

Guy Rotella: On "The Death of the Hired Man"

In "The Death of the Hired Man" elegiac response might be said to precede its occasion. Perhaps that's why the title forecasts the off-stage demise the dramatic final line supposedly reveals. Throughout the poem Mary anticipates Silas's death and works to manage in advance her husband Warren's reaction to it. As is well-known, "The Death of the Hired Man" dramatizes (without resolving) the timeless debate between justice and mercy: the competing positions those terms encode are represented in the poem by Warren's and Mary's respective responses to their wayward farmhand's return from his wanderings (ostensibly to ditch the meadow but in fact to die), and they're condensed in the poem's famous rival definitions of home (the tough-minded Warren calls it "the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in"; Mary describes it tenderly as "something you somehow haven't to deserve?"). It's also well-known that Mary plays a tutelary role in the poem. I've written elsewhere about economic and gender aspects of "The Death of the Hired Man," and about the ways in which Mary "works" on Warren: she helps him to extenuate before it's too late the harsh (if just) judgments of Silas she knows he'll regret when he encounters their hired hand in the diminished, terminal state she's already witnessed (her elegiac intervention takes on even greater resonance when, as it happens, Warren finds Silas not just worn out but dead).

Mary has multiple roles in the poem. Woman, wife, and teacher, she's also a figure of the poet: she muses, she's inspired by the moon, and the vine strings on her porch recall the Aeolian harp long associated with poetic imagination. Moreover, Mary is the sort of "womanly" poet-teacher who achieves her effects through the workings of affect rather than through pronouncement, argument, or precept. In a gradual, smartly managed and manipulative, yet entirely delicate and generous process developed throughout the course of the poem, Mary gently, powerfully moves Warren away from justice toward mercy. Her control of the situation is apparent from the start; she has all the strong verbs: she "heard," "ran," "put," "pushed," "shut," "took," "drew," and "dragged." Yet she allows Warren the semblance of control. Without objecting, she lets him express his initial, understandably aggrieved and justly harsh assessment of Silas: he's been irresponsible, mercenary, and disloyal. And when Mary does interject, it's not to deny the legitimacy of Warren's charges but to insist on Silas's now reduced condition and to ask for kindness in spite of his failings. Only after she successfully uses the tale of Silas's quarrel with the college-boy Harold Wilson (it moves Warren to remember the farmer's values he and Silas share), does Mary press her advantage. Helped by her quiet urging, Warren increasingly recollects that he and Silas are allies defending a world they hold in common against challenges and threats to it from the educated classes or from bankers. His empathy awakened, Warren then turns (is turned by Mary's ministrations) from judging Silas to praising him (he eloquently eulogizes Silas's skill in building a load of hay) and from accusing him to defending him (he refutes Mary's estimate that Silas's working days are done). Finally, using an intimately friendly form of Silas's name, Warren asserts his fundamental goodness: "I can't think Si ever hurt anyone." This is the state of Warren's mind and feelings when he goes in and finds his friend and workman dead beside the stove.

Mary works on and with Warren's memories and inclinations to turn him away from his initial resentful, anti-encomiastic judgment of the prodigal Silas toward a more inclusive, empathetic,

and forgiving appreciation of his flaws and his virtues, and also toward a fuller awareness of their common bond as members of a community or class threatened by competing sets of values. In this way, Mary protects Warren from the regret and self-recrimination he would have suffered if he'd discovered Silas dead in his earlier mood. I'll put it this way: working in part as a poet (?As if she played unheard some tenderness / That wrought on him beside her in the night?), Mary creates for Warren the conditions necessary for the elegiac work of mourning, making him more amenable than he would have been to consolation, however tacit his grief for Silas may be (perhaps it is not so much tacit as laconic: ?Si? does sigh). In such ways, vestiges of elegy in ?The Death of the Hired Man??antiphonal voices; the processional aspect of Mary's mournful lyric interlude or nocturne: ?a dim row, / The moon, the little silver cloud, and she?; the figures of weaving present in Silas's handiwork with hay and Warren's intricately braided representation of it, in Mary's vine strings, and in Warren's catching up of Mary's hand?contribute their own generic dimension to the poem's artfully ordinary family drama.

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