

## ANALYSIS

“The Death of the Hired Man” (1905,1914)

Robert Frost

(1874-1963)

“Aside from some brief descriptive and narrative passages, it is a dialog, and the conversation typifies Robert Frost’s skill in making verse sound like talk and in delineating the folk of his region. The temperament and history of the hired man, Silas, are shown indirectly by the discussion about him, and his return and death are important incidents. Silas is a lazy, sponging rogue who, on many occasions, has wandered away only to return and take advantage of the kindness of his employers, Mary and Warren. These employers reveal their characters as they converse about the latest return of this pathetic but rather ingratiating creature. In the discussion which follows, the wife deftly wins the farmer over to her point of view. When Warren goes to speak with Silas, he makes an ironic discovery.”

Walter Blair

*The Literature of the United States 2*  
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 921-22

“The chief character in this dramatic narrative never appears upon the stage, but Frost makes us feel we have always known him. A wandering farmhand, uneducated, ignorant, friendless, Silas suffers from a strong underlying feeling of inferiority. His whole life has been a struggle against that feeling, a pathetic but valiant effort to preserve his self-esteem. He cannot let it appear that he has come to Warren and Mary for charity--though charity is chiefly what it is--but must maintain that he has come to ditch the meadow and clear the upper pasture; for to accept charity would ruin his self-respect.

He cannot go to his brother’s house, though his brother is a ‘somebody--director in the bank,’ for his brother would make him feel ashamed and inferior. The summer he spent haying with Harold Wilson still troubles him ‘like a dream,’ because that summer he lost all the arguments to a mere college boy, and his self-respect was constantly endangered. He still keeps finding arguments he might have used. Inferior in so many ways to the idealistic boy, since become a college teacher, Silas must defend himself by rationalization. Harold, though a likely lad, was ‘daft on education’ and ‘the fool of books’; he studied useless things like Latin and scoffed at practical knowledge like finding water with a dowsing rod. Thus Silas makes Harold’s superior attainments appear inferior; at the same time he falls back for support on his own single talent--the ability to build a load of hay. He thinks if he could teach Harold that (an ability of no use to Harold now), he’d be ‘some good perhaps to someone in the world.’ The character of Silas emerges clearly, and Frost makes us feel that, shiftless as Silas is, he deserves our full compassion. When Silas rolls ‘his old head on that sharp-edged chair back’ (notice how the sound and rhythm of those last four syllables support their meaning), he hurts Mary’s heart, and ours as well.

But Silas is only one character in this pastoral drama; Warren and Mary are equally important to its total meaning. The thematic statement of the poem grows out of the conflict between Warren and Mary and their relationship to Silas. Warren and Mary are confronted by a moral problem. What is their duty toward the hired man? Shall they take him in or shut him out? In terms of law, they owe him nothing. Silas is no more than a hired hand who has worked for them for his keep, one who has taken advantage of them by leaving in haying time, when help is scarce. Moreover, Warren had warned him last haying time that if he left then, that ended it. Silas has not been loyal to Warren and Mary; why should they be loyal to him? He is no relation of theirs. He is too old to be of any real service. His presence will be only an added burden on their very meager resources, and an intrusion on their personal relationship. Yet Silas is a fellow creature, with no one else to turn to except a brother whose condescension, conscious or unconscious, would crush Silas’s pride. He is a human being with no home to go to but Warren and Mary’s.

The moral issue of the poem lies at the heart of human life. It is the ancient issue of justice versus mercy and of private happiness versus social obligation. It is the problem raised by Cain in ‘Am I my brother’s

keeper?’ and by Christ in the parable of the Good Samaritan. In the poem it is dramatically posed by the two definitions of home. Is home ‘the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in’? Or is it ‘Something you somehow haven’t to deserve?’ Warren’s definition is legalistic--home defined in terms of law and obligation. Mary’s definition is framed in terms of mercy.

Though the necessity for an answer is obviated by the death of Silas, Frost’s answer is clear enough, and is presented through Warren and Mary. Mary has already answered the question at the beginning of the poem, and is slowly winning Warren over to her side. If Warren holds out at first, he does so because he is a man, and because as manager of the farm he must be practical, and because, unlike Mary, he has not seen Silas and does not believe Silas’s working days are over. But when he confesses Silas’s ‘one accomplishment,’ when he picks up the little stick, breaks it, and tosses it by, and especially when he says, ‘I can’t think Si ever hurt anyone,’ it is clear that Warren is beginning to relent. Warren’s mind is basically in harmony with Mary’s. His tenderness and love for her are evidence of this, and if we have further doubts, we may recall his adoption of the old hound that came to them ‘out of the woods, worn out upon the trail,’ like Silas. Home for him as for Mary is ‘Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.’ And because Warren and Mary are presented sympathetically, we may be sure that their answer is Frost’s.

The great technical accomplishment of Frost as a poet was his mastery of the art of catching the speech tones of spoken language in metrical verse. As no one else before him, he knew how to string speech rhythms across a metrical framework and be fully faithful to both. The blank verse of this poem echoes the intonations of actual speech, yet never betrays its basic iambic pentameter pattern. It is speech and music made one, not prose.”

Laurence Perrine  
*100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century*  
(Harcourt 1966) 31-33  
with James M. Reid

Michael Hollister (2015)