

FROST'S "THE DEATH OF THE HIRED MAN" TAGGED AND NUMBERED

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ABSTRACT

'Death of the Hired Man' is one of Frost's poems that had received a lot of attentions from critics. The argument here is not to elaborate on the significance of these interpretations, but rather to expose the writer's open invitations to his readers to engage, in their own way, with his art. Frost's demand that readers of all sorts be 'employed' by his poems is intriguing. It allows any reader to experience the pleasure of 'seeing' and 'hearing' what other readers have not. Making every reader a discoverer is Frost's own concept of 'play'. In this analysis, the 'play' is within the poem's structure, which is a loosely structured stanza form, contrary to the illusive blank verse suggested at first glance by previous criticism. The question to be addressed here is this: 'what to make out of the art of 'interpretation'?

KEY WORDS

Structure, stanza, Robert Frost, modern american poetry, blank verse.

RESUMEN

'Death of the Hired Man' es un poema de Robert Frost que ha recibido una importante atención de la crítica. Este trabajo no trata de discutir la significación de estas interpretaciones, sino plantear la invitación que el autor hace abiertamente a que sus lectores se involucren, cada cual a su forma, con su arte. Resulta interesante cómo Frost pide que se 'ocupen' de sus poemas todo tipo de lectores. Esto permite que cualquier lector experimente el placer de 'ver' y 'oír' lo que otros lectores no han visto ni oído. Convertir a cada lector en descubridor constituye el concepto que Frost tiene de 'juego'. En este análisis, el 'juego' se encuentra dentro de la estructura del poema, una forma estrófica libremente estructurada y no ese ilusorio 'blank verse' que a

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primera vista sugiere la crítica previa. La pregunta que nos planteamos aquí es la siguiente: ¿cómo entender el arte de la ‘interpretación’?

PALABRAS CLAVE

Estructura, estrofa, Robert Frost, poesía norteamericana moderna, ‘blank verse’.

RESUME

‘Death of a Hired Man’ est le poème de Frost qui a davantage retenu l’attention des critiques. L’argument ici n’est pas d’élaborer sur la signification de leurs interprétations mais d’exposer l’invitation de l’auteur à ses lecteurs de s’engager avec son art. La demande de Frost que ses différents lecteurs s’engagent dans ses poèmes est intrigante. Ceci permet à chaque lecteur d’ ‘entendre’ et de ‘voir’ ce que d’autres lecteurs n’ont pas aperçu. Le concept de Frost de ‘jeu’ est de faire de chaque lecteur un ‘découvreur’. Dans cette analyse le jeu est dans la structure du poème qui a la forme de *strophe ouverte*, contrairement à la ‘*blank verse*’ suggérée par d’autres critiques. La question posée ici est: comment faire comprendre l’art de l’interprétation.

MOTS-CLÉ

Structure, strophe, Robert Frost, poésie moderne américaine, ‘blank verse’.

Like other roughly contemporary American works, works such as *The Spoon River Anthology* and *Winesburg Ohio*, “The Death of the Hired Man” uses a direct and accessible style, roughly echoes the speech pattern of its rural American setting, and relaxes formal structural patterns.

Structure is not absent; it is merely relaxed and muted. On the level of the lines, a glance reveals variations in length –although most have 10 syllables. The verse is free not only in the measures of the lines, but also in the lack of rhyme. To create a musical quality, Frost explores a variety of techniques. In the first 2 lines, for example, the beginning of the lines repeat a rhythmic stress pattern: “Mary sat musing /Waiting for Warren,” the alliteration strongly emphasizing the rhythm. Indeed, in each of these lines the alliterated consonant of the first half is repeated in the second half of the line, the consonance creating an almost Anglo-Saxon effect. But the opening pattern is not maintained. Rather Frost uses an assortment of rhythmic techniques: alliteration, straight repetition, and syntactic and stress rhythms are woven throughout the poem. These techniques are not used in a consistently regulated pattern, but they do add an element of structure to the language.

Similarly, the stanzaic pattern on cursory inspection seems irregular, some blocks appearing similar in length, others not. Closer inspection, however, leads to the view that the patterning on this level, while not rigid, is far more closely regulated than first appears, far more consistently developed than the rhythmic pattern.

The first indication of this patterning is that the opening stanza, like pivotal central stanza VIII, consists of 10 lines. The second stanza has an even 20 lines, but displays no major shift at the tenth line, a point where shift would be anticipated in a more formal scheme. If we count separately half lines, which are written on different type, set lines (an untraditional counting), we find third and fourth stanzas of 10 lines, which are marked by shifts of voice and content. The next two large blocks, with the intervening single line ("Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot") add together to equal an even 40—even though block one block is 22 lines, the other 17 ($22 + 1 + 17 = 40$). However, the overall length shows Frost is still counting by tens to this point. The 10 count breaks with the next 15 lines—stanza VI of eight lines, stanza VII of seven, but the count is emphatically returned to in the important stanza VIII. Following that stanza, three more 10 line units are found. At this point, the unit dissolves for the rest of the poem, with units of seven or eight (depending on the way intervening single lines are counted) dividing the remaining 30 lines.

At this point an apology is due to the reader for trying his/her patience with the preceding numerological nightmare. The general contours of the patterning, definitely a conscious patterning by Frost, have a significant thematic relevance. To demonstrate that, an exploration of the theme of the poem at this stage is essential.

The stanza referred to as pivotal, the middle stanza VIII, is thematically important. The importance is underscored by the length of the unit and by the development of an image pattern: Mary and the light. The image is presented here and at the beginning and close of the poem, dividing the poem into two units. In the opening stanza we find Mary musing on the lamplight; we learn of Mary's characteristic imaginative capability, a key quality of her consciousness (as, for instance, she enters into Silas's world: "I sympathize. I know how it feels"—Stanza V), but the opening leaves the image largely undeveloped. In the central stanza it is richly developed. Noticing the moon light on her lap, Mary" spreads her apron to it, lovingly noticing something only subtly substantial, demonstrating the same quality of fine perception that we have seen in her appreciation of Silas in the preceding stan-

zas. Silas, old and ill, has returned to the farmstead, and Mary is touched to pity and kindness by his vulnerability.

The image is given a symbolic content in the opening of this stanza: "a part of a moon was falling down the west dragging the whole sky with it to the hills." The lines present some difficulties. On a literal scenic level, the setting moon reveals a patch of clouded sky, progressively closer to the horizon; the moon, not at its full, is a "part." But why "a" moon and not "the" moon? A cosmic perspective may be suggested, but from such perspective "west" would seem an inappropriate directional indicator. But another level of significance resonates the lines. Silas is "a" satellite about the farm, a figure neither central nor attached, gravitating towards and centering on the farmstead. He too is setting: his death is about to be announced. Like the moon, Silas sheds a light, a subtly substantial quality, which reveals the characters on the central stage. We will judge them and they may judge themselves by the quality of their action in that light. The choices they make have a chaos producing potential in that regard, and so threatens to pull down the very heavens, like the moon "dragging the whole sky with it." The other potential of their action is redemptive, bringing the heavens "to the hills," and that resonance of the symbol is reinforced in the following lines when Mary runs her hands "Among harp-like morning glory strings" playing the celestial music of "tenderness." The strings connect the garden bed to the housetop, stretching upward, but the harp image stretches even higher. On this level, the connection of Mary and the light brings Mary almost in touching distance with the Virgin. The presentation is not without difficulties, but the concept this is as powerful a use of the light image as Tennessee Williams achieves with *Blanche's Lantern*.

The stanza is pivotal in a few ways. We have in the preceding stanzas learned of the past: of the relationship of Warren and Silas (Warren's begrudging Silas a steady pay of pocket money, Silas abandoning Warren when pay can be had elsewhere), of Silas character (his empty promises, his returns, his genuine craftsmanship with hay), and of Mary and Warren's relationship (their mutual caretaking: Warren emblematically brings in groceries, Mary relieving him of them so he may sit; their ability to pierce each other's masks: Mary taking Warren to task for an eloquent misplaced smile –stanza III), Warren taking Mary to task for evading an almost rhetorical question: "Mary confess/ He said he'd come to ditch the meadow" –Stanza IV), and the preceding stanzas have given us the wonderful glimpse into Silas's sum-

meretime, his haymaking with Harold. Following this stanza, the poem will focus almost entirely on present time considerations (can Warren be shunted to his brother's care? How do we define home?).

Before this stanza, the central problem of the poem have been presented –can Mary convince Warren to “be kind” to Silas, to compassionately accept silas’s intrusion– but she has made little head way in that direction. Warren’s reaction to Silas has been dominated by contractual obligations, their history as employer-hired man, and Mary has not yet replaced this with a sense of fellowship. We are not surprised when, in Stanza X, Warren symbolically snaps a twig and throws it aside as he attempts to throw Silas’s care to a rich man, Silas’s brother. But this is his last stand, his resistance has also been snapped, snapped by the critical element of stanza VIII: Mary’s prediction of Silas’s death. If Mary plays heavenly “harp” of “unheard...tenderness” to work on him, it is this one fact of mortality, made concrete through Silas’s impending death, that explodes the significance of her task.

Warren finally moves from his “gently” (?) mocking tone, from his definition of home as contractual (“they have to take you in”) to a warm appreciation of Silas: “I can’t think Si ever hurt anyone” (his first use of the familiar form). Mary moves him by arguing a parallel to definitions of Christian grace (home is “something you somehow haven’t to deserve”), and by calling on Warren’s sympathy for her own pain (seeing Silas broken “broke my heart”). Mary’s are arguments transcending the contractual, asserting ties of creature to creature: “he’s noting to us, anymore/Than was the hound that came stranger to us.”

And it is at this point of Warren’s changing heart that the stanza pattern shifts. His first line is the altered pattern of the second half of the poem is “I can’s think Si ever heart anyone.” The all-important transformation in Warren is echoed in the structural transformation, the shift from the 10 line module to that seven/eight in stanza XII.

The second stanza pattern continues to govern the last 30 lines (30: the count by ten incorporates the transformed pattern). It is at the close that we have the fine stroke of Silas death. Warren’s transformation finally bares starkly and purely on only Warren; his decision redeems him but has no “practical” effect on Silas. The death, in effect, freezes and frames the previous decisions. Fortunately the opportunity has been well used. We return to the pattern of Mary and the light to find the moon, the cloud and Mary in a “dim row,” the ordering of heaven and man resonating with the natural ordering of the world.

Indeed, as the seven/eight line units of the close of the poem are identified with the natural ordering of fellowship, the stanzas of seven and eight lines before the central stanza (stanza VI and VII) are also dominated by compassion and appreciation. They fit neatly into the thematic patterning of the stanza form.

A closer look at stanza VII, however, reveals a disturbing problem with the pat thematic treatment of redemption through compassion. Mary states that "Silas hates to see a boy the fool to books/ Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,/and nothing to like backward to with pride..." she appears mistaken. First, we have already been convinced that in Silas's and Warren's eyes haymaking ability was Silas's just pride—a little thing, could it be argued?—Still something to "look backward to with pride". Mary takes from him his sole scrap of dignity to achieve her pity for "poor Silas".

Her other misconception is more disturbing. Silas seems like Harold. But Silas's focus on the books is different from the "concerns for other folks" that Mary imagines. Harold's "young collage boy assurance" "piqued" Silas (stanza V). Silas's scorn of Harold's love for Latin comes through the lines, as does Harold's dismissal of rural traditions like the hazel diving rod. Harold and Silas are in the confrontation of University/commoner that has been treated in literature since Chaucer. Their worlds directly challenged each other, and they argued long and hard enough to have Warren hide "well out of earshot." Silas remembers arguments she should have made, not out of caring but out of wounded ego. Silas wants to give Harold skill wit haymaking to render him "useful to someone", to bring Harold into the world of Silas and Warren, out of the world of study and aesthetics; it is a wish more from motives of domination and absorption than the mere caring that Mary sees.

If this reading is valid, there are three possible interpretations for Mary's distortions. First, the possibility of last resort, that Frost has lost control of his lines: a poetic "glitch". Second, that Mary is revealing the limits of her intelligence: this seems unlikely, given Mary's quick perception in the rest of the poem. Third, most troubling, is that for the sake of compassion Mary miscolors and recreates the world: Silas is improved in portraiture so that compassion may be felt for him. Is Mary's ability with the non-existent harp strings and her focus on the subtle light an extension of an ability to pretend, to internally color, rather than a reflection of a finer sense? Either this is a poetic slip or

it is a dark undercurrent that dominates most of Frost's poetry. Without more to go on, it remains ambiguously a problem.

In other aspects, however, the poem has revealed a full and sustained treatment of a major theme. And, surprisingly, a muted and technically complex structural patterning of stanza emerges, reinforces and highlights the thematic material. Frost's careful line counting reflects a painstaking level of craftsmanship.

As a closing aside, I would like to point to an amusing detail. With the type of line count I have done, it is natural to locate the central line of the poem. That occurs in stanza VI, the central VIII stanza being slightly off center. The line is surprising: "and tags and numbers it for future reference." Did Frost anticipate the groveling line-counter, himself conscious of his own "tagging and counting for future reference"? And did he share with him a smile?

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