

Death of the Hired Man Summary

Writer: Robert Frost | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Background

Robert Frost's poem "The Death of the Hired Man" was written in the early twentieth century, around 1905 to 1906, and first published in 1914 in his famous poetry collection *North of Boston*. During this period, Frost sought to portray a realistic picture of rural American life. The background of the poem is set in a small farming family in New England, where the struggles of labor, poverty, duty, and human relationships are vividly shown. Frost depicts how an old laborer, Silas, returns to the home of Warren and Mary at the final moment of his life. This event is not merely the death of a poor man, but rather a deeply symbolic story of humanity and compassion.

Frost himself was a man of New England's rural life, so he portrayed ordinary villagers, their speech, morals, and emotions with great realism. In this poem, the word "Home" is not just a physical place; it stands as a symbol of love, shelter, and forgiveness. At that time, industrialization and modernity were growing rapidly in American society, yet Frost tried to preserve the emotional depth and human bonds of rural life. Thus, "The Death of the Hired Man" became an eternal poem of sympathy, responsibility, and humanity.

Summary

Mary Welcomes Warren: Mary sat at the table, her mind thoughtful in the glow of the lamp. She was waiting for Warren to return. When she heard his footsteps, she tiptoed down the dark passage and ran to the door to welcome him. With a mix of joy and slight anxiety, she said, "Silas is back." She warned Warren to be gentle with Silas and took the market goods from his hands, placing them on the porch. Then she drew him down to sit beside her on the wooden steps and began to talk. This part shows Mary's humanity and tenderness. She knows Silas is tired and helpless, so she asks Warren in advance to be kind. This scene marks the beginning of the poem's central themes — humanity and compassion.

Warren's Complaint: Warren angrily says that he has never been cruel to Silas, but this time, he will not let him stay. During the previous year's haying season, he had told Silas that if he left again, their relationship would be over forever. Warren believes Silas is now too old and weak to be of any real use. He comes only when there is little work to do, and disappears

whenever he is most needed. Silas works only for a small amount of money so that he can buy tobacco and avoid begging.

Warren explains that he cannot afford to pay fixed wages, and Silas refuses to accept charity. Whenever Silas finds a chance to earn money elsewhere, someone tempts him away—especially during haying time when labor is scarce. Yet in winter, he always returns. Finally, Warren, frustrated and tired, says, “I’m done,” meaning he no longer wants to take responsibility for Silas. This section reveals Warren’s practicality and weariness. He is torn between responsibility and emotion—between Silas’s past betrayal and the call of human compassion.

Mary Describes Silas: When Warren raises his voice in anger, Mary quickly says, “Sh! not so loud: he’ll hear you.” She doesn’t want Silas to hear Warren’s harsh words. But Warren replies, “I want him to; he’ll have to soon or late,” meaning Silas must eventually face the truth. Mary then quietly explains that Silas is utterly worn out and broken. When she returned from Rowe’s (a neighboring family or farm), she found him curled up asleep beside the barn door. The sight frightened her, because she couldn’t recognize him at first — Silas had changed completely. This moment highlights Mary’s deep compassion. She sees Silas not as a burden or failure, but as a human being nearing his end — a soul seeking warmth and peace rather than judgment.

Mary brings Silas inside, gives him tea, offers him a smoke, and tries to ask about his travels. But Silas does not want to talk — he simply nods his head and falls asleep. Warren curiously asks, “Did he say anything?” Mary replies, “Very little.” Then Warren guesses, “He said he’d come to ditch the meadow for me,” meaning Silas has come back to work again.

Mary, surprised and a little irritated, says, “Warren!” — because Warren thinks Silas has returned for work, but to Mary, the matter is completely different. For her, this is not about work at all; it is the moment of an old, helpless man seeking his final shelter. She realizes that Silas has come not for labor, but for mercy and the peace of death. This part clearly shows the two different perspectives of Mary and Warren — Mary looks from the side of humanity, while Warren sees it through practical reality.

Silas’s Dream and Memories: Mary tells Warren calmly that yes, Silas truly said he had come to work again. He wants to save his self-respect, so he speaks of work to avoid feeling like a burden while taking help. Mary says, “Surely you wouldn’t grudge the poor old man some humble way to save his self-respect.” In other words, the poor old man deserves at least a small chance to keep his dignity. Silas said he would not only clear the meadow ditch but also the upper pasture. Warren had heard that before. But this time, Silas spoke in a confused way — “He jumbled everything.” Mary says Silas was talking so strangely that she thought he might

be speaking in his sleep.

At one point, Silas began talking about Harold Wilson, the young man who had worked on their farm four years earlier during haying time. Now Harold teaches at a college. Silas imagines that if he and Harold could work together again, they could make the whole farm perfectly smooth and well-kept. But Silas calls Harold “daft on education” — meaning, too absorbed in book learning and lacking in practical skill. Silas recalls their old arguments in the hot sun — Silas standing on the wagon stacking hay, and Harold below pitching it up.

Warren dryly remarks, “Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot,” meaning he deliberately stayed far away so he wouldn’t have to hear their quarrels.

This section shows that Silas’s return at the end of his life is not just to find shelter, but to complete his unfinished work and regain a sense of dignity and usefulness before he dies.

Silas’s Regret and Wish: Mary says those old working days still haunt Silas like a dream — “Those days trouble Silas like a dream.” Though many years have passed, those memories continue to trouble him. Silas feels hurt by the young Harold Wilson’s confident attitude, which once wounded his pride. Mary adds, “How some things linger!” — meaning, some memories stay with people for a very long time.

Silas still thinks, deep down, that if he had found better arguments back then, his quarrel with Harold might have been resolved. Mary says, “He still keeps finding good arguments he might have used.” This means that even now, Silas keeps revisiting that old conversation, wondering what he could have said differently. Mary smilingly adds that Silas once asked her about something Harold had said — Harold claimed he studied Latin the way one plays the violin, simply because he liked it. To Silas, that logic made no sense; it seemed like the kind of reasoning only a bookish young man would give.

Even more amusing, Harold didn’t believe that one could find underground water using a hazel stick. Silas used this disbelief as proof of “how much good school had ever done him,” meaning how useless book learning could be in real life. Yet Silas wasn’t bitter — he wished for another chance to teach Harold how to build a proper load of hay. That was what mattered most to him. This part reveals Silas’s self-respect, unfulfilled desires, and belief in practical wisdom. Before dying, he wants to do something meaningful with his skills — to help someone, even once in his life.

Silas’s Skill and Mary’s Realization: Warren admits that there is one thing Silas does exceptionally well — he knows how to build a perfect load of hay. “He bundles every forkful in its place,” meaning he arranges each forkful of hay neatly so it can be easily removed later.

Warren even praises Silas's haystacks, comparing them to big birds' nests, and says that Silas never stands on the hay he's trying to lift — he never makes the mistake of trying to lift himself.

Mary quietly says that Silas believes that if he could teach Harold this skill, he might finally be useful to someone in the world. Silas dislikes boys who depend too much on books — “He hates to see a boy the fool of books.” But sadly, Silas has nothing in his past to feel proud of and nothing in his future to look forward to. He is broken and hopeless, living the same life of weariness and disappointment.

As the conversation continues, the scene in nature slowly changes. “Part of a moon was falling down the west,” meaning the moonlight was sinking toward the western hills. Mary gazes at the soft light, spreads her apron to catch it, and touches the dew-wet strings of morning-glory vines — as if playing some unseen melody that gently moves Warren's heart beside her in the night.

Finally, Mary softly says, “Warren, he has come home to die: You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time.” She means that Silas will not leave again — he has come home to die, and this house is his final shelter. In this part, Silas's final wish and incomplete life, along with Mary's insight and compassion, blend beautifully. Mary understands that Silas's return is not for work, but for something deeper — to find a bit of “home” and peace before death.

The Meaning of Home: Warren says the word “Home” in a slightly mocking tone — as if questioning, “Can you really call this place home?” Mary gently replies, “Yes, what else but home?” — meaning, what else could it be? But she immediately adds, “It all depends on what you mean by home,” suggesting that the meaning of “home” is different for everyone.

Warren argues that Silas is nothing special to them: “Of course he's nothing to us, any more than was the hound that came a stranger to us out of the woods.” In other words, just like a stray dog once wandered out of the woods and found shelter at their house, Silas, too, is a forsaken man seeking a place to rest.

Then Warren himself speaks one of the most famous lines in the poem: “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” This means that home is the place where, if you are forced to return, you cannot be turned away. Mary responds softly, “I should have called it something you somehow haven't to deserve.” To her, home is not a place you earn or deserve, but a place where love and acceptance are unconditional.

After that, Warren quietly walks a few steps away, picks up a small stick, breaks it, and throws it aside — showing his inner uneasiness. Then he asks, “Do you think Silas has a better claim

on us than on his brother?" He explains that Silas's brother lives only thirteen miles away, a rich man, a director in the bank. Yet Silas never went to him. This part reveals the central philosophical idea of the poem — that "home" is not defined by blood relations, but by kindness, compassion, and love.

Silas and His Brother: Mary softly says, "I think his brother ought to help him." She adds, "If necessary, I'll speak to him myself." To her, it was the brother's moral duty to give Silas shelter, especially considering his old age and helplessness. Still, Mary pleads with Warren, "Have some pity on Silas," because she knows that if Silas had any pride or hope in his brother, he would not have stayed silent about him all these years. Warren wonders, "I wonder what's between them." Mary replies, "I can tell you."

She explains that Silas is not a bad man, but he is the kind of person that relatives find hard to tolerate. "Silas is what he is—we wouldn't mind him—but just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide." That means Silas is simple, poor, and odd — the sort of man society and family tend to ignore.

He never did anything truly wrong, but he doesn't understand why he isn't considered "as good as anyone else." Though people see him as "worthless," he still has his self-respect. And because of that pride, he would never humiliate himself or try to please his brother just to gain his favor. This section highlights Silas's quiet dignity and how society often rejects those who don't fit its standards. Silas's tragedy is not evil or failure — it is loneliness and neglect.

Warren finally says softly, "I can't think Si ever hurt anyone." — meaning, "I can't imagine Silas ever harming anyone." In this part, the poet shows that Silas's greatest tragedy is not his poverty but his loneliness. He is not a criminal, yet he is rejected by society and his own kin. This neglect and isolation force him to search for a place like "home" before his death.

Silas's Death - The Final Moments and Death of Silas: Mary says gently, "No, Silas never hurt anyone, but he hurt my heart — the way he lay there with his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back, it looked as if his whole body had collapsed." She adds that Silas refused to lie on the lounge; instead, he rested his head on the hard chair. Mary tells Warren that she has made a bed for him — "I made the bed up for him there tonight."

She asks Warren to go and see him, saying, "You'll be surprised at him—how much he's broken". It means Silas has grown so weak that his working days are clearly over. But Warren replies, "I'd not be in a hurry to say that." — he still doesn't want to believe that Silas's time has come to an end. Mary answers, "I'm not hurrying. Go and see for yourself. But Warren, please remember—Silas said he came to help you ditch the meadow. He has a plan. Don't

laugh at him if he tells you.”

After this, Mary sits quietly and looks at the moon. A small white cloud floats in the sky. She says softly, “I’ll see if that small sailing cloud will hit or miss the moon.” Then the poet writes: “It hit the moon. Then there were three there, making a dim row — the moon, the little silver cloud, and she.” This creates a beautiful, symbolic scene — Mary, the moon, and the small cloud form a faint line, symbolizing a quiet and peaceful union, a reflection of approaching death and eternal calm.

Warren returns from inside the house — too quickly, so quickly that Mary senses something has happened. She takes his hand and asks, “Warren?” Warren gives only one word in reply — “Dead.” This moment marks the climax of the poem. Silas’s death happens silently, without drama or sorrowful speeches, yet it becomes a powerful symbol of human compassion, love, and the eternal truth of life. Through this scene, Frost shows that death is not an end — it is a kind of “homecoming,” a peaceful return to rest.