

"Death of the Hired Man"

Rosalind Intrater

THERE IS SO MUCH of New England in Robert Frost and he has put so much of it into his poetry that, although he was born in California and first won literary notice in Britain, New England has claimed him as her own poet-laureate.

One of his best known poems of New England, "The Death of the Hired Man," is a narrative in dialogue, told simply, with the restraint that marks all of Frost's poetry. He seems never to make the mistake of telling too much or "over-writing"; he suggests all without telling all. Three people are portrayed in the poem: a farmer, his wife, and an old farm-hand, shiftless and proud. It is one of the poem's subtleties that Silas, the character most fully revealed, is the one who never makes direct contact with the reader.

The dialogue throughout is completely natural and unaffected—the plain talk of farm people, the idiom of everyday conversation, manipulated into poetry of vigor and cadence. Frost succeeds in retaining realism while avoiding coarseness—a reflection of the attitude he expresses when he says: "There are two types of realists. There is the one who offers a good deal of dirt with his potato to show that it is a real potato. And there is the one who is satisfied with the potato brushed clean. I am the second kind. To me, the thing that art does for life is to clean it, to strip it to form."

From the statement of the title to the last line of the poem, Frost is direct and sincere. He makes no attempt to herald the tale with elaborate symbolism or metaphor. When we read the title we know that we are going to hear about the death of the hired man; and then we are told just that. At the end Frost does not leave us with vision of a disembodied soul trailing clouds of glory through the firmament. We are confronted by the unavoidable fact that the hired man is dead—a fact simply to be accepted, as death itself is to be accepted.

Despite its plainness, the poem does not lack beauty. Frost's descriptions are eloquent and vivid without being pretty, as in the lines in which he describes the scene on the porch steps of the farmhouse:

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

Or when Frost tersely sums up the tragedy of the hired man's life:

Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
 And nothing to look backward to with pride,
 And nothing to look forward to with hope.
 So now and never any different.

And again, the pungent definition of home which husband and wife exchange—they bear a light irony and unmistakable trademark of Frost's forthrightness:

Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
 They have to take you in.

and

I should have called it
 Something you somehow haven't to deserve.

The poem itself, told mainly by the kindly tongue of the farmer's wife, in an atmosphere of moonlit whispers, is filled with a gentle sense of peace—the peace of a wanderer come at last to rest.

THE OBSERVATORY

Claire Gaddy

We traced Orion's image in the stars,
 Saw Cancer crawl over the dome's pattern,
 Surveyed the galaxies and turned from Mars
 To calculate the involute rings of Saturn.

We mounted higher, by reason stellar and sound,
 To space no mind can leap or violate.

Queried, your lips gave answer: thus we found
 Passage through heaven's adamant gate.