

Preparing to Read

The Death of the Hired Man

by Robert Frost

LITERARY SKILLS FOCUS: NARRATIVE POETRY

A **narrative poem** is a poem that tells a story. As in a short story or novel, the story in a narrative poem includes a series of events with a beginning, a middle, and an end. A narrative poem also includes characters and, often, dialogue. Most of “The Death of the Hired Man” consists of dialogue written in **blank verse**, a flowing, unrhyming style of poetry that echoes the rhythms of everyday speech.

READING SKILLS FOCUS: DRAWING INFERENCES ABOUT CHARACTERS

When you **infer**, you draw conclusions based on information in the text and on your own knowledge and experience. When you draw inferences about characters, you make intelligent guesses about what the characters are like, what their feelings are, and why they do the things they do. You base your inferences on a character’s appearance, behavior, and words, as well as on the comments and responses of other characters. In “The Death of the Hired Man,” Silas never speaks. You learn about Silas’s character from what the husband and wife say about him.

Use the Skill As you read, use the chart below to record lines of dialogue that seem to reveal important information about Silas’s personality. Later, you will draw inferences from these lines of dialogue.

Dialogue from Mary	Dialogue from Warren



Reading Standard 3.1 Analyze characteristics of subgenres (e.g., satire, parody, allegory, pastoral) that are used in poetry, prose, plays, novels, short stories, essays, and other basic genres.
Grade 9–10 Review Reading Standard 3.3 Analyze interactions between main and subordinate characters in a literary text (e.g., internal and external conflicts, motivations, relationships, influences) and explain the way those interactions affect the plot.

Vocabulary Development

The Death of the Hired Man

SELECTION VOCABULARY

beholden (BIH HOHL DUHN) *adj.*: indebted.

Silas wants to earn his own money so he won't be beholden to anyone.

grudge (GRUHI) *v.*: withhold something from someone out of spite.

Warren's reaction is to grudge Silas a comfortable homecoming because Silas left without ditching the field.

daft (DAFT) *adj.*: without sense; stupid.

Silas believed young Wilson was daft because he couldn't properly build a load of hay.

WORD STUDY

DIRECTIONS: Write the vocabulary words from the list above next to their correct synonyms (words with the same or similar meaning). Each vocabulary word will be used twice.

- _____ deny
- _____ owing
- _____ senseless
- _____ refuse
- _____ silly
- _____ obligated



**Grade
9–10 Review
Reading
Standard 3.4**

Determine characters' traits by what the characters say about themselves in narration, dialogue, dramatic monologue, and soliloquy.

**Grade
9–10 Review
Reading
Standard 3.11**

Evaluate the aesthetic qualities of style, including the impact of diction and figurative language on tone, mood, and theme, using the terminology of literary criticism. (Aesthetic approach)

THE DEATH OF THE HIRED MAN

by Robert Frost



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Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table,
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
She ran on tiptoe down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway with the news
5 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. **A**
She took the market things from Warren’s arms
And set them on the porch, then drew him down
10 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.
15 What good is he? Who else will harbor¹ him
At his age for the little he can do?
What help he is there’s no depending on. **B**

1. harbor: provide safe shelter for.

A LITERARY FOCUS

In lines 1–7, circle the names of the characters in this narrative poem. Underline the dialogue.

B QUICK CHECK

Based only on the first 17 lines, describe what is happening in the story.

A VOCABULARY

Selection Vocabulary

Use context clues to write a definition for *beholden*. Underline the context clues that helped you.

B READING FOCUS

What can you **infer** about Silas and Warren so far?

C READING FOCUS

Circle the details that describe how Mary tries to help Silas. What can you **infer** about Mary from these actions?

Off he goes always when I need him most.
He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,
20 Enough at least to buy tobacco with,
So he won't have to beg and be beholden. **A**
'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.'
25 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.
30 In winter he comes back to us. I'm done." **B**
"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,
35 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."
40 "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." **C**
45 "What did he say? Did he say anything?"
"But little."
"Anything? Mary, confess
He said he'd come to ditch² the meadow for me."

2. **ditch**: dig drainage channels in.

“Warren!”

50 “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. **D**

He added, if you really care to know,

55 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 queer³—

60 To see if he was talking in his sleep.

He ran on⁴ 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.

65 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

70 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.

75 You wouldn’t think they would. How some things linger!

Harold’s young college-boy’s assurance piqued⁵ him.

After so many years he still keeps finding

Good arguments he sees he might have used. **E**

I sympathize. I know just how it feels

80 To think of the right thing to say too late.

3. **queer**: uncomfortable; ill at ease.

4. **ran on**: kept talking in a rambling way about.

5. **piqued**: provoked.

D LANGUAGE COACH

Some words can be used as more than one **part of speech** (noun, verb, adjective, or adverb). A word will have a different meaning depending on its part of speech. Here, *grudge* is used as a verb, and means “withhold something from someone out of spite.” What does *grudge* mean when it is used as a noun? Use a dictionary if you need help.

E READING FOCUS

What can you **infer** about Silas’s character based on lines 54–78?

A LITERARY ANALYSIS

How are Silas and Harold alike? How are they different?

B READING FOCUS

What can you **infer** about Silas’s character from this stanza?

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!
85 He said he couldn’t make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong⁶—
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
90 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
95 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.” **A**

“He thinks if he could teach him that, he’d be
100 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,
105 So now and never any different.” **B**

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
110 Among the harplike morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
As if she played unheard some tenderness
That wrought⁷ on him beside her in the night.

6. **hazel prong:** forked branch used to find water underground.
7. **wrought:** worked.

“Warren,” she said, “he has come home to die:
115 You needn’t be afraid he’ll leave you this time.” **C**

“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

120 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

125 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

130 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 doesn’t he go there? His brother’s rich,

A somebody—director in the bank.” **D**

135 “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—

140 He may be better than appearances.

But have some pity on Silas. Do you think

If he had any pride in claiming kin

Or anything he looked for from his brother,

He’d keep so still about him all this time?” **E**

C QUICK CHECK

According to Mary, what has Silas come home to do?

D QUICK CHECK

Why does Warren think that Silas should go to his brother for help?

E VOCABULARY

Academic Vocabulary

Do you think Silas going to live with his brother is a possible *alternative*, or choice? Explain your answer.

A**VOCABULARY****Word Study**

Broken has multiple meanings. Find the word in a dictionary. Which meaning of *broken* is intended here?

B**LITERARY ANALYSIS**

Why do you think the poet includes this image of the moon, cloud, and woman?

145 “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.

150 He don’t know why he isn’t quite as good

As anybody. 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

155 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. **A**

160 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.

165 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.

170 Then there were three there, making a dim row,

The moon, the little silver cloud, and she. **B**

Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her—

Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.

“Warren?” she questioned.

175 “Dead,” was all he answered.

Skills Practice

The Death of the Hired Man

USE A COMPARISON TABLE

DIRECTIONS: Examine the quotations below from “The Death of the Hired Man.” Then, use those quotations to draw **inferences** about two characters from the **narrative poem**.

Dialogue from the poem	Inference about character
“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.” (lines 12–14)	Warren:
“Surely you wouldn’t grudge the poor old man / Some humble way to save his self-respect.” (lines 52–53)	Mary:

Applying Your Skills

The Death of the Hired Man

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

DIRECTIONS: Complete the sentences with the correct vocabulary words from the Word Box.

Word Box

beholden
grudge
daft

1. Warren is quick to label Silas as lazy and _____, both unkind things to say.
2. Silas thinks he should earn enough to buy tobacco so he won't have to borrow money and be _____.
3. Mary encourages her husband not to _____ Silas a place to spend his final days.

LITERARY SKILLS FOCUS: NARRATIVE POETRY

DIRECTIONS: Write a brief paragraph discussing how dialogue adds depth to this **narrative poem**. How might the poem be different if it were presented entirely by an objective narrator rather than mainly as a conversation?

READING SKILLS FOCUS: DRAWING INFERENCES ABOUT CHARACTERS

DIRECTIONS: Analyze the following quotation about Silas. Then, draw **inferences** about Silas based on that quotation.



Reading Standard 3.1, Grade 9–10 Review Reading Standard 3.3, 3.4, 3.11. See pages 239–240 for full text.

“He never did a thing so very bad. / He don't know why he isn't quite as good / As anybody. Worthless though he is, / He won't be made ashamed to please his brother.” (lines 149–152)