

Before You Read

The Death of the Hired Man

by Robert Frost

LITERARY FOCUS: NARRATIVE POEM AND BLANK VERSE

A **narrative poem** is a poem that tells a story. As with 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 a dialogue between a husband and wife as they discuss Silas, the hired man.

“The Death of a Hired Man” is written in **blank verse**, which is unrhymed iambic pentameter. An **iamb** is an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable: da DUM (˘ ’), as in the word *confess*. In iambic pentameter, there are five iambs in each line.

A poem that is written to follow a more or less regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables is written in **meter**. If you try to beat out the meter in Frost’s poem, you will find that Frost often varies the metric pattern. He does this so that his poem will not sound sing-song and become monotonous.

READING SKILLS: DRAWING INFERENCES

An **inference** is a guess 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.

Use the Skill 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. As you read, look for clues to his character, and make inferences about him.

REVIEW SKILLS

As you read “The Death of the Hired Man,” look for the following literary element.

CHARACTERIZATION

The way a writer reveals the personality of a character. In **direct characterization**, the writer tells us directly what a character is like. In **indirect characterization**, the writer reveals character through the person’s appearance, actions, words, thoughts, and effect on other people.

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills
Understand the characteristics of a narrative poem and blank verse.

Reading Skills
Make inferences about characters.

Review Skills
Understand direct and indirect characterization.



Photograph of an old man asleep on a porch (1936). His cane is between his legs. Photo by Dorothea Lange.
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The Death of the Hired Man

Robert Frost

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.
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.
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.²
'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

IDENTIFY

A **narrative poem** tells a story and includes characters and, often, dialogue. In lines 1–7, circle the names of the characters. Underline the dialogue.

ANALYZE

Lines 7–10 are a good example of **blank verse**. Mark the five iambs in each line by putting the symbols \sim over the unstressed syllables and $'$ over the stressed syllables.

CLARIFY

Pause at line 18. Why is Warren angry at Silas?

INFER

In lines 19–24, circle what Silas wanted. Underline why Warren couldn't give it to him. What do you think Warren *does* give Silas in exchange for his labor?

1. **harbor** *v.*: provide safe shelter for.
2. **beholden** *adj.*: indebted.

INFER

Pause at line 30. What have you learned about Silas and Warren so far?

FLUENCY

Read the boxed passage aloud at least twice. Be aware of the beat of the lines, but read naturally. Try to bring the characters of Mary and Warren to life by reading the speech of each character somewhat differently.

INFER

Re-read lines 39–43. Underline the details that describe how Mary tries to help Silas. What inference can you draw about Mary from these actions?

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."

"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."

"Where did you say he'd been?"

40 "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."

"What did he say? Did he say anything?"

"But little."

45 "Anything? Mary, confess
He said he'd come to ditch³ the meadow for me."

"Warren!"

3. ditch v.: dig drainage channels in.

“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

50 Some humble way to save his self-respect.

He added, if you really care to know,

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

55 He jumbled everything. I stopped to look

Two or three times—he made me feel so queer⁴—

To see if he was talking in his sleep.

He ran on⁵ Harold Wilson—you remember—

The boy you had in haying four years since.

60 He’s finished school, and teaching in his college.

Silas declares you’ll have to get him back.

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.

65 He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft

On education—you know how they fought

All through July under the blazing sun,

Silas up on the cart to build the load,

Harold along beside to pitch it on.”

70 “Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot.”

“Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream.

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

Harold’s young college-boy’s assurance piqued⁶ him.

After so many years he still keeps finding

75 Good arguments he sees he might have used.

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 50. What has Silas said he’s come back to do?

INFER

Re-read lines 54–57. Circle the detail that describes Silas’s behavior. What inference can you draw about his character based on this detail?

PARAPHRASE

In your own words, retell the story events narrated in lines 65–75.

4. **queer** *adj.*: uncomfortable; ill at ease.

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

6. **piqued** *v.*: provoked.

COMPARE &
CONTRAST

Re-read lines 78–95. How are Silas and Harold alike, and how are they different?

INFER

What can you infer about Silas's character based on lines 99–102?

I sympathize. I know just how it feels
To think of the right thing to say too late.
Harold's associated in his mind with Latin.
He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying
80 He studied Latin, like the violin,
Because he liked it—that an argument!
He said he couldn't make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong⁷—
Which showed how much good school had ever done him.
85 He wanted to go over that. But most of all
He thinks if he could have another chance
To teach him how to build a load of hay—”

“I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment.
He bundles every forkful in its place,
90 And tags and numbers it for future reference,
So he can find and easily dislodge it
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
95 He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself.”

“He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be
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,
100 And nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different.”

Part of a moon was falling down the west,
Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
105 Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it
And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand

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



Silhouette of man in barn.

© Bob Winsett/CORBIS.

Among the harplike morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
As if she played unheard some tenderness
110 That wrought⁸ on him beside her in the night.
“Warren,” she said, “he has come home to die:
You needn’t be afraid he’ll leave you this time.”

“Home,” he mocked gently.

“Yes, what else but home?

It all depends on what you mean by home.

115 Of course he’s nothing to us, any more
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.”

Notes

INTERPRET

Lines 103–110 switch from dialogue to narration that uses beautiful **imagery**. What senses do these images appeal to?

IDENTIFY

In lines 111–112, circle what Mary says Silas has come home to do.

8. wrought v.: worked.

COMPARE &
CONTRAST

In lines 118–120, underline Warren's definition of home, and circle Mary's definition of home. What differences do you see in their two points of view?

CLARIFY

Re-read lines 124–129. Where does Warren think that Silas should go to get help?

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

120 “I should have called it
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
125 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.”

“He never told us that.”
130 “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—
He may be better than appearances.
135 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?”

“I wonder what’s between them.”
“I can tell you.
140 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.

He don't know why he isn't quite as good
As anybody. Worthless though he is,

- 145 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
And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back.
He wouldn't let me put him on the lounge.

- 150 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.
His working days are done; I'm sure of it."

"I'd not be in a hurry to say that."

- 155 "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.
He has a plan. You mustn't laugh at him.
He may not speak of it, and then he may.
160 I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud
Will hit or miss the moon."

It hit the moon.

Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.

Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her—

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

"Warren?" she questioned.

"Dead," was all he answered.

INFER

What inferences can you make about why Silas and his brother don't get along (lines 131–145)?

INFER

In lines 153–154, circle what Mary says about Silas's ability to work, and underline Warren's reply. What can you infer about Mary's and Warren's characters from their reactions?

INTERPRET

The narration again includes a beautiful image in lines 160–163. Why do you think the poet includes this image of the moon, cloud, and woman?

The Death of the Hired Man

Reading Skills: Drawing Inferences You can draw inferences about characters based on what they say, on what they do, and on what others say about them. The chart below lists some of the things Mary and Warren say in “The Death of the Hired Man.” In the right-hand column, write what you infer about Mary, Warren, and Silas, based on the dialogue quoted here.

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 49–50)	Mary:
“‘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 142–145)	Silas:

Vocabulary Development

The Jilting of Granny Weatherall

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

DIRECTIONS: Write vocabulary words from the word box to complete the paragraph below. Not all words from the box will be used.

Word Box

tactful
clammy
plague
vanity
jilted
disputed
nimbus
dwindled

That Katherine Anne Porter's fame is well deserved cannot be (1) **disputed**. Who would contest that her use of language to create character and mood is the sign of a great literary talent? In this famous short story, she is able to draw readers into the personal, inner world of a dying grandmother who was (2) **jilted** by her lover on her wedding day sixty years before. This rejection in Granny Weatherall's early life would (3) **plague** her until she died. Porter creates a vibrant portrait of a strong-willed woman, who is blunt rather than (4) **tactful** in her dealings with her family.

ANALOGIES: USING SYNONYMS AND ANTONYMS

In a **word analogy**, two pairs of words have the same relationship. Often the words in each pair are **synonyms**—words with similar meanings—or **antonyms**—words with opposite meanings. In the analogy below, the words in each pair are synonyms.

ANGRY : FURIOUS :: humorous : funny

DIRECTIONS: Study each word analogy below to determine if the words in the complete pair are antonyms or synonyms. Then, fill in each blank with the appropriate word from the word box above. In the blank following each analogy, write "A" if the word pairs are antonyms or "S" if they are synonyms.

1. DESTROYED : CREATED :: **dwindled** : increased **A**
2. **nimbus** : HALO :: ocean : sea **S**
3. ARID : DRY :: **clammy** : damp **S**
4. **vanity** : MODESTY :: sanity : madness **A**

SKILLS FOCUS

Vocabulary Skills
Use vocabulary words from the word box to complete word analogies.

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LITERARY FOCUS: NARRATIVE POEM AND BLANK VERSE

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"The Death of a Hired Man" is written in **blank verse**, which is unrhymed iambic pentameter. An **iamb** is an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable: da DUM (" "). as in the word *confess*. In iambic pentameter, there are five iambs in each line.

A poem that is written to follow a more or less regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables is written in **meter**. If you try to beat out the meter in Frost's poem, you will find that Frost often varies the metric pattern. He does this so that his poem will not sound sing-song and become monotonous.

READING SKILLS: DRAWING INFERENCES

An **inference** is a guess 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.

Use the Skill 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. As you read, look for clues to his character, and make inferences about him.

REVIEW SKILLS

As you read "The Death of the Hired Man," make inferences about the following literary element.

CHARACTERIZATION

The way a writer reveals the personality of a character in direct or indirect ways. A writer tells us directly what a character is like. In **direct** characterization, the writer reveals character through the person's appearance, actions, or words. In **indirect** characterization, the writer reveals character through the effect on other people.

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills
Understand characteristics of a narrative poem and blank verse.

Reading Skills
Make inferences about characters.

Review Skills
Understand direct and indirect characterization.

The Death of the Hired Man

Robert Frost

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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.
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.
What good is he? Who else will harbor¹ him
15 At his age for the little he can do?
What help he is there's no depending on.
Off he goes always when I need him most.
He thinks he ought to earn a little pay.
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,
20 So he won't have to beg and be beholden.²
'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

1. harbor *v.*: provide safe shelter for.
2. beholden *adj.*: indebted.

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Photograph of an old man asleep on a porch (1936). His cane is between his legs. Photo by Dorothea Lange. © Bettmann/COFBIIS.

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IDENTIFY

A narrative poem tells a story and includes characters and, often, dialogue. In lines 1–7, circle the names of the characters. Underline the dialogue.

ANALYZE

Lines 7–10 are a good example of blank verse. Mark the five iambs in each line by putting the symbols ' over the unstressed syllables and / over the stressed syllables.

CLARIFY

Pause at line 18. Why is Warren angry at Silas?

Silas quit his job

during the last haying,

when Warren needed

his help most.

INFER

In lines 19–24, circle what Silas wanted. Underline why Warren couldn't give it to him. What do you think Warren does give Silas in exchange for his labor?

Warren gives Silas food and shelter.

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INFER

Pause at line 30. What have you learned about Silas and Warren so far?

Silas is irresponsible, but he looks out for himself; Warren is angry and stern. Both men are stubborn and proud.

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. In winter he comes back to us. I'm done."

30

FLUENCY

Read the boxed passage aloud at least twice. Be aware of the beat of the lines, but read naturally. Try to bring the characters of Mary and Warren to life by reading the speech of each character somewhat differently.

"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."

40

INFER

Underline the details that describe how Mary tries to help Silas. What inference can you draw about Mary from these actions?

She is kind and caring.

"What did he say? Did he say anything?"

"But little."

"Anything? Mary, confess He said he'd come to ditch³ the meadow for me."

45

3. ditch v.: dig drainage channels in.

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 50. What has Silas said he's come back to do?

He has come back to work.

"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. He added, if you really care to know, 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 queer⁴— To see if he was talking in his sleep. He ran on⁵ 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. 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 All through July under the blazing sun, Silas up on the cart to build the load, Harold along beside to pitch it on."

50

INFER

Re-read lines 54–57. Circle the detail that describes Silas's behavior. What inference can you draw about his character based on this detail?

Silas's mind is wandering; he is ill or becoming senile.

"Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot."

"Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream. You wouldn't think they would. How some things linger! Harold's young college-boy's assurance piqued⁶ him. After so many years he still keeps finding Good arguments he sees he might have used."

55

PARAPHRASE

In your own words, retell the story events narrated in lines 65–75.

Possible response:

Silas worked with Harold Wilson, a college student, on the farm one summer. They fought a lot, and Silas is still coming up with arguments he wishes he had used.

65

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4. queer adj.: uncomfortable; ill at ease.
5. ran on: kept talking in a rambling way about.
6. piqued v.: provoked.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

Re-read lines 78–95. How are Silas and Harold alike, and how are they different?

They both have knowledge and like to argue. However, Silas has a farmer's skills, and Harold has book learning.

INFER

What can you infer about Silas's character based on lines 99–102?

Possible response: Silas has never had success.

I sympathize. I know just how it feels
To think of the right thing to say too late.
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!
He said he couldn't make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong?—
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
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
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!"

"He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be
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,
So now and never any different."

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

7. hazel prong: forked branch used to find water underground.

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Collection 5: The Moderns

INTERPRET

Lines 103–110 switch from dialogue to narration that uses beautiful imagery. What senses do these images appeal to?

the senses of sight, touch, and hearing

IDENTIFY

In lines 111–112, circle what Mary says Silas has come home to do.

Among the harplike morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
As if she played unheard some tenderness
That wrought⁸ on him beside her in the night,
"Warren," she said, "he has come home **(to die)**."
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time."
"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
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail."

8. wrought v.: worked.

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The Death of the Hired Man

COMPARE & CONTRAST

In lines 118–120, underline Warren's definition of home, and circle Mary's definition of home. What differences do you see in their two points of view?

Possible response:

Warren believes that home is where you are accepted out of duty or obligation; Mary believes that a home is where you are always welcome.

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

120 "I should have called it 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 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."

"He never told us that."

130 "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— 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?"

"I wonder what's between them."

140 "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.

CLARIFY

Re-read lines 124–129. Where does Warren think that Silas should go to get help?

He thinks that Silas should go to the home of his wealthy brother.

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INFER

What inferences can you make about why Silas and his brother don't get along (lines 131–145)?

His brother makes Silas feel ashamed.

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."

145 "No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay 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. His working days are done; I'm sure of it."

"I'd not be in a hurry to say that."

155 "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. 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."

160 It hit the moon. Then there were three there, making a dim row, The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.

Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her— Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.

165 "Warren?" she questioned. "Dead," was all he answered.

INTERPRET

The narration again includes a beautiful image in lines 160–163. Why do you think the poet includes this image of the moon, cloud, and woman?

He is connecting the events in the story with the larger world and with nature's cycles of life and death.

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SKILLS PRACTICE

The Death of the Hired Man

Reading Skills: Drawing Inferences You can draw inferences about characters based on what they say, on what they do, and on what others say about them. The chart below lists some of the things Mary and Warren say in "The Death of the Hired Man." In the right-hand column, write what you infer about Mary, Warren, and Silas, based on the dialogue quoted here.

Possible responses appear below.

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: He is stubborn and stern.
"Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor old man / Some humble way to save his self-respect." (lines 49–50)	Mary: She is compassionate and kind.
"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 142–145)	Silas: He is unsuccessful but proud.

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Before You Read

Harlem by Langston Hughes

LITERARY FOCUS: MOOD

The general feeling created in a piece of writing is called its **mood**. This mood, or atmosphere, is created by all the elements of the text: diction, or word choice; sounds; images; and figures of speech. Often, the mood of a text can be summed up in one word—gloomy, joyful, fearful, ominous, mysterious.

Setting the Mood Sometimes just the setting of a text is enough to establish a mood. The chart below lists three settings. In the right-hand column, fill in the mood you would expect from each setting. **Possible responses appear below.**

Setting	Mood
A dark castle	scary
A sunny beach	happy
High mountain peaks	majestic

READING SKILLS: IDENTIFYING HISTORICAL THEMES

Certain themes occur again and again during certain historical periods. During the American Revolutionary period, for example, writers often explored themes of freedom or identity. These themes reflected the optimistic, rational views of the time.

"Harlem," on the other hand, was written during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when millions of Americans faced severe economic problems. The number of people without jobs rose from four million to twelve million between 1930 and 1932. Many people who still had jobs worked fewer hours for less pay. It was a time when even a one-cent price increase meant that many people couldn't afford bread. Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City inhabited primarily by African Americans, was hit hard by the Depression. As you read the following poem, notice how it relates to the concerns of that historical period.

REVIEW SKILLS
As you read "Harlem," think about the following literary element.

THEME

The insight about a work of literature. Writers rarely state themes directly. Instead, they hint at the theme by thinking carefully about all the details in the text: diction, word choice, images, figures of speech.



Literary Skills
Understand mood.
Reading Skills
Identify historical themes.
Review Skills
Understand theme.

Harlem 259

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

Selection: _____ Author: _____

Blank Verse

Blank verse is poetry written in unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Iambic pentameter is a line of poetry that contains five iambic feet.

An **iamb** is a metric foot in poetry that has an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, as in the word *today*.

DIRECTIONS: Read the poem and the information below. Then, scan three lines of your choice from the poem. Decide if the line follows a strict iambic pentameter, as in the example, or explain how it differs from the metric pattern.

When you scan a line of poetry, you mark unstressed syllables with the symbol \sim and stressed syllables with the symbol $'$. For example:

\sim $'$ \sim $'$ \sim $'$ \sim $'$ \sim $'$ \sim $'$
But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

Line from Poem	Strict Iambic Pentameter? Explain.
1.	
2.	
3.	

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