

PRIMARY SOURCE

Grace Coolidge, “Open Door” Poem

Building Context

First Lady Grace Coolidge fell into the public eye during the “Roaring Twenties” - a decade defined by economic growth, consumerism, rapid technological progress, and the rise of the famous, fashionable party-goers known as “flappers.” Coolidge was humble and not naturally inclined towards drawing attention. However, her role demanded that she appear regularly in the public eye. Even still, she never gave any speeches or press conferences of her own. Instead, her stable responsibility and humility led the nation to be interested in her activities and fascinated by her as a person.

The family also faced one of their darkest moments while Calvin Coolidge was president. The family had two high school-aged sons, John and Calvin Jr., while their father was in office. During the summer of 1924, the brothers were playing tennis on the White House grounds and Calvin Jr. developed a blister on his foot. The blister became infected shortly after, and within days he had died of blood poisoning that had spread from it.

Grace and Calvin Coolidge mourned the loss of their son while in the public eye. Grace chose to mourn her son privately, while continuing to appear in public and follow through on her official duties. She also chose to wear white during her deepest period of mourning. These actions showed the public that while Grace was a caring mother, she was also aware of the significant role she had to play for the country as their First Lady.

Five years after her son Calvin Jr. died, Grace Coolidge wrote the poem “Open Door” to describe the emotional impact that the event had on her life. Read through the poem and consider the private and public expectations and responsibilities that Coolidge faced during this deeply sad time.

Directions: Read the excerpts and answer the questions that follow.

“Open Door,” by Grace Coolidge

<https://coolidgefoundation.org/presidency/first-lady-grace-coolidge/>

Text	Notes
You, my son Have shown me God.	
Your kiss upon my cheek Has made me feel the gentle touch Of Him who leads us on.	
The memory of your smile, when young, Reveals His face, As mellowing years come on apace.	
And when you went before, You left the Gates of Heaven ajar That I might glimpse Approaching from afar The glories of His grace.	
Hold, son, my hand, Guide me along the path, That, coming, I may stumble not, Nor roam, Nor fail to show the way Which leads us- home.	

Comprehension & Analysis Questions

1. What are the emotions that Grace Coolidge is sharing through this poem?
2. Consider the timing of the death of her son. Coolidge was the First Lady of the United States, and her husband was running for another term in office. How might her personal and private struggles have impacted her civic responsibility?
3. Knowing that she continued to appear in public and follow through on her promises to greet and host the American people in the White House, how would you characterize Grace Coolidge's responsibility and respect in her role as the First Lady?