on the side of women who are

assaulted by powerful men. As wrong as it is, perhaps making a joke out of losing herself to another's unwanted touch is the only way she can maintain some semblance of sanity or stability.

Word choice, when coupled with the humor in this section, drives home Shire's message of identity loss in the final section, section *x*. The speaker says, while pointing to her body, "This is where love comes to die" (line 38). This is the second time that the word "love" appears in this poem. However, it has negative connotations here. The word is coupled with the idea of death; love is dying, as if the speaker is incapable of feeling or accepting love because of the disconnect she's experienced with her body after violation from a man who appeared to love her. Shire also uses the word "home" in this section, when inviting people into the speaker's body. Is the speaker's body a home, or has that become impossible? It is interesting that Shire chooses to use this word here, as it drastically opposes the term "house" that is in the poem's title and is used throughout the rest of the poem. Shire calls into question the idea of making a home out of one's body. This statement gives the sense that the speaker has entirely disconnected from her body; she may now be accepting it as a space for others, mainly men, to be at home. She is no longer at home in her own skin, but the men who have violated her will remain there forever. Ahmed writes, "So much ends up being invested in our own bodies" (Ahmed, 5). What is invested in the speaker's body at the conclusion of this poem? She gives the impression that her body has grown into a place of death. She may be physically alive, but the pieces of her—the pieces of home—that previously existed are no longer.

Trauma goes through three distinct stages for the speaker in Shire's "The House"—she transitions from being broken into and stripped of power, to regaining some control while still falling victim to the men that harmed her, to removing herself from the equation entirely. By the end of the poem, Shire's speaker has turned her experience into a joke. These three moments tell us about the staying power of traumatic experiences. They not only remain inside of us, but they render our relationships with ourselves fraught. Shire's use of extended metaphor, drawing a body into a house, is telling of the complex nature of dealing with a trauma. This woman's body is filled with rooms, some locked, others not—and she is broken into and stolen from regardless of what she desires. Her body is a labyrinth; she describes boys getting "lost in the maze of/ [her] hair" (lines 31-32). This poem, a commentary on the unstable and dynamic effects of trauma on a woman raises the question: is a violated body ever capable of fully healing from its emotional wounds? Shire's speaker appears to have lost herself by the poem's conclusion. Any power she

gained in section *viii* has become a joke, and the only way to carry on is to make everyone think that her body is merely that: a joke, something to laugh at, something that can no longer be taken seriously.