

The Darkness of Modern Society in Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man"

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Abstract

Along with the rapid development brought by the territorial expansion, waves of new immigrants and the second industrial revolution, the United States witnessed many problems in the late nineteenth-century, such as widening class divides and interpersonal isolation. As one of the most influential American poet in the 20th century, Robert Frost is best known for his depictions of the countryside life and his philosophical ideas in simple language, which generates a large body of research exploring his ecological consciousness and his unique skills in depicting the rural area. However, as a poet living in the transitional period, Frost is in fact fully aware of the problems in modern society caused by industrialization. In "The Death of the Hired Man", he reveals the darkness of modern society through symbolic images and the predicament of modern people, and expresses his deep concerns about the influence of urbanization on the rural areas and the alienation of people. Through the analysis of the symbolic images and the delineation of the characters, this paper employs the method of close reading to delve into his revelation of the darkness of modern society in "The Death of the Hired Man", such as his exposure of social alienation and the moral ambiguities of progress, thereby contributing to the understanding of his literary response to modernity.

Keywords: Robert Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man", darkness, modern society

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1. Introduction

Robert Frost, whose full name was Robert Lee Frost, was a distinguished American poet in the 20th century. He received four Pulitzer Prizes for Poetry in his life and performed a reading at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy. Together with Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost was considered as the greatest American poet in the 20th century by the poet Randall Jarrell. As a productive poet, Robert Frost focused on depictions of rural life and contemplations on philosophical subjects in colloquial language, with collections of poetry like *A Boy's Will*, *North of Boston*, and *New Hampshire*.

Born in 1874 and passing away in 1963, Robert Frost lived through a transitional period in literary creation, and was categorized as the poet "at the crossroads of 19th-century American poetry and modernism" (Poetry Foundation, 2025). Though both traditional and modernist traits can be found in most of Frost's poems, researches on Robert Frost and his poems have been mainly focused on his traditional traits, such as his adoption of traditional forms, with his examination on the modern society and his employment of modernist styles less touched. However, his second collection, *North of Boston*, published in 1914, is a representative work marked by its modernist traits, such as its emphasis on the vernacular language and its revelation of the dark side of human nature, as evidenced by the fact that Ezra Pound regarded this collection as "a book of people". Therefore, this paper attempts to delve into "The Death of the Hired Man" in *North of Boston* and explore Frost's observation on the dark side of the modern society from his symbolic images, his delineation of characters and his modernist themes. In this way, it hopes to examine Robert Frost in a modernist context and boost the understanding of the poet and his poetry.

2. Literature Review

"The Death of the Hired Man", written in the form of dramatic dialogue, has drawn many attentions from scholars abroad and at home since its publication. Foreign scholars pay much attention to the style and the theme of this poem. For example, Parini (1993, p. 260-283) inquires into the style of dramatic dialogue in this poem and points out Frost's excellent skill in the employment of regional cant. Hopkins (1954) gives a detailed explanation to the

diction, the structure and the characters of the poem and regards this poem as an integration of thought, emotions and words. Aurangzeb and Amir (2020) analyze Mary' and Warren's different attitudes towards Silas and praises Mary's qualities such as sympathy and forgiveness. Mehta (2018) examines the meaning of home in terms of marriage and class and analyzes Frost's excellent skills in shaping the characters in this poem. Compared with foreign research achievements, domestic research on this poem is relatively rare, with most studies appearing in doctoral dissertations or papers focusing on the overall examination of Robert Frost and his poetry. For example, in their dissertations, Fu (2013) makes an analysis on the theme of detachment between humans by taking this poem as an example, and Li Haiming (2010) probes into Frost's delineation of the little man Silas and reveals Frost's concern on marginalized groups. Through the analysis of the current studies, it is noticeable that though some scholars have paid attention to modernist traits such as the indifference between men, there are few papers concentrating on the darkness of modern society in "The Death of the Hired Man". Therefore, this paper aims to probe into this aspect and to make a supplement to the research on Robert Frost.

3. The Darkness of Modern Society in Modern Images

Symbolism is a literary device that a writer uses in literary creation to represent something abstract with some physical objects or phenomena. Through the employment of symbols, the writer can endow some normal objects with rich meanings and thus make the work more thought-provoking. (Mahler, 2017) Robert Frost is skilled in the employment of symbolic images in his poems, as he once claimed, "If I must be classified as a poet, I might be called a synecdochist, for I prefer the Synecdoche in poetry - that figure of speech we use a part for the whole" (Parini, 1993, p. 264). At the same time, he also put forward the idea that "Poetry is simply made of metaphor ... Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing. And there is a sense in which all poems are the same old metaphor always" (Frost, 1995, p. 786). In "The Death of the Hired Man", Robert Frost adopts symbolic images to infuse his concern of modern life into his poems, thus reflecting his revelation of the darkness in modern society.

3.1 *The "Moon" as a Symbol of Death and Fading Innocence*

In "The Death of the Hired Man", the moon is an image that appears four times and is endowed with rich symbolic meanings. The moon firstly makes it clear that the story happens at night, thus setting a pitiful tone for the story and giving readers an impression of bleakness, as evidenced by the lines "Part of a moon was falling down the west, / Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills", which reveals the deathly stillness of the night. What is more important is that the moon insinuates Silas's death. In the poem, the trajectory of the moon seems to echo Silas's gradual death. When Mary and Warren are arguing about Silas's return, the moon "was falling down the west" and "Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills", which suggests that Silas is dying and is struggling to spend his last time in this world. As Warren finally agrees to check Silas's condition, the small sailing cloud "hit the moon". The moon being covered by the cloud seems to be a hint of Silas's death, as Warren finds out at the end of the poem. Therefore, the motion of the moon is in line with Silas's journey to death and the moon is thus a symbol of death in this poem. In addition, the moon, as a symbol of wonder and innocence, also hints at Mary's kindness, as evidenced by the interaction between Mary and the moon. When the moon first appears, "Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw / And spread her apron to it". Though the moon seems to carry some heaviness and bleakness in the former lines, where it "was falling down the west" and "Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills", it shows its mercy and beauty to Mary, which seems to be a reflection of Mary's warm-heartedness and Silas's gratitude to Mary. However, the moon is shielded by the moon in the end, which makes "a dim row" between the three - "The moon, the little silver cloud, and she". The "dim row" seems to indicate the inevitable destruction of the good in the modern society, thus revealing the darkness of the modern society.

3.2 *"Darkness" as a Symbol of Desolation*

"Darkness", as the opposition of brightness, always carries implications such as death, chaos, mystery, and destruction. In "The Death of the Hired Man", it is a symbol of desolation. The poem starts in a dimly lit setting, with "Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table / Waiting for Warren". Hearing Warren's steps, Mary "ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage" to welcome her husband. The dark setting at the beginning of the poem not only demonstrates the time that the story takes place, but it is also an implication of the isolation and helplessness of modern people represented by the three characters. The three characters, enveloped in darkness, are all experiencing isolation to different extent. Mary, at the start of the poem, "sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table", as she is helpless when facing Sila's unexpected return. On the one hand, she is willing to offer help to

Silas; on the other hand, she is confronted with Silas's silence as "I tried to make him talk about his travels. Nothing would do: he just kept nodding off", and also with her husband's insistence on not allowing Silas's stay. As a woman, she cannot make the decision on whether to take Silas in or not. In this way, Mary's sitting in darkness seems to indicate her dilemma and the "lamp-flame" beside her seems to be a symbol of forlorn hope. Warren, at the same time, is also in isolation. His indifference to accept Silas seems to make him a ruthless man, as such an action is irreconcilable with Puritan traditions, but he is also experiencing the pain that caused by Silas's betrayal and violation of their contract. In this way, Warren's returning home seems to be a returning to pain, chaos, and darkness, as shown by the "darkened passage". The absence of another character, Silas, is also an indication of his desolation. Silas does not appear in person throughout this poem, but merely exists in the conversation between the couple. He seems to be covered in darkness as he is sleeping in another room and his death in the end seems to indicate that he is integrated into the darkness. In this way, Silas is separated with the couple spatially. Through the dark setting and the three characters, Robert Frost utilizes darkness to symbolize the desolation in modern society.

3.3 "Home" as a Symbol of the Modern System

In the poem, "home" is a repeatedly occurring image and carries significant meanings. Marry believes that Silas should be kept as "he has come to home to die", which implies that Silas has taken the barn as his home instead of a mere workplace, and the "home" here is undoubtedly a warm place to seek comfort. Because of this, Warren and Marry starts a debate over the meaning of home. As for Warren, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in". Warren's definition questions the notion of belonging based on necessity and suggests that home is related to kinship and obligations. From Warren's perspective, home is more of a house, a physical object related to the modern social system, and it exists as a symbol of order. However, Mary takes the "home" from a different perspective, as she replies to Warren, "I should have called it / Something you somehow haven't to deserve", which manifests that home is a place of unconditional love and acceptance. In this way, the house becomes a complexity of belonging and acceptance. Through the end of the poem, Robert Frost does not give a certain answer to the definition of home, but through the debate between Warren and Mary, he seems to indicate that home has transformed into a symbol of the modern system where the individuals wield their power. When Warren comes back home, the house is not a warm and comfortable place, but a dark place with "the darkened passage" where the conflicts and struggles for power are carried out. In the house, Warren is the subject of right in front of Mary and Silas. Warren represents the dominant position of man in the household for Mary and the superiority of those landowners for Silas. The argument between Warren and Mary is not only a conversation between husband and wife, but also a battle between man, the power subject, and woman, the other. Likewise, the conflict between Warren and Silas is also a fight between those with property and the marginalized group. In this way, the house is transformed into a field of the struggle for power and is thus a symbol of modern system.

4. The Darkness of Modern Society in the Delineation of Characters

The collection *North of Boston* is also known as a book of people because of its engagement with the farmers in New England. In this way, the delineation of characters plays a vital role in this collection. "The Death of the Hired Man" records a story that happens between three main characters, namely, Mary, Warren, and Silas. They are more than just a wife, a husband, and a worker, but the incarnation of the modern people. While Mary embodies the challenged faith, Warren and Silas represent the detached man and the marginalized man in modern society respectively. Through the three characters, Robert Frost reveals the spiritual wilderness of modern people and thus criticizes the darkness in modern society.

4.1 Mary as Challenged Faith

Mary, as a tolerant and kind-hearted woman, symbolizes the challenged faith in modern society. Mary is firstly an embodiment of Saint Mary, mother of Jesus. Mary not only has the same name with Saint Mary, but she also carries all the good attributes in Christianity, such as forgiveness, compassion, hospitality, and perseverance. When Silas turns to her, she greets him warmly as she "dragged him to the house, / And gave him tea and tried to make him smoke / ... tried to make him talk about his travels", though she knows clearly that Silas has betrayed her husband. She also asks her husband to "Be kind" and to speak "not so loud", as Silas will "hear you", and she insists in persuading her husband to forgive and accept Silas. In addition, she is a prophet-like figure, as she foretells Silas's death in the line "he has come home to die: You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time". All these reflect Mary's

Christian identity. At the same time, Mary is also confronted with all kinds of questions, which may reflect the faith being challenged in modern society. When Mary reminds her husband to be nice to Silas, her husband replies "When was I everything but kind to him". As Mary defends for Silas's leave and his ability to earn a higher salary, her husband argues that "Then someone else will have to". Warren's contradiction to Mary is not merely a refutation to her opinion, but also an implication of the attack against traditional beliefs in modern society. In the end, the moon is "hit" by the cloud and the three, "The moon, the little silver cloud" and Mary make "a dim row", indicating the daziness of modern people with the faith lost.

4.2 Warren as a Detached Man

While Mary manifests the virtues of Christianity to some extent, Warren embodies the indifference and detachment of modern people, as evidenced by his insistence in refusing to accept Silas's returning. No matter how hard Mary tried to convince him, Warren always strongly opposes. Warren declares himself clearly in the beginning, saying "But I'll not have the fellow back" and "I told him so last haying, didn't I? / If he left then, ... that ended it". Then, he uses many evidences as justification for his standpoint. For example, Silas always goes off for a better pay to buy tobacco and leaves "when I need him most". Warren even points out the fact that Silas should come to his brother who is only thirteen miles away, as he says "Silas has better claim on us you think / Than on his brother" and "Thirteen little miles / As the road winds would bring him to his door". Even though Warren seems to soften his tone a little in the end by agreeing to check Silas's condition, he does not make the final decision to really take him in, which can be evidenced by the saying that "I'd not be in a hurry to say that". Through Warren's statements and actions, it is obvious that Warren seems to be a detached man in modern society. He is free of the Puritan principles as he always makes up his mind based on his rationality, which, in return, makes him an alienated man in the modern society, with reason overemphasized than sensibility or humanity. As for the modern people represented by Warren, instrument reason is more important than value reason, which gives rise to the self-centeredness and immorality in modern society.

4.3 Silas as a Marginalized Man

Silas's identity as a marginalized man is demonstrated in various ways. Through the poem, Silas does not appear or say anything, and he is isolated in the dark room with no one knowing whether he is alive or dead. Readers can only get information about him from the dialogue between Mary and Warren. In this way, Silas seems to be in a state of aphasia, which is caused by his humble origin and inferior status. Apart from the physical marginalization, Silas is also alienated spiritually, as he is always seeking a way to prove his meaning of existence. Silas is unwilling to ask his bank director brother for help before his death, but rather to seek help from his employer, as he attempts to "save his self-respect", a symbol of his meaning of existence. Meanwhile, Silas's offer to "ditch the meadow" for Warren indicates his wish to contribute and find purpose, to prove his worth and to justify his presence. What's more, Silas cannot forget his fight with Harold Wilson, the boy who worked in the hay four years ago, and even talks about this event in his dream, as "those days trouble Silas like a dream". Though this argument happened four years ago, Silas is still "piqued" by Wilson's "college boy's assurance" and "After so many years he still keeps finding / Good arguments he sees he might have used", which not only reflects his internal conflicts and attachment to the past, but also reveals his insecurity caused by his lack of formal education. At the same time, Silas's constant remembering of the fight symbolizes an approach Silas adopts to gain his meaning of existence, because he believes that "if he could teach him that, he'd be / Some good perhaps to someone in the world". Silas's wish to pass on his practical skill and help Wilson become a skillful worker in fact manifests his longing for connection and his need to leave behind a legacy as the evidence of his self-value, and Wilson's choice for college seems to be a protest against Silas's idea and leads to his doubt of his self-worth. In addition, Silas is deeply struggled by the fact that "He never did a thing so very bad", but "he isn't quite as good / As anyone", which is in fact a result of the economic disparity in modern society and reveals the dilemmas of modern people under the influence of industrialization.

5. The Darkness of Modern Society in Themes

Brodsky (1994) once commented in his article "On Grief and Reason" that Robert Frost was a poet who wanted to explore the relationship between grief and reason—"the grief of the thrush in the woods and the reason of the poet stepping back from them". He also pointed out that though Robert Frost "is generally regarded as the poet of the countryside, of rural settings—as a folksy, crusty, wisecracking old gentleman farmer, generally of positive

disposition”, but he is in fact a dark, “terrifying” poet. Rothman (2013) also noted that Robert Frost’s “delicious indecision”, “reluctant normalcy”, and “dark energy” all contribute to the charm of his poems. In “The Death of the Hired Man”, Robert Frost’s darkness is exposed through his examination on the alienation between humans, man’s loss of faith and the inequality of social norms.

5.1 Alienation of People

Robert Frost reveals the alienation between humans in modern society. In the dramatic narrative poem, the conflict is unfolded between Mary and Warren, and the latter seems to be an alienated man under the impact of industrialization. When Warren learns about Silas’s returning, the first thing comes into his mind is Silas’s betrayal. When talking about Silas, what Warren is concerned about is not Silas’s health condition, but whether Silas comes back to “ditch the meadow for him”, as evidenced by the conversation between Warren and Mary - “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.’” When Silas and Horald Wilson had a fight four years ago, what Warren did was not to stop them, but “took care to keep well out of earshot”, which indicates Warren’s indifferent attitude towards the underclass. In the end, even though Warren has known Silas’s difficult situation clearly, he is still unwilling to reemploy Silas but chooses to wait. Apart from this, alienation between humans is also manifested through the relationship between Silas and his brother. During the years that Silas works in the hay, he keeps “still about him (his brother) all this time”, which implies the alienation between Silas and his brother. Even though Silas “never did a thing so very bad”, he becomes “the kind that kinsfolk can’t abide”, partly because he is uneducated and “worthless”. With the rapid development of industrialization, Silas, as a representative of the traditional agricultural society, seems to be outdated and unable to integrate into the modern society and is thus separated from the society. He makes many attempts to find his meaning of existence, but ends in failure. His death in the end seems to symbolize his unfitness in the modern society.

5.2 Loss of Faith

In 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche has already shouted out that God is dead in his book *The Gay Science*, which was a great shock to the western belief system. As a poet in the late 19th and early 20th century, Robert Frost was undoubtedly influenced by Nietzsche’s idea. In “The Death of the Hired Man”, he portrays modern people’s dilemma of losing faith, which can be best demonstrated through Silas’s betrayal of Warren. From Warren’s narration, it is known that Silas always leaves the hay in the busiest time, when “I (Warren) need him most”. Silas’s leave is not out of the idea of avoiding heavy work, but his desire to earn a better salary, as “there’s someone at him / Trying to coax him off with pocket-money,— / In haying time, when any help is scarce”. In addition to this, Silas always “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”, even though he knows that Warren “can’t afford to pay / Any fixed wages, though I (Warren) wish I could”. In this way, Silas seems to be an unfaithful and unloyal man, as he always chooses to leave merely for economic benefits and thus breaks the contract and promise between him and Warren. At the same time, most of the characters in the poem violates the Christian beliefs and are thus unfainful. For example, Warren’s unforgiveness to Silas goes against the Christian belief of compassion, and the deteriorated relationship between Silas and his brother seems to be a result of the economic disparity and is also a breach of the Christian belief. Through the conflicts between these characters, Robert Frost reveals the loss of faith in modern society brought forth by the economic and industrial development.

5.3 Critique of Social Norms

Though Robert Frost is best known for his depictions of the rural life in New England area and seems to be not involved in the complex social life, he is never an escapist who retires from the social and political life. In fact, Robert Frost is more of a social and political conservatist, who is well aware of the “serious weaknesses in all forms of government” and perceived urbanization as the primary cause of “a great loss in individual freedom in American society” and “one of the great social tragedies of 20th-century America” (Stanis, 2018). In “The Death of the Hired Man”, Robert Frost reveals the drawbacks of the social system and criticized social norms, which can be illustrated through his revelation of the tension between economic value and human dignity. In the poem, Silas asks Warren to pay him the wages, so he “won’t have to beg and be beholden”, which manifests his desire to maintain his dignity. Furthermore, when Silas returns to the hay, he offers to “ditch the meadow”, which is a “humble way to save his self-respect”. With the economic advancement, Silas’s brother becomes a “director in the bank”, which

brings the class distinction between Silas and his brother and also the alienation between them, as Silas is unwilling to talk about his brother in front of Mary and Warren and prefers to pass away in his employer's house rather than turn to his brother for help. As Mary replies to Warren's question about Silas's avoidance of his brother, "If he'd had any pride in claiming kin / Or anything he looked from his brother, / He'd keep so still about him all this time?" and "He won't be made ashamed / To please his brother, worthless though he is". From Mary's remarks, it is obvious that Silas's resistance to have recourse to his brother is his insistence in his dignity, a manifestation of humanity which has been debased by the inferiority and alienation caused by industrialization. Apart from this, Harold Wilson's insistence in leaving the hay and accepting education can be seen as a result of industrialization, as people at that time were more willing to leave the countryside and move to big cities. In this way, Silas's fight with Wilson may also lie in the fact that Wilson's attempt to integrate into the city is a challenge to Silas's traditional values. Through Silas's tragical life and his emphasis on dignity, Robert Frost glorifies humanity and criticizes the alienation between people that urbanization has given rise to.

6. Conclusion

Although Robert Frost is known as a poet of the countryside, he is never a poet merely focusing on the bright side of life such as the beautiful scenery or the peaceful life in the countryside, or escaping from the complexities and the trivialities of urban life. As a matter of fact, Frost also pays much attention to the dark side of the society and is highly critical to industrialization, especially its destruction to the rural areas. In "The Death of the Hired Man", Robert Frost examines the darkness of modern society through a dialogue between a couple, Mary and Warren, about their hired man, Silas. By employing some symbolic images, such as the moon, darkness, and the home, Frost implies the depressing atmosphere in modern society. In addition, the three main characters embody the alienation of people in modern society, as they are challenged in faith, detached and marginalised both physically and mentally. Through this poem, Robert Frost reveals a number of problems in modern society, such as alienation, loss of faith, and the inequality of social norms. In this way, Frost expresses his deep concern about the damage to the countryside and the distortion of humanity caused by industrialization and urbanization. Future studies could probe into whether Robert Frost puts forward any possible solutions to the problems of modernity, or further explore Frost's response to modernity across his broader body of work, particularly through comparative studies with other modernist poets addressing similar themes. Additionally, investigations into the gender differences in poems like "The Death of the Hired Man" could also offer vital insights into the understanding of Frost's attitudes towards social norms and human relationships in a changing world.

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