

DEATH AND THE MOON'S LINK TO EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN WILLIAM  
WORDSWORTH'S "STRANGE FITS OF PASSION I HAVE KNOWN" AND ROBERT  
FROST'S "THE DEATH OF THE HIRED MAN"

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William Wordsworth famously defines poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of feelings.” In accordance with Romantic tradition, Wordsworth deeply desired for his poetry to be linked to nature, shunning the city as tainted by man. While modernist poet Robert Frost is known for his poetic nature settings, he notably views nature as chaos and is constantly experimenting with borders and walls. Despite living and writing in completely different literary eras, these two renowned poets each penned a poem with striking similarities. I will compare Wordsworth’s “Strange fits of passion I have known” to Frost’s “The Death of the Hired Man.” Nature foreshadows the death of a character inside the house in both poems; however, the works focus instead on the effects of death on the living. In Wordsworth’s poem, the speaker, in the midst of nature and lulled into a dream-like state by the moon, is blinded to hints of death in the form and language of the ballad. In Frost’s poem, the characters view nature from their house and Warren attempts to make order out of it. On the other hand, Mary seems aware of nature’s signs and even of the hired man’s death before verbal confirmation. Frost and Wordsworth both address death in their poetic form, the symbol of the moon, and how it affects the living. I will examine how the format foreshadows death and how the characters’ comprehension of death as signaled by the moon indicates their emotional intelligence.

Both authors foreshadow death and reveal more about their characters’ personalities in the poems’ forms, rhyme, doubleness of language, and inverse sentences. “Strange fits of passion I have known” is a seven stanza, simple ballad, written with an ABAB rhyme scheme and alternating metrical lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. Wordsworth’s choice to put this poem in ballad format is interesting because he breaks all of the form’s rules. Traditionally, ballads are community-minded songs written to be sung and danced to in a large group. They are typically composed in third person with no strong “I” voice. “Strange fits” directly opposes this

design with a first person narrator employing the personal pronoun in almost every single stanza. Additionally, in coincidence with the short meter creating a nursery rhyme feel within the lines, ballads are usually less psychological and reflective. This Romantic ballad follows a speaker whose thoughts the reader can hear. Usually, the meaning of the poem is grasped on a stanza, rather than line, level. In Wordsworth's poem, however, close readings of words pay large dividends. Charles Stork writes about how Wordsworth's poems are rarely real ballads. He explains:

His entire theory . . . was opposed to the method of the popular ballad. The ballad depends on action, Wordsworth upon description and reflection; the ballad is objective and impersonal, Wordsworth maintains that the poet should treat things not 'as they are,' but 'as they seem to exist to the senses, and to the passions' . . .

In general we may say that no other of the great English poets was by temperament so incapable of writing a good ballad as Wordsworth.<sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth made a conscious choice to break the rules of the ballad. Writing a ballad about how the narrator is affected by nature and deals with death is an innovative poetic move on Wordsworth's part.

"The Death of a Hired Man" is a one hundred and sixty-seven line dramatic narrative poem in blank verse, which is unrhymed iambic pentameter. In the same way Wordsworth innovates form for his own Romantic uses, Frost utilizes the unfashionable dramatic narrative style in the height of modernism. Frost's development of his characters through dialogue adds more depth to his work in comparison with Wordsworth's. Frost's dramatic narratives were some of the first in English of their kind. He stands original when compared to other authors and his

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<sup>1</sup> Stork, Charles Wharton. "The Influence of the Popular Ballad on Wordsworth and Coleridge." *PMLA* 29, no. 3 (1914): 301. <https://doi.org/10.2307/456924>.

model allows for minimal narration and direct dialogue.<sup>2</sup> Dialogue in “Hired Man” allows him to further explore the themes begun in “Strange fits.”

Both poems employ doubleness in their wording to allude to death. Wordsworth wrote “Strange fits” in past tense, which is a precursor in itself. In the last line of the third stanza, the speaker describes the paths he travels as “so dear to me.”<sup>3</sup> The paths as “dear” can be read doubly as sentimental to the speaker, or as costly—implying that he will not be traveling them again—he would not have reason to if his lover was dead. In the fourth stanza, the traveler reaches the “orchard plot.”<sup>4</sup> The word “plot” stands out from the rest of the nature description as a stark graveyard word. It also rhymes with “Lucy’s cot,” in the third line of the stanza, which insinuates that Lucy is either a baby or old, in bad health, and dying. The moon descending “still”<sup>5</sup> at the end of the fourth stanza is another death word associated with the body. Even “slept” is similar both in sound and concept to “death.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, the last word of the poem itself is “dead,” echoing the use of “dropp’d” in the stanza above and acting as the final drop.

Frost also foreshadowed death by writing in past tense in “Hired Man.” He invokes it a second time when Mary “ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage.”<sup>7</sup> Here, the darkened passage suggests the transition from death to life. When Mary reaches Warren, she wishes to “put him on his guard,”<sup>8</sup> insinuating that their house is becoming a tomb of some kind. Later on, employers are “Trying to coax [Silas] off” and Warren states Silas will have to hear his opinion

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<sup>2</sup> Dana Gioia, “Robert Frost and the Modern Narrative,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 89, no. 2 (2013): 191, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26446759>.

<sup>3</sup> William Wordsworth, “Strange fits of passion I have known,” in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Tim Kendall, and Mary Jo Salter. (W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 827-828.

<sup>4</sup> Wordsworth, 827.

<sup>5</sup> Wordsworth, 828.

<sup>6</sup> Wordsworth, 828.

<sup>7</sup> Frost, 1298.

<sup>8</sup> Frost, 1298.

“soon or late,”<sup>9</sup> conveniently leaving off the ‘r’ and speaking the word associated with names of the dead. While Frost and Wordsworth foreshadow death in the imagery and content of their poems, they cleverly infuse even their format with hints of it.

Both Wordsworth and Frost notably write in inverse sentences in their works. In “Strange fits,” the speaker carefully puts his lover and other things before him in every thought: “When *she* I lov’d,” “Upon *the moon* I fix’d my eye,” and “*my eyes* I kept.”<sup>10</sup> The “Death of the Hired Man” also contains backward phrases, such as “What help he is there’s no depending on,” “Off he goes always when I need him most”, and “In winter he comes back to us.”<sup>11</sup> Inverse sentences catch the reader’s attention because they throw off natural flow. They draw attention to the fact that something is off and to be on guard. Outside of format, both poems’ lunar and character content push the idea of death even further.

The moon symbolizes death in both poems in two ways: movement and thievery. The movement of the moon in “Strange fits” alludes to the possibility of death. In the first stanza, the speaker informs the reader that he is about to share a story of a fit of passion he experienced. The first hint of death is found in the speaker’s use of past tense, first especially notable in the last line of the first stanza: “What once to me befel.”<sup>12</sup> The word “befel” sounds similar to “fell,” which, before the moon is even mentioned, foreshadows its motion in the second to last stanza. In the second stanza, the speaker describes himself as bending like “a rose in June,”<sup>13</sup> implying that his lover is his sun: “I to her cottage bent my way.”<sup>14</sup> However, this journey takes place “Beneath the evening moon,”<sup>15</sup> where he is in the physical absence of both the real sun and his

<sup>9</sup> Frost, 1298.

<sup>10</sup> Wordsworth, 827-828, emphasis mine.

<sup>11</sup> Frost, 1298.

<sup>12</sup> Wordsworth, 827.

<sup>13</sup> Wordsworth, 827.

<sup>14</sup> Wordsworth, 827.

<sup>15</sup> Wordsworth, 827.

lover. The life-giving, warm sun is replaced by the cold moon. This lack of needs being met is a second foreshadowing. Wordsworth is extremely spatially aware of what occurs on each line; in the third stanza, the moon is mentioned in the first line. Its position on the first line implies that the moon is rising to the top of the night sky. In the fourth stanza, the speaker and his horse are climbing a hill in the first two lines as the moon descends in the second two. The last line reads, “The moon descended still,”<sup>16</sup> with a double meaning on still to indicate death. The moon continues to descend in the last line of the fifth stanza. At the end of the sixth stanza, as the horse is raising its hooves, the moon, “down behind”<sup>17</sup> the cottage drops. At the beginning of the last stanza, the moon slides, directly transcribing fear into the lover’s head: “If Lucy should be dead!”<sup>18</sup> The motion of the moon is responsible for the imageable representation of death.

“The Death of the Hired Man” also implements the movement of the moon in foretelling death waiting inside the home. Unlike the Wordsworth poem, where the speaker is immersed directly in nature, the couple in Frost’s poem are viewing nature from the perspective of their front porch. Near the end of the middle of the poem, Frost writes, “Part of the moon was falling down the west, / Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.”<sup>19</sup> The falling in these lines foreshadows Silas’s plight just inside. Silas’s reputation of floating around from house to house causes me to believe that he is symbolized as the cloud in the following lines, when Mary says, “I’ll sit and see if that small sailing cloud / Will hit or miss the moon.”<sup>20</sup> If the cloud symbolizes Silas, and the moon symbolizes death, the conclusion “It hit the moon”<sup>21</sup> is an obvious one of death.

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<sup>16</sup> Wordsworth, 827.

<sup>17</sup> Wordsworth, 828.

<sup>18</sup> Wordsworth, 828.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Frost, “The Death of a Hired Man,” in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Tim Kendall, and Mary Jo Salter. (W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 1298-1301.

<sup>20</sup> Frost, 1301.

<sup>21</sup> Frost, 1301.

In addition to movement, the moon symbolizes death as thievery. In his article on the topic of the moon in folklore, J. W. Slaughter mentions how in Norse mythology, the idea of the moon has been commonly associated with the idea of theft, which reputedly takes place at night.<sup>22</sup> In both poems, death can be seen as a type of thievery from the domestic household. In “Strange fits,” the speaker acts as the classic lover on a quest for his beloved, Lucy. He is lulled into a stupor by the moon, and while distracted by its beauty, the moon’s movement symbolizes her theft from him. In “Hired Man,” Silas’s death robs the house: Warren, of a logical hired hand, and Mary, of the friendship of another emotional being.

Unquestionably, death occurs in both poems. However, the dead individual is not the subject of each piece, in fact, the reader never sees them. The effects of death on the three living characters in the works are examined instead. In Wordsworth’s poem, the speaker reveals how his view of nature influences his thoughts. In Frost’s poem, Warren and Mary’s notably different understandings of human nature subtly reveal themselves in their respective perception of nature. James Bowen comments that Frost’s poem “explores this . . . [confrontation] . . . by placing a logically practical approach to a particular problem in juxtaposition with an emotionally intuitive approach to the same problem.”<sup>23</sup> Being confronted by death illuminates important nuances in Wordsworth’s lover, Mary, and Warren’s worldviews.

The speaker describes his experience of being alone in nature as a “strange fit of passion.”<sup>24</sup> The beautiful landscape—“the wide lea”<sup>25</sup>—and the horse’s trudging lull the speaker into a comfortable state, allowing him to lean back and enjoy the view. He describes the familiar

<sup>22</sup>J. W. Slaughter, “The Moon in Childhood and Folklore,” *The American Journal of Psychology* 13, no. 2 (1902): 306. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1412741>.

<sup>23</sup> James Bowen, “Propositional And Emotional Knowledge In Robert Frost’s ‘The Death of The Hired Man,’ ‘The Fear,’ And ‘Home Burial,’” *CLA Journal* 12, no. 2 (1968): 155. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44321487>.

<sup>24</sup> Wordsworth, “Strange fits,” 827.

<sup>25</sup> Wordsworth, 827.

paths as “dear” to him. In his book *The Romantic Dream: Wordsworth and the Poetics of the Unconscious*, Douglas Wilson writes on the prevalence of dreaming and dream-like states in Romantic poetry such as Wordsworth’s. He defines a dream as a state of sleep where there is no will operating—it seems to come from another place.<sup>26</sup> Relatedly, a reverie is “a deeper state of hypnagogic intensity, in which the will becomes less operative, as in a dream or in a state induced by hypnosis.”<sup>27</sup> This definition accurately describes the state that the speaker falls into on his horse ride. The power of the light of the moon is what, I claim, is the source of his strange fit of passion. The moonlight is symbolic of the unattainable, transcendental truth of Platonic forms that cannot be grasped by human reason. By delighting in nature, the lover is like a child, a beloved stage of life that Romantics idealized. Being entranced by the light of the moon demonstrates that the man is still childlike (like Lucy) and has not developed emotional intelligence; he misses the obvious.

The most predominant part of the speaker’s Romantic experience is the moon. The moon predominantly hangs over the whole poem after its first mention in the second stanza. Wordsworth begins the third stanza with “Upon the moon I fix’d my eye,”<sup>28</sup> which, given the mention of fits in the first stanza, and the recurring connection in literature between the moon and lunacy, implies that the moon is lulling him into a romantic fit of madness induced by nature. In the fifth stanza, he declares “In one of those sweet dreams I slept, / Kind Nature’s gentlest boon!”<sup>29</sup> He is proclaiming this dream-state as a blessing from nature. This solipsism, a state in which the self is all that can be known to exist—is a distinctly Romantic phenomenon and is a consequence of playing out Romantic ideals to their extreme. Unaware of the real world and

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<sup>26</sup> Douglas B. Wilson, *The Romantic Dream: Wordsworth and the Poetics of the Unconscious* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 15.

<sup>27</sup> Wilson, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Wordsworth, 827.

<sup>29</sup> Wordsworth, 827.

preoccupied with inner thoughts, the speaker spirals into the ultimate result of the Romantic movement as a whole: extreme egocentrism. The speaker becomes so caught up in his own experience in nature that he forgets the end goal—his lover—and does not notice the moon’s foreshadowing of death. It is not until the end of the poem, when the planet drops, essentially straight into the speaker’s head, that he snaps back into reality with the thought “O mercy! . . . If Lucy should be dead!”<sup>30</sup> Alan Bewell comments that “Love and guilt thus became infused in the narrator’s sense that he was implicated in her death.”<sup>31</sup> The speaker’s lack of emotional intelligence is demonstrated in his lack of awareness of nature and his lover’s plight.

In “Hired Man,” Frost explores the dynamics of the marital relationship between Mary and Warren as they discuss their juxtaposing conceptions of human nature. Warren, the man of the house, logically measures mankind for his usefulness. Bowen observes that “Warren is able to see Silas’ frailties and accomplishments only as belonging to an impersonal hired hand and not as an emotional human being. Responding to Mary’s remembrances of Silas’ human qualities, Warren can only recall Silas’ practical worth.”<sup>32</sup> This tendency manifests itself in his constant need to make order of nature. When Warren comes home and Mary informs him of Silas’s return, one of his first questions is, “What good is he?”<sup>33</sup> He is upset due to Silas’s lack of usefulness as a farm hand: “What help he is there’s no depending on. Off he goes always when I need him most.”<sup>34</sup> Warren’s life and livelihood revolve around his manipulation of nature into logical farming order. As Mary defends Silas, she reminds Warren of the things he did well. Warren concedes:

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<sup>30</sup> Wordsworth, 828.

<sup>31</sup> Alan Bewell, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment: Nature, Man, and Society in the Experimental Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 203.

<sup>32</sup> Bowen, “Emotional Knowledge,” 156.

<sup>33</sup> Frost, “Hired Man,” 1298.

<sup>34</sup> Frost, “Hired Man,” 1299.

That's Silas' one accomplishment.  
 He bundles every forkful in its place,  
 And tags and numbers it for future reference . . .  
 Silas does that well.<sup>35</sup>

Warren evaluates Silas's worth based on how well he can order nature to his will.

Another subtle instance demonstrating Warren's desire to control nature is found near the end of the poem. Mid-conversation with Mary, "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."<sup>36</sup> This action is such a minor detail in the narrative, an action often performed absentmindedly in conversation, but in a poem where space is limited and every word is intentional, its inclusion necessarily must be significant. An unexpected connection can be found in Slaughter's article, where he describes the myth of the man in the moon. There are many versions of the story from the Bible, German myths, and other tales, that associate the man in the moon with breaking the Sabbath and thievery, and they are "familiar in every nursery."<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, they all center around the story of a man breaking the Sabbath by gathering sticks. In the German story, the stick-gatherer is punished by having to dwell eternally in the moon as a warning to all Sabbath-breakers. In a medieval theory, the moon is actually the "seat of hell."<sup>38</sup> Numbers 15:32-36 details another stick-gathering story. In the way that this Isrealite was not in sync with God's will and his community's rules, Warren is not communing with nature in the same way Mary is. Just like the speaker in "Strange fits," he does not notice the signs of the moon. His desire to dominate nature misconstrues his understanding of it.

On the other hand, Mary views man through an emotional lens, exhibited in her connection with nature. She takes pity on the old man, seeing him in a vulnerable human state,

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<sup>35</sup> Frost, 1300.

<sup>36</sup> Frost, 1300.

<sup>37</sup> Slaughter, "Moon in Folklore," 305.

<sup>38</sup> Slaughter, 307.

“A miserable sight, and frightening, too— / I didn’t recognize him.”<sup>39</sup> She anticipates Warren’s response regarding his usefulness. Some of her first words to Warren when he arrives home are “Be kind.”<sup>40</sup> Bowen remarks that, “by warning Warren to be kind, she implies a foreknowledge of his response.”<sup>41</sup> This demonstrates high emotional intelligence. Bowen continues, “Mary’s emotional attitudes, those attitudes which require no reasonable explanations, are abundant throughout the context of the narrative. She pays attention to Silas’ worth as a human being, even realizing he may have no practical worth.”<sup>42</sup> Not only is she emotionally aware of others, but she is also emotionally connected to nature. As she talks with Warren on the porch, she is watching the moon fall and interacting with it:

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 . . .  
 As if she played unheard some tenderness  
 That wrought on him beside her in the night.<sup>43</sup>

Here, she clearly engages with nature on a deeper level than Warren. It is at this time she informs Warren that she senses that Silas has come “home” to die. Later, Mary tells Warren to go inside the house and see Silas for himself. She stays to “see if that small sailing cloud / Will hit or miss the moon.”<sup>44</sup> If the moon symbolizes death, perhaps the cloud represents Silas floating from farm to farm, working odd jobs. The next line continues: “It hit the moon. / Then there were three there, making a dim row. / The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.”<sup>45</sup> This poetic verbiage describing the trio sitting together suggests that Mary may anticipate the death occurring inside before Warren actually returns with the news.

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<sup>39</sup> Frost, “Hired Man,” 1298.

<sup>40</sup> Frost, 1298.

<sup>41</sup> Bowen, “Emotional Knowledge,” 156.

<sup>42</sup> Bowen, 157.

<sup>43</sup> Frost, “Hired Man,” 1300.

<sup>44</sup> Frost, 1301.

<sup>45</sup> Frost, 1301.

Not only is Mary emotionally observant of the moon's significance, but based on the wording and her purpose in the narrative, she actually functions as the moon of the domestic space. In ancient universal animistic traditions, the moon is considered the wife of the sun.<sup>46</sup> If the sun rules the work day and is the marker by which man orders his life, Warren functions as the sun of the household. Compare Mary's words in line 9: she "drew him down" and in line 40: "I dragged him to the house"<sup>47</sup> with lines 103-104: "Part of a moon was falling down the west, / Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills."<sup>48</sup> In these examples, the implication of Mary's lunar role in the domestic sphere is almost explicit. Mary demonstrates high emotional intelligence of her husband and the hired man, reflected in her comprehension of the relevance of the moon in her environment.

Robert Frost and William Wordsworth, while working in the different formats, both brush on the same subjects in their poems. Wordsworth uses the ballad format, and Frost, the dramatic narrative, in ways new to their respective literary movements. They exhibit talent by foreshadowing death in their format with rhyme, doubleness of language, and inverse sentences. The moon functions as a looming symbol of death with its movement and reputation for thievery. The characters' descriptions by the authors and contextual reception to the signs of nature reveals their emotional intelligence. Wordsworth writes about a traveler overcome by romantic nature, one who loses sight for a while of anything but his own mind and pleasure. Frost explores the dynamics of marriage and the differing ways man and woman often view nature. Poetry acts as the timeless vehicle in which to analyze man's complexity and his relation to nature.

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<sup>46</sup> Slaughter, "Moon in Folklore," 296.

<sup>47</sup> Frost, "Hired Man," 1298.

<sup>48</sup> Frost, 1300.