The Death of the Hired Man

POEM TEXT

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway with the news
And put him on his guard. 'Silas is back.'
She pushed him outward with her through the door
And shut it after her. 'Be kind,' she said.
She took the market things from Warren's arms
And set them on the porch, then drew him down
To sit beside her on the wooden steps.

'When was I ever anything but kind to him?
But I'll not have the fellow back,' he said.
'I told him so last haying, didn't I?
If he left then, I said, that ended it.
What good is he? Who else will harbor him
At his age for the little he can do?
What help he is there's no depending on.
Off he goes always when I need him most.
He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,
So he won't have to beg and be beholden.
"All right," I say, "I can't afford to pay
Any fixed wages, though I wish I could."
"Someone else can." "Then someone else will have to."
I shouldn't mind his bettering himself
If that was what it was. You can be certain,
When he begins like that, there's someone at him
Trying to coax him off with pocket-money,—
In haying time, when any help is scarce.
In winter he comes back to us. I'm done.'

'Sh! not so loud: he'll hear you,' Mary said.

'I want him to: he'll have to soon or late.'

'He's worn out. He's asleep beside the stove.
When I came up from Rowe's I found him here,
Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep,
A miserable sight, and frightening, too—
You needn't smile—I didn't recognize him—
I wasn't looking for him—and he's changed.
Wait till you see.'

'Where did you say he'd been?'

'He didn't say. I dragged him to the house,
And gave him tea and tried to make him smoke.
I tried to make him talk about his travels.
Nothing would do: he just kept nodding off.'

'What did he say? Did he say anything?'

'But little.'

'Anything? Mary, confess
He said he'd come to ditch the meadow for me.'

'Warren!'

'But did he? I just want to know.'

'Of course he did. What would you have him say?
Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor old man
Some humble way to save his self-respect.
He added, if you really care to know,
He meant to clear the upper pasture, too.
That sounds like something you have heard before?
Warren, I wish you could have heard the way
He jumbled everything. I stopped to look
Two or three times—he made me feel so queer—
To see if he was talking in his sleep.
He ran on Harold Wilson—you remember—
The boy you had in haying four years since.
He's finished school, and teaching in his college.
Silas declares you'll have to get him back.
He says they two will make a team for work:
Between them they will lay this farm as smooth!
The way he mixed that in with other things.
He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft
On education—you know how they fought
All through July under the blazing sun,
Silas up on the cart to build the load,
Harold along beside to pitch it on.'

'Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot.'

'Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream.
You wouldn't think they would. How some things linger!
Harold's young college boy's assurance piqued him.
After so many years he still keeps finding
Good arguments he sees he might have used.
I sympathize. I know just how it feels
To think of the right thing to say too late.
Harold's associated in his mind with Latin.
He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying
He studied Latin like the violin
Because he liked it—that an argument!
He said he couldn't make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong—
Which showed how much good school had ever done him.
He wanted to go over that. But most of all
He thinks if he could have another chance
To teach him how to build a load of hay—'

'I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment.
He bundles every forkful in its place,
And tags and numbers it for future reference,
So he can find and easily dislodge it
In the unloading. Silas does that well.
He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.
You never see him standing on the hay
He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself.'

'He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be
Some good perhaps to someone in the world.
He hates to see a boy the fool of books.
Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
And nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different.'

Part of a moon was falling down the west,
Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it
And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
As if she played unheard some tenderness
That wrought on him beside her in the night.

'Warren,' she said, 'he has come home to die:
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time.'

'Home,' he mocked gently.

'Yes, what else but home?
It all depends on what you mean by home.
Of course he's nothing to us, any more
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.'

'Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.'

'I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve.'

Warren leaned out and took a step or two,
Picked up a little stick, and brought it back
And broke it in his hand and tossed it by.
'Silas has better claim on us you think
Than on his brother? Thirteen little miles
As the road winds would bring him to his door.
Silas has walked that far no doubt today.
Why didn't he go there? His brother's rich,
A somebody—director in the bank.'

'He never told us that.'

'We know it though.'

'I think his brother ought to help, of course.
I'll see to that if there is need. He ought of right
To take him in, and might be willing to—
He may be better than appearances.
But have some pity on Silas. Do you think
If he'd had any pride in claiming kin
Or anything he looked for from his brother,
He'd keep so still about him all this time?'

'I wonder what's between them.'

'I can tell you.
Silas is what he is—we wouldn't mind him—
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.
He never did a thing so very bad.
He don't know why he isn't quite as good
As anyone. Worthless though he is,

He won't be made ashamed to please his brother.'

'I can't think Si ever hurt anyone.'

'No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay
And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back.
He wouldn't let me put him on the lounge.
You must go in and see what you can do.
I made the bed up for him there tonight.
You'll be surprised at him—how much he's broken.
His working days are done; I'm sure of it.'

'I'd not be in a hurry to say that.'

'I haven't been. Go, look, see for yourself.
But, Warren, please remember how it is:
He's come to help you ditch the meadow.
He has a plan. You mustn't laugh at him.
He may not speak of it, and then he may.
I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud
Will hit or miss the moon.'

It hit the moon.
Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.

Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her,
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.

'Warren,' she questioned.

'Dead,' was all he answered.

SUMMARY

A woman named Mary sits staring at the flame of an oil lamp while waiting for her husband, Warren, to get back from the market. Upon hearing his footsteps, she quietly runs down the dark hallway to meet him and deliver some news that'll put him on edge: their old farmhand, Silas, has returned to the farm. Mary pushes Warren back outside through their front door, closing it behind her while telling her husband to be kind to Silas. She takes Warren's shopping from him and then pulls him down to sit next to her on the porch.

Warren says that he's always been kind to Silas but refuses to hire him again; he told Silas he'd never take him back after he'd left in the middle of the previous haying season. He's useless, Warran says; no one would hire someone as old and unreliable as Silas, who would always disappear right when Warren needed him most. Last year, Silas had argued that he deserved some extra money to buy things like tobacco, but Warren had told him that he, unfortunately, couldn't afford it. Silas declared that someone else would be willing to pay him fixed wages, and Warren told him he'd have to go and find that person then. If it had just been about Silas simply trying to improve his lot in life, Warren wouldn't have been bothered by him leaving; but really, Warren says, whenever Silas starts demanding more money it's just because someone else is trying to lure him away with promises of some extra cash during the haying season, when hired help is in high demand. Meanwhile, Silas only comes back to Warren's farm in the winter (i.e., when the haying season is over). As such, Warren is through with him.

Mary warns her husband to be quiet, lest Silas hear them talking, but Warren doesn't care.

Mary says that Silas is totally exhausted and sleeping next to the stove inside the house. She'd come home to find him completely passed out in front of the barn, looking miserable. The sight of him had frightened her (something that, to Mary's frustration, makes Warren laugh) because she hadn't been expecting to see him and didn't realize who he was at first. Once Warren sees him, he'll understand that Silas is different now.

Warren asks where Silas had come from, but Mary doesn't know. She'd brought him inside, tended to him, and tried to get him to explain where he'd been, but the exhausted Silas just kept falling asleep.

Warren presses Mary, who again insists that Silas didn't say much.

Warren keeps pressing Mary, assuming that Silas told her that he'd come back in order to finish ditching the meadow (he suspects that Silas just isn't able to find work anywhere else and wants to return to a place of steady employment).

Mary confirms that this is what Silas said but then scolds Warren, rhetorically asking what else he'd want from Silas and urging him to let the farmhand reclaim his dignity by finishing the job he'd started. She adds that Silas also offered to clear the upper pasture. Noticing that Warren remains unmoved and unsurprised, she describes the pitiful scene further: in the farmhand's confusion, he'd jumbled his words, leading Mary to think he might be sleeptalking due to his extreme exhaustion. Silas couldn't stop talking about Harold Wilson, who was a college student who worked on the farm four years ago (and now teaches at his old school). In the old farmhand's exhausted and delusional state, he raved about the possibility of Mary and Silas bringing Wilson back to work on the farm and making it better than ever before. He thought highly of Wilson, even though he considered the younger man to be a little over-educated. Mary recalls how the two farmhands argued all through July as they harvested and loaded up bushels of hay

under the hot sun.

While Warren also remembers their fights, he notes that he deliberately didn't get involved.

Mary was surprised to learn that the sting of those days four years ago still bothers Silas. She tells Warren that Harold Wilson's self-assuredness annoyed the older farmhand. Silas talked about how, even after all these years, he replayed old arguments with the younger farmhand in his head, thinking of all the things he could have said. Mary sympathizes with him because she—like everyone—has had the same experience. He associated Wilson with Latin because the boy enjoyed the language and chose to study it just as one might study the violin; Silas asked Mary for her opinion on studying something just for the fun of it, contrasting Wilson's formal education against his complete lack of practical knowledge and disbelief in rural traditions and superstitions (like the practice of finding water with a forked stick). At the end of the day, Silas wanted to teach Wilson the working-class, honest skills he valued himself, like building a load of hay.

Even Warren admits that Silas was an organized worker who carefully kept track of every bundle of hay so he could easily find and unload them later. He was good at that, Warren says again; he put as much effort as possible into the difficult task of unloading the hay bales by lifting them from their cart.

Silas valued these humble skills and thought that if he could pass them down to Harold Wilson, he might actually have more luck in life; he considered Wilson's education a waste. But Mary notes that despite Silas's attention to other people's situations, he didn't plan his own life out particularly well—he had no real successes to be proud of or look forward to, and it's the same case now.

As the moon sets in the sky, it casts its light across the landscape. Mary spreads her apron as though to catch the moonlight in her lap and then touches a nearby morning-glory plant covered in dew. The plant's long tendrils are like the strings of a harp on which Mary plays gentle music to move her husband. She attempts to win Warren over to her side by explaining the tragedy of Silas's situation and describing how ill the old man is. She tells her husband that Silas isn't trying to trick him, the farmhand just wants to return to his home, a place that mattered to him, before he dies.

Warren laughs at her for describing the farm as Silas's home, but Mary doubles down and pushes Warren to think about what home actually means. She compares the farmhand to a poor lost dog who happened upon their homestead.

Warren defines home as a place that's obligated to take you in.

Mary argues that even though she and Warren aren't bound by blood or contractual obligation to Silas—home isn't something that's deserved or earned, but instead a basic right.

Warren fidgets, playing with a stick as he brings up Silas's family. He argues that Silas should have sought refuge from his brother who lives thirteen miles away—less than the distance Silas traveled to reach Mary and Warren. This is not just any brother, either, but a rich and successful banker.

Silas never told his employers about his brother, though they were aware of him anyway.

Mary theorizes that—since family members do have a kind of obligation to each other—Silas and his brother are likely estranged, although she hopes that his brother might be kinder than he seems. She tells Warren to cut Silas some slack. If not for the tension between the two, Silas probably would've mentioned his brother to Mary and Warren in the course of normal conversation (and he likely would've asked his brother for help instead of them).

As Mary and Warren try and figure out the nature of the conflict between Silas and his brother, Mary imagines that he's the kind of person successful family members can't stand: even though he doesn't have the career his brother does, he has pride in himself and refuses to beg his brother for help.

Warren agrees that Silas never caused anyone any harm, though Mary says that the pitiful sight of him sitting, exhausted, on an uncomfortable chair inside the house hurt her heart. Even in his extreme exhaustion, he refused to let Mary put him on the lounge. She tells Warren to check on the farmhand and see if he can convince him to take the bed that Mary made up, although she warns her husband that Silas is terribly worn out—and certainly no longer capable of manual labor.

Warren gently scoffs at her, but she insists he go to see Silas for himself. In an attempt to help Silas save his pride, she reminds Warren of the farmhand's stated plan to help finish ditching the meadow—something Silas may or may not bring up when Warren sees him—and tells her husband not to mock him. Then she waits, watching a cloud stream past the moon, for her husband's return.

The cloud seems to collide with the moon. The silvery could, the moon, and Mary form a little trio in the landscape.

Warren quickly returns and holds Mary's hand in a bid to comfort her.

He doesn't tell her the bad news until she asks: during the course of their conversation, Silas died.

THEMES

JUSTICE, MERCY, AND FORGIVENESS

Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man" narrates an argument between a farmer and his wife: Mary tries to convince her husband, Warren, to hire back Silas, a former farmhand who disappointed the couple in the past by disappearing when they needed him. At the end of his life, the

mortally ill Silas returns to the farm so he can meet the terms of his contract with Warren. Although Mary takes pity on Silas and feels that she and Warren should give him a second chance, her husband disagrees. When Mary finally manages to convince Warren, it's too late: Silas has already died. The poem suggests that reconciliation and forgiveness are matters of life and death—and that humility, patience, and mercy are more valuable than pure, unfeeling justice.

Since Silas broke his contract last year, Warren considers his reluctance to hire the farmhand back a completely fair and just response. If their working relationship was based on that contract, and Silas broke the agreement, Warren feels he's been released from any obligation to Silas. This is an unemotional, legalistic reading of the two men's relationship (and responsibility) to each other.

Mary, on the other hand, believes in a Christian model of forgiveness. Although she acknowledges that Silas has done wrong, she has faith in his fundamental goodness, his past hard work, and his ability to change his behavior. She thus argues that she and Warren should allow "the poor old man" "some humble way to save his self-respect"—in other words, they should let him return to the farm despite the fact that he broke his promise, trusting that he's sorry for what he's done and wants to make amends. While Warren bases his decisions on a sense of obligation and justice, Mary is more merciful.

Ultimately, Warren's beliefs result in Silas's death; Warren refuses to allow Silas in until it is too late. This a tragedy that the poem suggests could have been averted if Warren had tempered his idea of justice with some of Mary's mercy. Both Silas's efforts to make up for his past failings and Warren and Mary's attempts to understand each other suggest that the poem sees Mary's more compassionate and merciful perspective as essential; pure, unemotive, tit-for-tat "justice" isn't truly just.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-60
- Lines 64-66
- Lines 74-175

HOME AND BELONGING

When the ill and impoverished farmhand Silas returns to his former employers Warren and Mary, trying to make amends for a contract he broke, he sparks a debate between the couple. Warren feels that Silas should have gone to his brother for help, seeking a home with blood relations; Mary argues that home is something that you *make*, not something you're born into. The poem explores the meaning of "home," ultimately agreeing with Mary: people create homes through choice, effort, love, and generosity.

Warren seems to believe that a feeling of "home" is based on obligation: home is where "they have to take you in." Such obligations, in his view, are formed through blood ties. He argues that Silas should call upon his rich brother, a "director in the bank," instead of coming back to the farm.

Mary, on the other hand, believes that, as Silas's past employers, they should accept his return and treat it as a homecoming, making him feel welcome. Despite the fact that Silas breached his contract, Mary still feels a responsibility towards him: to her, home is "something you somehow haven't to deserve," a freely given and loving gift. Silas also seems to see home more in the way Mary does than the way Warren does. He returns to Mary and Warren rather than going to his own brother, suggesting that his sense of home is defined by chosen loyalties and affection, not by duty or blood.

Although Warren feels that Silas owes him for leaving the farm, then, Mary suggests that she and Warren in fact owe Silas in his hour of need. She describes the farm as Silas's "home," arguing that even though Silas may not have any blood relation to them, they still have an obligation to him. This isn't a contractual obligation, but a moral effort that they can (and, in Mary's opinion, *should*) choose to make.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 114-144

CLASS AND STATUS

Like many of Robert Frost's works, this poem suggests that class creates artificial (and harmful) divisions between people. The class difference between the landowning Mary and Warren and the laborer Silas means that the couple has disproportionate power over their employee. Silas's own regrets about how he dealt with a younger but more educated farm hand and his estrangement from his rich brother further demonstrate how class hierarchy distorts and damages human relationships.

Mary and Warren employ Silas; as a result, they have more power than he does and can choose to let him return or cast him out. As a result of this class and power imbalance, Warren's sympathy for Silas is tempered by his perception of their relationship. Because he sees Silas as a mere employee rather than a fellow human being, he at first refuses to show him any mercy or understanding.

Class differences also damage Silas's relationship with his wealthy and successful brother. Mary and Warren speculate that Silas refuses to go to him for help because the two are estranged: because Silas is a farmhand and his brother is a banker, the class gulf between them makes it painful or difficult for Silas to relate to him.

Similarly, the class division between Silas and Harold Smith, a

college-educated farmhand who helped Silas out during an earlier haying season, contributed to tension between the two workers. Although Silas regrets their conflict at the end of his life, Mary states that "Harold's young college boy's assurance piqued him." Harold's education, the poem implies, likely made him a bit of a snob and prevented him and Silas from fully understanding or connecting with each other.

Last but not least, although the poem doesn't explicitly explore a class division between Mary and Warren—since they're married, they're in the same economic position—Warren's gender seems to make him the head of the household. While Mary eventually manages to convince him to allow Silas to stay, Warren is the one who ultimately makes the decisions. The speaker may be suggesting that the power imbalance between the two contributes to their differences in philosophy and opinion.

Class differences—and the differences in power that they create—fracture all of these relationships, causing harm to everyone involved (regardless of their position).

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32
- Lines 61-101
- Lines 126-152

THE VALUE OF HARD WORK

"The Death of the Hired Man" questions the value of hard work. Although the farmhand Silas tries to complete the work he left undone (and thus to give himself some sense of purpose before his death), his efforts are ultimately fruitless. Work seems to have given him a sense of community and kinship with his employers, Mary and Warren. Since Warren doesn't return this sentiment until it's too late, however, the speaker questions the foundations of what Silas believes in.

All the poem's characters value hard work—and judge each other on the basis of that work. Although Warren initially doesn't remember Silas as a good farmhand due to his breach of contract, Mary reminds him that Silas used to work very hard. This reminder makes Warren begin to appreciate Silas, and eventually allows Mary to convince him to let the farmhand stay.

Silas, too, remembers his days of hard work fondly and feels guilty for breaking his contract and failing in his duty to the farm and his employers. Despite being mortally ill, he chooses to come back to the farm and promises to complete as much work as he can, showing that he's seriously committed to hard work as a value even though he hasn't lived up to his own standards in the past. Even though he's on death's door and "his working days are done," his sense that work is meaningful means he tries to fulfill his promise anyway.

Hard work, in these people's world, is thus valuable in itself, a sign of good character, and a way of showing loyalty and care. Yet despite the characters' positive views on the value of work, the poem *itself* seems a little more skeptical. Silas is ultimately unable to return to work; he dies before Warren relents and allows him to come home. Without other human values like compassion and forgiveness, the poem suggests, hard work is only worth so much.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 15-30
- Lines 51-55
- Lines 64-66
- Lines 85-105
- Lines 159-175

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-10

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway with the news
And put him on his guard. 'Silas is back.'
She pushed him outward with her through the door
And shut it after her. 'Be kind,' she said.
She took the market things from Warren's arms
And set them on the porch, then drew him down
To sit beside her on the wooden steps.

The speaker beings this long narrative poem with a stanza of exposition that sets the scene: a woman named Mary is sitting by a table waiting for her husband Warren to get home from "the market," so that she can inform him that the couple's old farmhand, Silas, has returned.

The way the speaker describes Mary's temperament and actions—she sits "musing on the lamp-flame at the table," revealing her calm and patience, then runs "on tip-toe" to meet her husband "in the doorway" and "put him on his guard"—gives readers some clues as to Mary's personality, the relationship between Mary and Warren, and the context behind the couple's relationship with Silas.

Mary tries to direct her husband: she physically pushes him through the door, then orders him to "be kind" before removing groceries from his arms and pulling him down to sit next to her. These actions grant readers a sense of the dynamic between the two: while readers can assume that Warren is the "man of the house" and likely has the power to make decisions, Mary holds her own. She has a certain view of the world and attempts to get her husband to share her perspective. The fact

that Mary seems keen to break the news about Silas to her husband gently suggests a kind of tension around the farmhand's return; it certainly doesn't seem like Warren is going to be happy that Silas is back.

This stanza also establishes the poem's form. "The Death of the Hired Man" is written in a subtle blank verse: unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter is a meter in which each line of verse contains five iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern. Take lines 9-10:

> She took | the mar- | ket things | from War- | ren's arms
> And set | them on | the porch, | then drew | him down
> To sit | beside | her on | the wood- | en steps.

The meter contains plenty of variations, which is common for blank verse and keeps the poem from sounding overly stiff or formal. Take lines 1 and 2, both of which open with a trochee (the opposite of an iamb, following a stressed-unstressed syllable pattern): "Mary," "Waiting." Variations like this keep the poem's language sounding natural and even quite prose-like.

LINES 11-21

> *'When was I ever anything but kind to him?*
> *But I'll not have the fellow back,' he said.*
> *'I told him so last haying, didn't I?*
> *If he left then, I said, that ended it.*
> *What good is he? Who else will harbor him*
> *At his age for the little he can do?*
> *What help he is there's no depending on.*
> *Off he goes always when I need him most.*
> *He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,*
> *Enough at least to buy tobacco with,*
> *So he won't have to beg and be beholden.*

Warren speaks for the first time, and the poem allows him to lay out his perspective on the world.

Warren tells Mary that while he's always been kind to Silas, he refuses to let the farmhand back in. The poem also provides more context for the relationship between Silas and the farm owners: during last season's haying (when farmers cut, dry, and bale hale), Silas left before he'd completed the job he was hired to do. In other words, he broke his contract—and before he left, Warren warned him that this breach was an unforgivable one.

Warren goes on to describe Silas as effectively useless given his age, and basically claims that the farmhand expects more than he deserves. Silas wants money to buy things like "tobacco" rather than having to "beg" for them or "be beholden"—that is, in debt. The crisp /b/ alliteration of this phrase makes it come across as more forceful, conveying Warren's distaste for Silas's actions.

More broadly, this initial statement from Warren relays the farm owner's overarching values. He views relationships as transactional—he values Silas based on what he can economically and practically offer the farm—and considers a breach of contract a breach of trust. And although he describes himself as having been "kind to [Silas]," he doesn't actually tell readers what that kindness looked like. Readers can imagine that, based on Warren's worldview, kindness equates to holding up one end of a labor-relation (in other words, paying and housing Silas for his service).

In terms of form, these lines continue the pattern established by stanza 1. The poem continues in a rough unrhymed iambic pentameter (a.k.a. blank verse), which keeps the dialogue sounding natural.

Note, too, the use of rhetorical questions throughout these lines:

- "When was I ever anything but kind to him?"
- "I told him so last haying, didnt I?"
- "What good is he?"
- "Who else will harbor him / At his age for the little he can do?"

These questions make Warren sound a bit defensive. He's trying to convince Mary—and, perhaps, himself—that he doesn't owe Silas anything more.

LINES 22-30

> *"All right," I say, "I can't afford to pay*
> *Any fixed wages, though I wish I could."*
> *"Someone else can." "Then someone else will have to."*
> *I shouldn't mind his bettering himself*
> *If that was what it was. You can be certain,*
> *When he begins like that, there's someone at him*
> *Trying to coax him off with pocket-money,—*
> *In haying time, when any help is scarce.*
> *In winter he comes back to us. I'm done.'*

These lines grant readers more insight into Warren's moral code and general outlook on the world. Readers learn here that Silas likely broke his contract because he went in search of fixed wages (Warren must have been paying him by the day). The dialogue between Warren and Silas also reveals the terseness and tension of their relations. Warren shows Silas no compassion, and Silas seems to address Warren with a similar lack of respect. (Note, however, that this dialogue is also related to Mary by Warren; readers aren't getting Silas's side of things.)

Warren goes on to state that he wouldn't mind Silas *actually succeeding* in finding fixed wages or a better position, but he looks down upon the farmhand's naivety given that Silas's "better offer" was just someone "trying to coax him off with pocket-money." That is, Silas wasn't really "bettering himself"—he was just seduced by the prospect of a little extra money. Warren also resents the fact that Silas abandoned the

farm during the busy haying season only to return in winter, when jobs are scarce and help isn't really needed.

Like Warren's conversation with Silas, the ending of this stanza is extremely terse and final. Warren is a stubborn person, the poem implies, set in his ways: he has a certain idea of justice and fairness, which doesn't include Silas given the way in which the farmhand broke his contract. As a result, Warren simply says "I'm done"—unlike Mary, who's willing to hear Silas out, Warren puts his foot down.

LINES 31-39

'Sh! not so loud: he'll hear you,' Mary said.
'I want him to: he'll have to soon or late.'
'He's worn out. He's asleep beside the stove.
When I came up from Rowe's I found him here,
Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep,
A miserable sight, and frightening, too—
You needn't smile—I didn't recognize him—
I wasn't looking for him—and he's changed.
Wait till you see.'

These lines present readers with the beginning of a back-and-forth between Mary and Warren. After Warren criticizes Silas for his infidelity to the farm and to his contract, Mary tells Warren to lower his voice; Silas is nearby, "asleep beside the stove," and she doesn't want to upset him. Mary, then, is clearly concerned with Silas's feelings.

Warren, on the other hand, believes that Silas deserves to hear "the truth" of his actions—that is, to own up to what he did. This belief ties into Warren's general approach to justice and responsibility.

Mary, again, is extremely empathetic towards Silas and his plight. She goes into a detailed description of his pitiful state: she'd unexpectedly come across the older man as he slept "against the barn-door" looking exhausted and fragile. Surprised to find him there, the "miserable sight" had frightened her—the thought of which that apparently makes Warren chuckle ("You needn't smile," she tells her husband).

Mary's halting, caesura-filled dialogue conveys her distress. Note the sharp pauses here, as well as the parataxis of "I didn't recognize him— / I wasn't looking for him":

> You needn't smile—I didn't recognize him—
> I wasn't looking for him—and he's changed.

The language isn't smooth or measured, making it sound more like Mary is speaking honestly, from the heart. Because of her ability to understand Warren's suffering, she is also able to believe that "he's changed." Unlike Warren, she forgives him for the mistakes of his past and admonishes Warren for his apathy.

LINES 40-50

'Where did you say he'd been?'
'He didn't say. I dragged him to the house,
And gave him tea and tried to make him smoke.
I tried to make him talk about his travels.
Nothing would do: he just kept nodding off.'
'What did he say? Did he say anything?'
'But little.'
'Anything? Mary, confess
He said he'd come to ditch the meadow for me.'
'Warren!'
'But did he? I just want to know.'

Mary and Warren's conversation continues, revealing more about the couple's relationship with Silas as well as each of their general moral and philosophical priorities.

Warren tries to probe for more information as to Silas's previous whereabouts, but Mary claims he was too tired to discuss his travels. He was so exhausted, in fact, that he "kept nodding off," unable to keep his eyes open. Even before disclosing the fact of his arrival to her husband, she greeted Silas with compassion, care, and hospitality: she "dragged him to the house, / And gave him tea and tried to make him smoke." Although she also inquired as to where he'd been, the general implication is that she asked him out of concern; she wasn't being accusatory.

Warren, on the other hand, quickly makes the intention behind his line of questioning clear: he demands that Mary confess Silas's promise to "ditch the meadow." He attempts to demonstrate that Silas does want something from him and Mary in order to justify his retributive, unforgiving mindset towards the farmhand.

At first, it looks like these lines have broken the poem's meter: lines 39, 40, 46, 47, 49, and 50 each lack the necessary 10 syllables for a line of iambic pentameter. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that the blank verse remains intact when readers *combine* these lines. That is, line 39 read in conjunction with line 40 creates a full line of iambic pentameter, and the same is true of lines 46-47 and 49-50. Here are lines 46-47 as an example (note that Frost swaps a trochee into the fourth foot here):

> 'But lit- | tle.' 'A- | nything? | Mary, | confess

The characters' speech thus maintains the poem's steady rhythm.

LINES 51-60

'Of course he did. What would you have him say?
Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor old man
Some humble way to save his self-respect.
He added, if you really care to know,
He meant to clear the upper pasture, too.
That sounds like something you have heard before?
Warren, I wish you could have heard the way

He jumbled everything. I stopped to look
Two or three times—he made me feel so queer—
To see if he was talking in his sleep.

Mary is forced to admit that Silas did come to offer his services and complete his contract. Instead of just asking for help and housing, he has claimed to be willing to make up for his past misdeeds—however, it is strongly implied that he is far too old and tired to actually be capable of doing what he promises. He also told Mary that he "meant to clear the upper pasture, too."

Although Mary understands that Silas will likely be unable to complete these tasks and hold up his "end of the bargain," she feels pity for him: she refers to him as a "poor old man" trying to "save his self-respect." She sees him as someone trying to change and do his best rather than a swindler promising things he isn't going to make good on.

Finally, Mary tries to explain Silas's mental state to Warren. He is obviously unwell—Mary says that he "jumbled everything," even going so far as to claim that he sounds like he "was talking in his sleep." Talking to Silas made Mary feel "so queer," or strange, revealing her discomfort around the suffering older man.

LINES 61-73

He ran on Harold Wilson—you remember—
The boy you had in haying four years since.
He's finished school, and teaching in his college.
Silas declares you'll have to get him back.
He says they two will make a team for work:
Between them they will lay this farm as smooth!
The way he mixed that in with other things.
He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft
On education—you know how they fought
All through July under the blazing sun,
Silas up on the cart to build the load,
Harold along beside to pitch it on.'
'Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot.'

Mary relays more of the conversation she had with Silas to Warren.

Silas, who at this point seems delirious, is trapped in his memories and idealizations of the past. Silas recalls his old partnership with another farmhand, a college student named Harold Wilson who has since grown up to teach at his old school. Yet Silas's request that Mary and Warren hire Wilson back demonstrates his mental state; he doesn't realize that the student is now an adult—and not just an adult, but one in a very different financial position due to his educational background. It is implied in this poem that Wilson is more highly educated than Silas, and as a result that he has enjoyed a degree of class mobility. The job on the farm was likely a form of temporary seasonal employment for the boy, who has now moved on to "bigger and better things."

Mary also relates Silas's opinion on Wilson, which further emphasizes the class divide between the two: the old farmhand considers Wilson "daft / On education," likely due to his booksmarts and relative lack of practical ability. From this conversation, it sounds like Silas took on the brunt of the work as he "[built] the load" while Wilson "[pitched] it on." Like the class divisions that prevent Warren from sympathizing with Silas (and perhaps the power differential that prevents Mary and Warren from seeing eye to eye), the class division between Warren and Harold Wilson led to conflicts between the two.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Warren's response to Mary—"Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot"—encapsulates his attitude towards Silas. Since he is essentially the holder of ultimate power on his farm, he considers the dealings of his farmhands to be "below his pay grade." He doesn't consider himself responsible for any of the issues and conflicts that arise between the two farmhands.

LINES 74-90

'Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream.
You wouldn't think they would. How some things linger!
Harold's young college boy's assurance piqued him.
After so many years he still keeps finding
Good arguments he sees he might have used.
I sympathize. I know just how it feels
To think of the right thing to say too late.
Harold's associated in his mind with Latin.
He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying
He studied Latin like the violin
Because he liked it—that an argument!
He said he couldn't make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong—
Which showed how much good school had ever done him.
He wanted to go over that. But most of all
He thinks if he could have another chance
To teach him how to build a load of hay—'

This stanza demonstrates not only Silas's character and commitment to the farm, but also Mary's ability to empathize with the old farmhand despite her comparatively higher class status.

Despite having no personal connection with Harold Wilson besides the fact of their joint employment, "those days trouble Silas like a dream." In other words, Silas still feels bad about his old conflicts with Wilson. Even Mary is able to recognize that he has no practical obligation to Wilson—instead, he revisits those memories out of a sense of dedication to his work and to the farm.

As Mary describes the nature of Silas's arguments with Wilson, it becomes even more apparent that the philosophical divisions between the two men were a product of education and class differences: Wilson is "associated in [Silas's] mind with Latin," Mary says—something Silas sees as ultimately frivolous and

snooty, of no use in the real world. Silas attempted to teach Wilson what he believed to be practical skills, like the superstitious practice of finding water with a hazel prong, but Wilson—with, it is implied, his more traditional or classical education, for example—was not able to see eye to eye with the older farmhand. To Silas, this is evidence that the younger man's schooling was of no practical use; it did him no real "good."

Silas's biggest regret, it seems, is not having been able to teach Wilson how to properly "build a load of hay." Despite Warren's opinion that Silas is just returning to the farm in an attempt to wheedle payment from his previous employers, this piece of information reveals the emotional significance behind Silas's relationship with work and with the farm at large: Silas takes this work seriously and feels a sense of pride in his labor.

LINES 91-115

'I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment.
He bundles every forkful in its place,
And tags and numbers it for future reference,
So he can find and easily dislodge it
In the unloading. Silas does that well.
He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.
You never see him standing on the hay
He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself.'
'He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be
Some good perhaps to someone in the world.
He hates to see a boy the fool of books.
Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
And nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different.'
Part of a moon was falling down the west,
Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it
And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
As if she played unheard some tenderness
That wrought on him beside her in the night.
'Warren,' she said, 'he has come home to die:
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time.'

Even Warren is forced to admit Silas's commitment and detail-oriented nature in building loads of hay. As he describes the farmhand's meticulous approach to bundling "every forkful in its place," "[tagging] and [numbering] it for future reference," he finally remarks "Silas does that well." This is the first and most significant compliment Warren has paid Silas—it reveals how Warren, like Silas, ultimately values work and diligence. He appreciates Silas's industrious nature, praising him for "trying to lift, straining to lift himself."

Mary also notes that Silas's desire to teach Harold Wilson how to manage the farm "properly" stems from the old farmhand's fundamental belief that practical skills are more useful in the world at large than being an overeducated "fool of books." She then laments Silas's compassion, suggesting that his concern for "other folk" came at the expense of his own well-being. This is a sharp departure from Warren's conception of the old farmhand as selfish and useless; here, he comes across as generous but short-sighted, and the intense parallelism of lines 103-104 underscores the tragedy of Silas's situation:

> And nothing to look backward to with pride,
> And nothing to look forward to with hope,

Whichever way Silas looks—toward the past or the future—he has "nothing" to cling to. He hasn't done anything that he can reflect proudly on, nor does he have anything "to look forward to" that might keep him going. "So now and never any different," Mary continues, the intense /n/ alliteration and consonance of this phrase making it sound more emphatic. Silas's situation is the same as it ever was, and nothing is going to change.

This section contains some of the work's most lyrical language, and, not coincidentally, this language describes Mary and her mercy; at the same time, these stanzas mark the beginning of a shift in Warren's decision-making process. Up until the previous stanzas in which Warren begrudgingly acknowledges the high quality of Silas's work on the farm, Warren's mind was made up: Silas broke his contract, and Warren believed that he didn't owe the farmhand anything. Yet as Mary describes Silas's kindness (his "[concern] for other folk") as well as the tragedy and misfortune of his life, her compassion begins to change Warren's mind.

In a rare break from the interplay of dialogue between Mary and Warren, the speaker describes the moon setting in the distance. The imagery depicts Mary as an almost mystical being with a deep connection to nature—she "[spreads] her apron" to the moonlight and "[puts] out her hand / Among the harp-like morning-glory strings."

These actions point to her growing power on the farm and specifically over Warren: the speaker imagines her playing "unheard some tenderness / That wrought on him beside her in the night." Her mercy and compassion, which seem to be figuratively linked to the land of the farm itself, actively sway Warren toward her point of view.

At the end of the stanza, she finally states her belief that Silas "has come home to die." Instead of keeping up the charade that he'll be able to finish his duties from last season, Mary tells Warren that while Silas may have broken his contract in the past, he wants to die in the only place he considers home. He feels a sense of belonging to the farm—and, it is implied, to Mary and Warren. Warren "needn't be afraid" that Silas will leave, Mary says, because Silas wants the farm to be his final resting place.

LINES 116-134

'Home,' he mocked gently.
'Yes, what else but home?
It all depends on what you mean by home.
Of course he's nothing to us, any more
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.'
'Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.'
'I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve.'
Warren leaned out and took a step or two,
Picked up a little stick, and brought it back
And broke it in his hand and tossed it by.
'Silas has better claim on us you think
Than on his brother? Thirteen little miles
As the road winds would bring him to his door.
Silas has walked that far no doubt today.
Why didn't he go there? His brother's rich,
A somebody—director in the bank.'

In response to Mary's assertion that Silas has "come home to die," Warren and Mary debate the meaning of "home" and "family."

At first, Warren scoffs at the idea that the farm is Silas's home; in his view, his relationship with Silas was purely professional, based on a contract. He and Mary aren't Warren's friends or family, so their farm is not his home. Mary, however, pushes back; "what else" would the farm be to Silas, she says, "but home?"

Mary acknowledges that Silas has no claim on the couple: she states, "Of course he's nothing to us, any more / Than was the hound that came a stranger to us / Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail." By comparing the farmhand to a lost dog, she examines the question of pure mercy—what does it mean to show kindness to a person or creature who hasn't, or can't, return the favor?

It's not entirely clear who speaks the following lines, which present two definitions of home:

- "[T]he place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in"
- "Something you somehow haven't to deserve"

Perhaps Mary is offering the first definition, which Warren amends, essentially agreeing with her; the opposite is also possible, with Warren offering the first definition of home and Mary softening it. Either way, the poem ultimately presents the idea of home and belonging as a kind of unconditional love that persists regardless of relationship or circumstance. The second definition of home reinforces Mary's broader belief system: no one necessarily *deserves* mercy or earns it through their actions, but it's a quality that should be shown nonetheless without the hope of reciprocity.

Finally, Warren brings up Silas's brother. Up until this point in the poem, there's been no discussion of Silas's background beyond his history as a farmhand, but Warren reveals the fact that Silas's brother is not just wealthy, but "A somebody—director in the bank." He implies that Silas's brother may even be a person with more power and influence than Warren and Mary themselves.

Why, then, does Silas return to the farm instead of seeking shelter with his privileged relative? This question leads Mary and Warren to the poem's emotional apex: an investigation of what loyalty and home really mean.

LINES 135-152

'He never told us that.'
'We know it though.'
'I think his brother ought to help, of course.
I'll see to that if there is need. He ought of right
To take him in, and might be willing to—
He may be better than appearances.
But have some pity on Silas. Do you think
If he'd had any pride in claiming kin
Or anything he looked for from his brother,
He'd keep so still about him all this time?'
'I wonder what's between them.'
'I can tell you.
Silas is what he is—we wouldn't mind him—
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.
He never did a thing so very bad.
He don't know why he isn't quite as good
As anyone. Worthless though he is,
He won't be made ashamed to please his brother.'

Although Silas never explicitly disclosed his brother's financial and social position to his former employers, Mary and Warren are very aware of it. Mary remarks that his brother "ought to help, of course"—especially given her merciful and forgiving perspective, there's no doubt in her mind that Silas's close family member should be more than willing and able to assist him in his time of need—but tells Warren that there must be a reason Silas hasn't simply turned to him for help. She asks:

> Do you think
> If he'd had any pride in claiming kin
> Or anything he looked for from his brother,
> He'd keep so still about him all this time?

In these lines, Mary examines the relationship between Silas and his brother: she basically states that the fact of Silas's life up to this point, as well as his decision to pursue employment as a farmhand (a relatively menial, low-paid position compared to his brother's job as a bank director), proves something about his character. He would rather struggle on his own than look to

his estranged brother for help. This approach to life reinforces Mary's fundamental belief that Silas truly cares about the farm, responsibility, and the value of hard work.

While Warren wonders what happened between the two brothers, Mary seems to understand the nature of their relationship. Even though Silas "never did a thing so very bad," she describes him as "just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide." Perhaps his brother doesn't approve of his humble life and considers his ambitions and values "worthless"—after all, even though Mary seems to respect him, she refers to him using that language.

But regardless of his position, he still holds on to his pride: in Mary's words, "He won't be made ashamed to please his brother." Silas has chosen his path and refuses to compromise, even if it would save his life—a decision that Mary, the speaker of the poem, and Frost himself seem to consider fundamentally valuable.

LINES 153-161

'
I
can't think Si ever hurt anyone.'
'No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay
And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back.
He wouldn't let me put him on the lounge.
You must go in and see what you can do.
I made the bed up for him there tonight.
You'll be surprised at him—how much he's broken.
His working days are done; I'm sure of it.'
'I'd not be in a hurry to say that.'

This long poem tells the story of the relationship between Warren, Mary, and Silas, but it also narrates the course of a conversation between Mary and Warren. Above all, it explores the conflict between two people and two sets of values; over the course of the poem, Warren's mind gradually changes as he begins to surrender his justice and obligation-based perspective to Mary's more gentle and compassionate point of view.

This portion of the poem marks a definite turning point in Warren's worldview. Instead of focusing on the history and facts of Silas's employment at the farm—in other words, what he did or didn't do as a worker—Warren begins to consider him as a human being. Although his remark—"I can't think Si ever hurt anyone"—seems casual, he refers to the farmhand using a nickname: one that demonstrates a closer relationship between the two than the contractual employer-employee power dynamic. It also demonstrates a degree of compassion for Silas, as well as an admiration of the farmhand's character, that Warren doesn't really display earlier in the poem.

Mary, of course, continues to talk about Silas with the kindness she demonstrates throughout their conversation. In response to Warren's softening, she describes the farmhand's position and "how much he's broken" in great detail: when she went to see him, he "hurt [her] heart the way he lay / And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back." By remarking on the way Silas's state affects her, she reveals the true depths of her empathy—her ability to not only understand his position, but feel his pain.

Even though Silas has returned to ask Mary and Warren for help, his pride prevents him from letting Mary "put him on the lounge." She welcomes him in with open arms, having already "made the bed up for him there tonight" despite the fact that he is completely unable to pay the couple back. Regardless of his promise to finish his job, "His working days are done."

LINES 162-175

'I haven't been. Go, look, see for yourself.
But, Warren, please remember how it is:
He's come to help you ditch the meadow.
He has a plan. You mustn't laugh at him.
He may not speak of it, and then he may.
I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud
Will hit or miss the moon.'
It hit the moon.
Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.
Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her,
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.
'Warren,' she questioned.
'Dead,' was all he answered.

Mary insists that Warren must visit Silas and see the farmhand for himself—although at this point her husband is more or less convinced to let Silas stay, she seems to hope that witnessing the farmhand's sorry state firsthand will trigger the same feelings of mercy in Warren that it did in her. Despite her realization that Silas is physically unable to continue working on the farm, she wants to respect his desire to work anyway. She reminds Warren of Silas's plan to "help [him] ditch the meadow" and demands that Warren "mustn't laugh at him."

These remarks show the true strength of Mary's character as well as her genuine compassion and understanding: she doesn't just want to provide shelter and safety for Silas, she wants to fulfill his emotional needs by acknowledging his values. Even if he's too sick and old to work, he still wants to: he's returned to the farm because he considers it his real home and his responsibility.

While Warren leaves to go check up on Silas, Mary states that she will "sit and see if that small sailing cloud / Will hit or miss the moon." In other words, she's watching a little cloud drift across the night sky and is wondering if it will cross in front of the moon, looking, from Mary's vantage point far below, as though it has "hit" it.

The poem then zooms away from Mary to describe the cloud:

It hit the moon.
Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.

Although most of this poem is devoted to the conversation between Mary and Warren, this is one of its few descriptive third-person passages. The speaker suggests that Mary's mercy somehow connects her to nature and the world around her: this imagery places her alongside "the moon" and"the little silver cloud" in the moment of her victory, since she's convinced her husband to let Silas stay on the farm.

Yet her victory is tragic and short-lived: Warren quickly returns, taking up her hand in a moment of uncharacteristic kindness and physical affection. The poem ends with his terse declaration that Silas has already died. The poem's terse final moment—Warren says, simply, "Dead"—feels all the blunter on the heels of the moon imagery. This makes Silas's death seem both sudden and cruel, despite the fact that Mary has referenced his pitiful state all along.

SYMBOLS

THE MOON

Although this poem doesn't make extensive use of figurative language or symbolism, the moon looming across the sky might be interpreted as a symbol of Silas's looming death. The speaker describes the moon as "falling down" and "Dragging the whole sky with it," an image that makes the moon feel heavy and foreboding and which also mirrors that of Silas slumping down outside Mary and Warren's barn Shortly after a "little silver cloud" passes in front of the moon at the poem's end, Warren announces that Silas has died. The moon being pierced or hidden by a cloud seems to reflect Silas passing from the world of the living.

The moon is also linked with Mary's mercy. Its first mention appears when Mary begins to successfully persuade Warren to have some mercy for Silas: its light pours "in her lap" and she gently "spread[s] her apron to it." Seeming to hold the moonlight perhaps reflects Mary's capacity for pity and forgiveness.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 106-109:** "Part of a moon was falling down the west, / Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills. / Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it / And spread her apron to it."
- **Lines 168-171:** "Will hit or miss the moon.' / It hit the moon. / Then there were three there, making a dim row, / The moon, the little silver cloud, and she."

POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

"The Death of the Hired Man" is a narrative poem filled with dialogue, and much of its language is literal. This grounds the poem in the real world and keeps the focus on the conundrum Mary and Warren face (that is, whether or not to take Silas back). That said, the poem does contain some similes and metaphors that help to add drama, establish the relationship between its characters, and bring the poem's imagery to life.

For example, in one of the poem's rare third-person passages that step outside of the dialogue between Warren and Mary, the speaker uses an extended simile to describe Mary's mercy and persuasive power through her close relationship with nature:

- First, the speaker compares the strings of the flowering morning glory plant to those of a harp. This sets up the second part of the simile where Mary puts "out her hand [...] As if she played unheard some tenderness / That wrought on him beside her in the night."
- Although the plant isn't *actually* a harp and she's not *actually* playing it, the simile creates a vivid image that illustrates the mysterious power of Mary's mercy.
- Through this figurative image, the speaker effectively demonstrates how Mary's kindness sways her husband away from his black-and-white view of justice and contractual obligation. She's playing not just the morning glory "strings," but also those of her husband's heart.

A little later in the poem, when Mary describes Silas's relationship to the farm, she remarks:

Of course he's nothing to us, any more
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.

By using analogy to compare Silas to a tired, lost dog wandering in the woods, Mary highlights the pathos of his situation. More importantly, however, she makes the point that even if the farmhand had never worked for them, she and Warren owe him a basic degree of sympathy and care. Warren likely wouldn't turn away a homeless hound, so why does he feel justified in turning away a human being in need of help?

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 109-113:** "She put out her hand / Among the harp-like morning-glory strings, / Taut with the dew from

garden bed to eaves, / As if she played unheard some tenderness / That wrought on him beside her in the night."

- **Lines 119-121:** "Of course he's nothing to us, any more / Than was the hound that came a stranger to us / Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.'"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification helps create more vivid imagery in the poem while also establishing a connection between its characters and the natural world.

Toward the end of the poem, for example, the speaker remarks:

> Part of a moon was falling down the west,
> Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
> Its light poured softly in her lap.

Although this passage literally describes the natural movement of the moon across the sky, the language suggests that the moon has a kind of agency—it falls "down the west" and drags "the whole sky with it to the hills," pouring its light "softly in [Mary's] lap." The moon is moved by its gravitational orbit, not by its own desires: it lacks the ability to actually fall, drag, or pour anything. But the speaker's personification of the moon clearly and beautifully illustrates the way it appears to Mary and Warren.

It also sets up a series of interactions between Mary and nature (which are expanded upon in the morning-glory simile that appears a few lines later) that further establish the unique power of Mary's mercy and tenderness. Because the moon figuratively pours its light in her lap, she is able to "spread her apron to it"—interacting with it as she would if it were a person.

Similarly, Mary's own description of a cloud in the sky as "that small sailing cloud" personifies it—a cloud cannot actively sail, although it travels across the sky on the wind like a sailboat would. When the speaker later states that "Then there were three there, making a dim row, / The moon, the little silver cloud, and she," both the moon and the "little silver cloud" are personified. Neither the moon nor the cloud is capable of joining in "a dim row" with Mary, but establishing them as characters alongside her reinforces her connection with the world around her: a poetic tactic that illustrates her empathy and understanding.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 106-108:** "Part of a moon was falling down the west, / Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills. / Its light poured softly in her lap. "
- **Lines 167-171:** "I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud / Will hit or miss the moon.' / It hit the moon. / Then there were three there, making a dim row, / The moon, the little silver cloud, and she."

DIALOGUE

One of the things that makes "The Death of the Hired Man" so unique is its use of dialogue and, in particular, colloquialisms. Robert Frost was famous for writing in plain, casual language; this quality was a huge part of what made him such an important American poet, as he captured the way people talked in the rural Northeast (particularly New England).

This poem is written almost entirely in dialogue: the speaker barely appears, and only enters at intervals to describe Mary and Warren's surroundings. As a result, the farm owners' opinions aren't filtered through a third party. Because Mary and Warren are individual characters given their own voices, the reader is able to fully understand both of their philosophical points of view and witness the interplay between them.

Due to the heavy use of dialogue, the poem is essentially just a conversation stretched into poetic form—and readers can deduce a lot about both of these characters by listening closely to the way that they talk. Listen to the halting caesurae in lines 36-38, for example, where Mary is telling her husband about unexpectedly stumbling upon Silas:

> A miserable sight, and frightening, too—
> You needn't smile—I didn't recognize him—
> I wasn't looking for him—and he's changed.

The halting pace helps to convey Mary's confusion and also suggests that she's speaking from the heart; her speech here feels jaunty and emotionally-charged rather smooth and rehearsed. The parataxis of these lines ("I didn't recognize him—
I wasn't looking for him") adds to the effect, making it sound as though Mary is simply relaying details as they occur to her.

Note how different Mary's dialogue sounds when compared to Warren's in the previous stanza. While Mary sounds somewhat hesitant, Warren's speech is filled with emphatic rhetorical questions: "When was I ever anything but kind to him?" "I told him so last haying, didn't I?" "What good is he? Who else will harbor him / At his age for the little he can do?" All these questions make Warren sound both defensive and exasperated.

Where Dialogue appears in the poem:

- Line 5
- Line 7
- Lines 11-105
- Lines 114-168
- Lines 174-175

ALLITERATION

This is a long, narrative poem focused on telling a story in plain language, a tactic Frost often uses. Still, a few moments of alliteration add subtle emphasis and lyricism to the poem. Even in the very beginning of the poem, phrases like "waiting for Warren" (with the repeated /w/ consonant) and "drew him down" (with the repeated /d/ consonant) establish a sense of movement across the lines of the poem.

Since this poem details a conversation between Mary and Warren, much of it is made up of dialogue: it's written in the words the fictional farm owners say to each other. Since they speak in "common language" rather than conventional verse, devices like alliteration and enjambment become especially important in maintaining the poetic quality of the piece. When Warren delivers lines like "It that was what it was," the alliteration in his words gives the conversation more of a flowing, lyrical quality.

Finally, the sibilance towards the end of the poem lends it a foreboding quality that hints at Silas's sad fate. In the lines "Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her, / Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited," the repeated /s/ consonant creates an ominous hissing effect.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "down," "darkened"
- **Line 9:** "drew," "down"
- **Line 21:** "beg," "be beholden"
- **Line 26:** "was what," "was"
- **Line 43:** "tried to," "talk," "travels"
- **Line 68:** "likely lad"
- **Line 96:** "bunches," "big birds'"
- **Line 101:** "boy," "books"
- **Line 148:** "kind," "kinsfolk can't"
- **Line 160:** "days," "done"
- **Line 167:** "sit," "see," "small sailing"
- **Line 168:** "miss," "moon"
- **Line 172:** "soon," "seemed"
- **Line 173:** "Slipped," "side"

VOCABULARY

Haying (Line 13, Line 29, Line 62) - Haying refers to the harvesting of grass so it can be stored and dried into hay, but can also refer to the season for the harvest.

Beholden (Line 21) - To be beholden to someone means to owe them, or to be in their debt.

Coax (Line 28) - To coax someone is to convince them, usually through the use of bribery or gift-giving.

Ditch the meadow (Line 48, Line 164) - The labor-intensive process of ditching a meadow involves digging ditches, or deep grooves in the ground, through which water can flow. These ditches carry water into the meadow and ensure that grass can grow.

Clear the upper pasture (Line 55) - Clearing land is a necessary step in planting crops for the next season—it involves harvesting existing trees and plants in order to make way for new growth.

Pitch (Line 72) - Pitching is the process of throwing hay onto a cart or into bundles (typically using a pitchfork).

Piqued (Line 76) - To pique someone is to stimulate their interest or irritate them—the word has a dual meaning. In this case, the word likely refers to the way in which Harold's advanced education annoys Silas.

Hazel prong (Line 86) - The "hazel prong" in this context refers to a forked hazel stick used in the process of "water witching" or "dowsing:" an ancient tradition used to uncover hidden sources of water.

Dislodge (Line 94) - To dislodge something is to move it out of position—in this case, it simply refers to moving bundles of hay from one place to another.

Morning-glory (Line 110) - Morning glories are a kind of flower. Since the plant has the ability to climb (like ivy), the delicate flower stems can trail down like the strings of a harp.

Wrought (Line 113) - To wring upon someone (the present-tense form of "wrought") is to work upon someone—the word is often used in the context of metalworking, but can also be used metaphorically to describe the influence of someone's words or feelings upon another person.

Kin/kinsfolk (Line 142, Line 148) - Someone's kin, or their kinsfolk (the two words basically mean the same thing) are their family: their blood relatives.

Row (Line 170) - A fight or argument.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like many of Robert Frost's poems, "The Death of the Hired Man" doesn't fit into a traditional form. It is broken up into multiple stanzas (i.e., lines 1-10 and lines 11-30), but it takes its shape and structure from the nature of the dialogue between Warren and Mary. The poem also uses a loose blank verse, another Frost favorite: lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter (more on that in the Meter section of this guide).

Altogether, the poem's lack of any strict form makes it feel more like a transcription of a real conversation. There are times when readers would be forgiven for forgetting this that long narrative poem is, in fact, a poem!

METER

"The Death of the Hired Man" uses loose blank verse: lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter. An iamb is a poetic foot that follows an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, while pentameter means there are five of these feet in a line (for a total of 10 syllables). Here's how this pattern looks in lines 8-9, for example:

> She took | the mar- | ket things | from War- | ren's arms
> And set | them on | the porch, | then drew | him down

Iambic meters mimic the natural patterns of spoken English. Here, the meter largely fades into the background, adding to the poem's naturalistic feel. The meter isn't overly strict, either; variations keep the language sounding conversational and dynamic. Take line 1, which is highly irregular:

> Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table

It's hard to discern any iambic rhythm here at all, in fact, which perhaps subtly conveys Mary's nervous energy as she awaits her husband's return.

By contrast, some lines that certainly look like they're breaking the poem's meter are not. Take lines 46-47: on their own, each is far too short to fit the poem's meter. But put them tovether, and you've got almost perfect iambic pentameter:

> 'But lit- | tle.' 'A- | nything? | Mary, | confess

RHYME SCHEME

"The Death of the Hired Man" doesn't follow a rhyme scheme. In fact, there aren't any strong slant rhymes or internal rhymes in the poem at all. Obvious rhyme might distract from the naturalistic, even plain quality of his characters' conversation. Even when the speaker interjects with more traditionally poetic descriptions of the farmhands' environment, the language is still relatively prose-like. This is in keeping with Frost's style, which rejects a lot of poetic conventions in favor of representing conversations and people "as they really are."

SPEAKER

"The Death of the Hired Man" relays an argument between Warren and Mary primarily in their own words. As such, the third-person "speaker" of the poem barely appears. When the speaker does appear, they seem to be a relatively neutral, omniscient third party. Instead of commenting on either of the farm owners' worldviews, they set the scene by narrating the couple's movements (as in the beginning of the poem, when Mary sits at the table waiting for Warren) or the environment around them (the movements of the moon and clouds in the night sky).

Mary and Warren's dialogue sounds quite natural and conversational and grants readers insight into both characters' personalities and worldviews: Mary is quicker to sympathize and forgive, whereas Warren clings to more rigid ideals of justice and obligation. The conflict between these two worldviews shapes the conflict at the heart of the poem: whether or not to welcome Silas back to the farm.

The speaker's interjections, meanwhile, provide the poem with its more lyrical and figurative components (for example, the beautiful, highly illustrative personifications of the moon, the clouds, and the plants around Mary). The speaker also describes Mary and her relationship with nature more extensively than they describe Warren. Although the speaker doesn't actively take a side, this difference in the way they treat the poem's two central characters suggests that the speaker—and, perhaps, Frost himself—is more aligned with Mary's gentle and forgiving point of view (especially since Mary seems to be significantly closer to the natural world the speaker describes with such care).

SETTING

Although this poem's setting is never explicitly laid out, the conversation between Mary and Warren obviously takes place on the couple's farm, which is likely located in a rural area. Given the college student Harold Wilson's previous employment on the farm, however, there may be schools—specifically, institutions of higher education—relatively nearby. Based on all this information, it is possible (especially given Frost's own background and favored subject matter) that this poem is set somewhere in the greater New England area. The setting creates a clear tension between "hired men" like Silas and Harold, one of whom relies on farm labor as his main source of income and the other who, presumably, is using farmwork as a temporary gig while getting an education.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Frost is one of the most notable figures of American poetry and letters. Fascinated by philosophy, he frequently addressed broad existential themes like morality, religion, life, and death in his work. His family was originally from New England, and he spent much of his young life in Massachusetts; he became famous for writing about the Northeast.

Frost consistently shied away from associating with any one particular school of writing. Instead, his work is notable for its

ability to incorporate various traditions while remaining highly accessible. Compared to the very deliberate departures from traditional forms that his modernist contemporaries like T. S. Eliot were making, Frost was not particularly interested in innovation for innovation's sake. His poetry typically blends traditional poetic techniques and meters with frank, contemporary language and focuses on the intersections between nature and working-class rural life.

"The Death of the Hired Man" was written in 1905 or 1906 but first publicly appeared in 1914 as part of Frost's New England-focused collection *North of Boston*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though he lived through both World War I and II and saw many significant social and political shifts in his lifetime, Frost hardly ever wrote directly about history or politics. Instead, Frost's poetry is known for dealing with rural New England life and identity. Having lived and worked on a New Hampshire farm from 1900-1912, Frost's interest in rural life, nature, and New England is an extension of his time working the land in what he considered to be the best part of America.

With an eye for austerity and tragedy, Frost's work is known for its realism, particularly as it pertains to the difficulties of rural life and the indifference of nature. Like many poets of his time, Frost had a somewhat pessimistic view of the modern world that was perhaps intensified by his own significant personal losses. His father died of tuberculosis when he was only 11, leaving behind only eight dollars for the family. His mother died of cancer five years later, in 1900, and in 1920 his younger sister was committed to a psychiatric institution, where she later died. Both Frost and his wife also struggled with depression.

In spite of, or more like because of, these personal trials, Frost wrote diligently about individuals searching for meaning and finding, most often in nature, some kind of mirror for their own situations. His poems tend to highlight ordinary moments in which extraordinary or profound insights occur.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Robert Frost: Darkness or Light? — Read an article exploring Frost's poetic and personal relationship with life and death. (https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/robert-frost-darkness-or-light)
- On Grief and Reason — A study of Frost's poetic inspirations and references. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1994/09/26/on-grief-and-reason)
- Robert Frost's Life and Work — Check out a biography of the poet from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a recording of "The Death of the Hired Man." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GixoG8QLVkY&ab_channel=ShaunIvory)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- Acquainted with the Night
- After Apple-Picking
- Birches
- Desert Places
- Design
- Dust of Snow
- Fire and Ice
- Home Burial
- Mending Wall
- My November Guest
- Nothing Gold Can Stay
- Out, Out—
- Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
- The Oven Bird
- The Road Not Taken
- The Sound of the Trees
- The Tuft of Flowers
- The Wood-Pile

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