The Man with the Hoe

POEM TEXT

Written after seeing Millet's World-Famous Painting

God made man in His own image,
in the image of God made He him. —Genesis.

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,
The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on his back the burden of the world.
Who made him dead to rapture and despair,
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?
Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw?
Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?
Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?
Is this the Thing the Lord God made and gave
To have dominion over sea and land;
To trace the stars and search the heavens for power;
To feel the passion of Eternity?
Is this the Dream He dreamed who shaped the suns
And marked their ways upon the ancient deep?
Down all the stretch of Hell to its last gulf
There is no shape more terrible than this—
More tongued with censure of the world's blind greed—
More filled with signs and portents for the soul—
More fraught with danger to the universe.

What gulfs between him and the seraphim!
Slave of the wheel of labor, what to him
Are Plato and the swing of Pleiades?
What the long reaches of the peaks of song,
The rift of dawn, the reddening of the rose?
Through this dread shape the suffering ages look;
Time's tragedy is in that aching stoop;
Through this dread shape humanity betrayed,
Plundered, profaned and disinherited,
Cries protest to the Judges of the World,
A protest that is also prophecy.

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
is this the handiwork you give to God,
This monstrous thing distorted and soul-quenched ?
How will you ever straighten up this shape;
Touch it again with immortality;
Give back the upward looking and the light;
Rebuild in it the music and the dream;
Make right the immemorial infamies,
Perfidious wrongs, immedicable woes?

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
How will the Future reckon with this Man?
How answer his brute question in that hour
When whirlwinds of rebellion shake the world?
How will it be with kingdoms and with kings—
With those who shaped him to the thing he is—
When this dumb Terror shall reply to God
After the silence of the centuries?

SUMMARY

The poet was inspired to write this poem after seeing "The Man with the Hoe," a painting by French artist Jean-Francois Millet from 1862.

This epigraph is a quotation from the Book of Genesis in the Bible. It asserts that because human beings were created by God, their physical appearance is also God's.

Years of hard work have left the laborer stooped over his hoe and staring at the ground, like many generations of laborers before him. His face expresses nothing, even as the rest of society depends on the harvest he reaps. Who, the speaker asks, is responsible for the fact that this man cannot experience the highs and lows of human emotion, can neither mourn loss nor have hopes for the future? Who made him into something like one of the farm animals, dumb and unfeeling? Who made his savage jaw hang open? Whose hands made his brows hang heavy? Who extinguished his ability to think? Is this the same being that God created to rule over the earth's natural resources, to gaze up at the stars and search for meaning, and to embrace life fully? Is this man really what God, who created the entire universe, intended when creating human beings? Even in the furthest stretches of Hell you would not find a worse shape than this man's body. There is no shape more marked by society's blind greed, no shape that more obviously represents a warning about humanity's soul. The condition of workers threatens to undermine the spiritual health of all.

There are such huge distances between this man and the

angels! Because he must work constantly in order to survive, he has no time for intellectual pursuits such as philosophy and astronomy. What could music, art, and beauty possibly mean to him? You can see the suffering of workers throughout the ages in his frightening body. The tragic oppression of the working class throughout all of history is reflected in his bent posture. His frightening body represents a betrayal of humanity itself, as he has been robbed, defiled, and denied a fair share of what he produces. However, workers like him resist exploitation by seeking justice, which foreshadows a future when history will look back on the current society as a failure.

I am asking you, the most privileged people in society, the ruling class: how can you expect to receive divine blessings when you exploit workers in the way you have for so long, warping their bodies into something monstrous and snuffing out their soles? How do you plan to repair this body and revive its immortal soul? How do plan to raise its gaze from the ground and return the spark of light to its mind, to restore its joy and hope? How do you plan to atone for this ancient sin and fix the mess you made of God's creation?

I ask you again, ruling class, how will future societies look back on the brutal and monstrous suffering you inflicted on the working class? How will the new world reckon with you when the time comes that the workers rise up and resist? What will become of those with so much power and wealth, those who inflicted all this suffering? After sinning for so long, how will you answer to God?

THEMES

THE EXPLOITATION OF THE WORKING CLASS

"The Man with the Hoe" criticizes the exploitation of the working class. The poem was written at a time when extreme inequality prevailed in the United States, a period when wealth and power were concentrated in the hands of a few while the average worker toiled away in poverty. The speaker is criticizing these circumstances, and calling on society to treat members of the working class as fellow human beings with a right to share in the products of their labor. What's more, the poem argues that, because God created all human beings "in His own image," the horrific treatment of the working class is an affront to God himself.

The poem describes a worker whose body and mind have been warped by endless toil, highlighting the toll that manual labor has taken on this man in order to emphasize the brutal conditions faced by workers throughout history. The man is described as "dumb" (unable to speak) and "dead" to "rapture and despair." He's like a farm animal, "stolid and stunned." He "grieves not" and "never hopes," and "the light within his brain" has been extinguished. The speaker even compares the man to a beast of burden and says he's been reduced to a "monstrous thing." Basically, he has been robbed of conscious thought and emotion—of anything that makes him human.

At the same time, the poem insists that this worker carries "the burden of the world" on his back, implying that his labor is *essential* for the functioning of society even as he's not allowed any of the *benefits* of that society. The man is solely a "Slave of the wheel of labor"—forced to focus on nothing but production in order to satisfy "the world's blind greed."

The blame for this situation, the poem insists, lies with the rich and powerful members of society—a ruling class of "lords" and "masters" who brutally exploit and dehumanize workers in the name of personal profit. Addressing the ruling class, "O masters, lords and rulers in all lands," the speaker mockingly questions "the handiwork you give to God." Capitalism's brutal treatment of the laborer, in other words, has replaced divine creation (in God's image) with something inhuman and "monstrous."

The speaker asks why the laborer appears to be drained of feeling and spirit when he, too, is part of God's creation. The exploitation of workers, the speaker thus argues, isn't just an affront to ideals of equality and human decency; it's an insult to *God*.

The consequences are potentially grave. At the end of the poem, the speaker insists that society must one day "reckon" with the laborer's condition—with the fact that profit-driven society has changed "Man" to "brute," or, in other words, from a sensitive human being into a violent beast. The poem ultimately presents a stark choice: either the ruling class will act in accordance with Christian principles by treating the working class with dignity, or else society will perpetuate a cycle of suffering until the "hour" of divine judgment arrives. The workers class will inevitably rise up and "rebellion" will "shake the world"—and not even "kings" will be safe.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-49

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1, LINES 1-4

Written after seeing Millet's World-Famous Painting

God made man in His own image,

in the image of God made He him.
—Genesis.
Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,

The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on his back the burden of the world.

Before the poem begins, the speaker includes a quotation from the Bible, specifically the Book of Genesis. This says that human beings were created in God's "own image"—that is, that all human beings are a reflection of God. Opening the poem with this quote makes the next lines all the more striking, since they describe a bent and broken man. This, the speaker seems to be asking, is what humanity has done to God's image?

The poem's opening lines then describe the titular "man with a hoe" referenced in the poem's title. This man's body has been deformed and his mind has been exhausted by years of intense physical labor. The use of "centuries" reveals that the speaker isn't talking about an *actual* person, however; rather, the man in the painting represents all working people from across humanity history. Essentially, this man symbolizes the oppression and exploitation of the working class in general.

The fact that his bent-over posture results from the strain of shouldering the "burden of the world" makes this oppression seem all the more unjust. The speaker is saying that laborers like this man produce the harvest that feeds humanity, yet this treatment is all the thanks they get.

The poem's first line also establishes its meter, which is iambic pentameter. This means that each line contains five iambs, or units made up of one long or **stressed** syllable and one short or unstressed syllable. However, this meter isn't perfect. The very first foot in the poem, "Bowed by," stresses the first instead of the second syllable, creating trochee. The stresses in the first line thus read as follows:

Bowed by | the weight | of cent- | uries | he leans

By beginning the poem in this way, the poet places extra emphasis on the meaning of the first word, a burst of sound that suggests the force of gravity bends the worker's body into a bow, like a piece of wood.

Alliteration and assonance also drive these lines forward, building the sense of how labor and time shape the worker's body. For example, the alliterative repetition of /h/ sounds (**h**e; **h**is **h**oe), /g/ sounds (**g**azes; **g**round), and /b/ sounds (**b**ack; **b**urden) has the effect of identifying human features with tools and nature, suggesting how labor transforms the man's body into a tool in and of itself. Assonance in phrases such as "cent**u**r**ie**s h**e** l**ea**ns" and "**a**g**e**s in his f**a**ce," highlight the changes in the worker's posture and facial expression as he labors over the course of long passages of time.

LINES 5-10

Who made him dead to rapture and despair,
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?
Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw?
Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?
Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?

These lines pose a series of rhetorical questions meant to make the reader consider the causes of the worker's condition. Basically, the speaker asks the reader to reflect on *who* is responsible for dehumanizing the worker, for turning a human being into a lifeless, unfeeling animal. The repetition of "Who" and "Whose" at the beginning of successive sentences creates anaphora, which drives home this question.

The worker is numb to highs and lows of emotion—to both "rapture and despair." He neither experiences sadness about the past ("grieves") nor optimism about the future ("hopes"). The "light within this brain"—a metaphor for a spark of intelligent thought—has been extinguished. The worker has been totally brutalized, which is reflected in his loose jaw and slanted brow—two features that correspond to his limited intelligence.

Describing the worker as sub-human, "a brother to the ox," the speaker is sympathetic to his plight. And yet, the speaker's attitude toward the worker's physical appearance is also suggestive of class and racial prejudices and stereotypes about human development typical of his time. Slack jaws and sloping brows, for instance, were seen by late-19th century colonial western society as regressive traits of supposedly undeveloped or uncivilized populations and ethnic groups. Social Darwinists saw the physique and bone structure of certain people as evidence of their backwardness. Such assumptions continued to be widely held in the twentieth century, illustrated in the popular account of human development, "The Progress of Man."

The speaker again uses consonance and alliteration throughout these lines. For example, note the /st/ sounds that begin "**St**olid and **st**unned," and the /br/ sounds of "**br**utal," "**br**ow," "**br**eath," and "**br**ain." These hard consonants are meant to make readers notice the feeling of saying them aloud. Their sound-based qualities reinforce the hard impact of strenuous labor and repetitive movements on the body of the worker.

LINES 11-16

Is this the Thing the Lord God made and gave
To have dominion over sea and land;
To trace the stars and search the heavens for power;
To feel the passion of Eternity?
Is this the Dream He dreamed who shaped the suns
And marked their ways upon the ancient deep?

Once again, these lines are structured by rhetorical questions and repetition. They pose a contradiction between the worker, now completely dehumanized, and the omnipotent power of God to create humanity. The speaker is calling attention to the *difference* between the miserable condition of the working class and the abundant resources and capacities humanity was endowed with by God. How could this bent and broken man,

the speaker wonders, possibly be what God had in mind (what God "dreamed") upon creating human beings in God's own image?

It *can't* be, the poem implies. In other words, there is *no* justification for the current treatment of the working class. The tone of indignation is heightened by the regular meter. Consider the following line:

> Is this the Thing the Lord God made and gave

The stresses fall on "this" and "Thing," expressing disbelief that society could allow humans to be reduced to things. It is an insult to God, whose benevolence is emphasized in the stressed words "made" and "gave." "God" may or may not receive a stress here, depending on the reader. But the arguable spondee (double stress) of "God made" would heighten the emphasis on this phrase, on God's power, even more. This technique of adding an extra stress, which the reader notices because it temporarily breaks the metrical pattern, is sometimes used by poets to call attention to a particular word—here, again, to the word "God."

The rhetorical effect of the speaker's questions is also once again heightened by anaphora and parallelism. Consecutive lines begin with infinitive verb phrases: "To have"; "To trace"; "To feel." The effect of all this repetition is to build a sense of the speaker's frustration with society. How can society expect the working class to exercise its God-given faculties of enterprise and intellect, these questions ask? How could society expect the working class to believe in God?

The repetition of "and" further dramatizes the omnipotence of God and, by comparison, the failure of society. Humanity was meant to rule the entire natural world—"over sea and land," according to the speaker; to chart "the stars and search the heavens for power"—to observe and interpret the stars and the will of God. This reflects the divine powers of God, "who shaped the suns / And marked their ways ..." God both created and observes the universe, and humanity is meant to be the stewards of and find meaning in this creation.

Finally, the speaker repeats the phrase "Is this" when referring to the sub-human condition of the worker. The ironic difference between the worker and God's intended creation is heightened in line 15. The passage of Genesis from the poem's epigraph, "in the image of God made He him" is echoed grammatically in "the Dream He dreamed." This is an example of a device known as polyptoton. Also notice how the noun and verb, "Dream" and "dreamed," echo a particular rhetorical device in the Biblical language known as chiasmus, which is essentially when phrases are repeated in reverse order:

> *God made man in His own image,*
> *in the image of God made He him.*

The chiasmus reinforces the connection between humanity and God. Here, though, the effect of "Dream He dreamed" is to reinforce the speaker's main point: the working class is part of God's creation but no longer resembles God.

LINES 17-21

> *Down all the stretch of Hell to its last gulf*
> *There is no shape more terrible than this—*
> *More tongued with censure of the world's blind greed—*
> *More filled with signs and portents for the soul—*
> *More fraught with danger to the universe.*

Here the speaker emphasizes just how extremely broken this worker is. The speaker is basically saying that even in the farthest reaches of Hell itself, you could not find anything more "terrible" than the worker. The worker has been brutalized and dehumanized to the point that he is more frightening, more horrible, than even any creature from Hell. That is quite a condemnation of the treatment of the working class!

Representing Hell as a vast, empty space, these lines echo the description of Hell in John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*. They draw upon the authority of Milton as a canonical author, in particular his representation of the super-human dimensions of the Archangel Lucifer (a.k.a Satan). Hell is unimaginably unpleasant in *Paradise Lost*; in these lines, the speaker says that the exploitation of workers in modern society is even *worse*. By explicitly comparing them, he both invokes and challenges the Miltonic epic—a daring move for any poet.

Markham draws the comparison negatively and hyperbolically. The repetition of the word "More" in three consecutive lines (another example of anaphora) emphasizes the initial point of comparison. *Nothing* more horrific than the worker's body exists.

In turn, it is impossible to imagine a better reflection of society's greed than the physical conditions of the worker. The worker's body is literally a sign of the sins of the ruling class, and predicts their failure to achieve salvation; "portents" essentially means "warnings," so the speaker is saying that the worker's misshapen body is an *external* warning that humanity's *internal* soul is in deep, deep trouble. All of this adds up to the final hyperbolic claim: the exploited worker is the gravest threat to humanity in general.

LINES 22-26

> *What gulfs between him and the seraphim!*
> *Slave of the wheel of labor, what to him*
> *Are Plato and the swing of Pleiades?*
> *What the long reaches of the peaks of song,*
> *The rift of dawn, the reddening of the rose?*

Just as the distance to the bottom of Hell cannot be measured, the differences ("gulfs") between the laborer and God's angels ("seraphim") is unfathomable. The labor is fully stuck on the

ground—in fact, he is a "Slave to the wheel of labor." The speaker is saying that this worker has *no choice* but to work more and more; his very survival depends on his labor.

That this labor is metaphorically described as a "wheel" suggests that it rolls over/crushes those unfortunate enough to be caught by it, and also that this work never ends. Wheels roll on and on, and this the working class will forever be doomed to their lot. The assonance of the long /ay/ sound in "Slave" and "labor" connects these two words sonically and reflects their metaphorical connection in the poem.

The speaker goes on to say that the ideal aesthetic and philosophical principles of Greek antiquity, or Platonic forms, are meaningless to someone who performs menial labor all the time and thus has no energy for study or creative expression. Deprived of freedom, the worker is unable to contemplate the heavens, let alone recognize a constellation of stars that represents the seven sisters of ancient philosophy ("Pleides"). The clear alliteration of "Plato" and "Pleiades" connects these two concepts on the level of sound, reflecting the idea that anything beyond earthly drudgery is out of reach for this laborer.

Deprived of natural beauty, the laborer has no ability to appreciate the artistic expression of nature in music (those "long reaches of the peaks of song") or its representation in paintings. The assonance, alliteration, and consonance of these lines lends them a sonic beauty that is meant to reflect the beauty of art they describe:

> What the long reaches of the peaks of song,
> The rift of dawn, the reddening of the rose?

The use of rhetorical questions meanwhile again insists that all this beauty is lost on the laborer, whose gaze permanently affixed to the ground.

LINES 27-32

> *Through this dread shape the suffering ages look;*
> *Time's tragedy is in that aching stoop;*
> *Through this dread shape humanity betrayed,*
> *Plundered, profaned and disinherited,*
> *Cries protest to the Judges of the World,*
> *A protest that is also prophecy.*

The first half of this stanza focused on beautiful and ideal things out of the laborer's reach. Now, the speaker focuses on the laborer's body itself, which is a "dread"—or fearsome, frightening—shape. The juxtaposition between natural beauty ("dawn and "the rose") and the unnatural state of the worker's body implies that exploitation is *not* a God-given state of the world, but instead reflects the world's *distortion* and perversion in the hands of human beings.

The misshapen body of the worker *exposes* the conditions of oppression and exploitation suffered by workers throughout all of history; his body reveals not just his *own* suffering, but is also symbolic of the "suffering of ages." His bent, "aching stoop" reflects "Time's tragedy," with the personification of "Time" here hammering home that this one worker is representative of so much more than just himself.

Indeed, the pain and bent posture of the worker embodies the consequences of society's sinful exploitation of the working class, and this is presented as one of the great failings of humanity. In fact, the treatment of workers is a "betrayal" of humanity *itself*. Recall that in the beginning of the poem the speaker quoted the Bible, reminding readers that humankind was created in God's image. The "dread" body of the worker is thus an affront, or insult, to God. The worker's treatment represents a desecration or violation of humanity, and thus a rejection (or disinheritance) of God's image.

And, the poem suggests, it may be too late for society to redeem itself in the eyes of God. The worker's body metaphorically "Cries" out in "protest" against capitalist greed. This "protest" appeals to the Christian fellowship of its readers, but also petitions God directly. The speaker argues that God's mercy or wrath will depend on whether ruling class reforms and starts to treat its laborers with due dignity. The meaning of the worker's brutal condition (this "protest") is thus, symbolically, about the *future* ("prophecy") as well as the *past*—a "protest that is also a prophecy." The alliteration and consonance of these words reflects their thematic connection in the speaker's eyes. Essentially, the speaker is saying that divine judgment will come upon those who continue to exploit labor.

LINES 33-35

> *O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,*
> *is this the handiwork you give to God,*
> *This monstrous thing distorted and soul-quenched ?*

Here, the poem makes a decisive shift in the style of its address. Using apostrophe, these lines call out to the ruling class, and cast doubt on its ability to undo the wrong done to workers. The consonance of line 33 links these groups together, presenting all the great powers as a homogenous group that must be unified in their purpose:

> O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,

By addressing a generic set of "masters, lords and rulers," the lines also address the poem's readers directly. After all, as the previous stanza made clear, the worker himself is chained to his "wheel of labor" and has no use for art and poetry. (It's worth noting that, to modern readers, the speaker's own prejudice is on display as well throughout the poem; even as the speaker vehemently defends the working class, the speaker also repeatedly belittles their intelligence and dignity. Workers

need a *savior*, in the speaker's vision, because they've been so broken that they cannot possibly save themselves.)

The "this" here refers to the laborer, whose distorted shape is the "handiwork" of the ruling class. Calling the worker a "monstrous thing" emphasizes his utter lack of humanity, while "soul-quenched" means that the worker's soul has been snuffed out. The speaker is basically asking: are you, most powerful people in the world, really so ungrateful as to ruin God's creation, misshaping its body and crushing its spirit? The question is once again rhetorical, and the speaker doesn't expect an answer. Rather, this is a way for the speaker to essentially say, "*Seriously*?"

LINES 36-41

How will you ever straighten up this shape;
Touch it again with immortality;
Give back the upward looking and the light;
Rebuild in it the music and the dream;
Make right the immemorial infamies,
Perfidious wrongs, immedicable woes?

The speaker continues to ask the ruling class a series of rhetorical questions that highlight its responsibility in correcting the inhumane treatment of the working class. Essentially, the poem asks, can "rulers" really do anything to redeem the ancient sins (those "immemorial infamies") of capitalism? How will you fix the worker's broken body ("straighten up this shape") and re-inspire the worker's soul? Can you possibly expect to restore divine beauty and goodness in society after so many years of sinful exploitation?

Note how these lines further establish the symbolism of light/sight that has been subtly present throughout the poem. So far, the worker's state has been one of earth-bound darkness, of a gaze fixed upon the "ground," closer to Hell than the angels ("seraphim") of Heaven and with no use for things like starry constellations ("Pleiades"). To right this wrong, the laborer must again be able "straighten" his bent back in order to look "upward," and he must have the "light" that was blown "out" in line 10 blown back on.

These lines are again thick with consonance, assonance, and alliteration. Note the long /ay/ of "straighten up this shape"; the shared /l/ of "looking and the light"; and the /m/ of "music and the dream." These paired sounds suggest a sort of harmony that will be restored if the working class is repaired.

Finally, note in particular the /m/ and short /i/ sounds that pervade lines 40-41:

> Make right the immemorial infamies,
> Perfidious wrongs, immedicable woes?

These lines are a mouthful, to say the least, which reflects the dense web of sin and wrongs that have built up throughout history. "Immemorial" means very old, while "infamies" means sins; "perfidious" means deceitful and "immedicable" means incurable. The sin of exploitation, in other words, having been repeated so many times over the generations, may have *permanent* consequences.

This idea ties back to earlier moments in the poem. Despite the immoral "greed" the speaker attributes to "rulers" and "kings," the poem represents history as a cycle of exploitation and suffering. A "Slave of the wheel of labor," the laborer seems to destined to reproduce his current state of powerless servitude. Moreover, the poem implies, the working class will not appreciate "the peaks of song," by which the speaker means poems like "The Man with the Hoe," which seek to educate readers about the ills of society. In other words, the damage may already be done.

LINES 42-43

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
How will the Future reckon with this Man?

In its final stanza the poem concludes by repeating its direct appeal to the ruling class, another instance of apostrophe: powerful people of the world, what judgment will history make of the suffering and exploitation you have inflicted on the worker? The repetition of this line is a way of making sure the ruling class doesn't get let off the hook; in case they weren't listening the first time around, the speaker invokes the "masters, lords and rulers" once again.

In the prior stanza, the speaker asked these rulers what God would think of their despicable "handiwork." Now the speaker asks what "the Future" will think of "this Man"—that is, how will society in years to come look back on the treatment of the working class? The speaker is suggesting that the Future—personified as "Time" was earlier in the poem—will scoff at such brutality. Essentially, the speaker is telling these rulers to stand on the right side of history—to consider their societal legacies and to help create a better world for the generations to come.

Because this audience is implicitly absent, however, the poem's questions are again rhetorical, intended to provoke readers' concern. The speaker wants readers to reflect, collectively, on the consequences of labor exploitation for the future of the society everyone lives in, and individually, for the state of every human being's soul.

LINES 44-49

How answer his brute question in that hour
When whirlwinds of rebellion shake the world?
How will it be with kingdoms and with kings—
With those who shaped him to the thing he is—
When this dumb Terror shall reply to God
After the silence of the centuries?

At the end of the poem the speaker essentially warns that God will seek vengeance through a kind of apocalypse, which will

happen when the working class rebels against the ruling class.

The speaker turns once again to anaphora, repeating "How" and "When" throughout the rhetorical questions that make up the rest of the stanza. The use of "when" rather than "if" implies an *inevitable* societal reckoning. In other words, the speaker suggests that if things keep going the way they are, then the world *will* change, the working class *will* rise up, and the "whirlwinds of rebellion" *will* "shake the world."

Up until this point, the speaker has painted the working class as having been utterly beaten down and defeated by the "masters, lords and rulers in all lands." This final stanza represents something of a shift, then, as it suggests such oppression cannot continue unchecked. The ruling class thus needs to carefully consider what will happen "with kingdoms and with kings" when workers rise up against them; will the ruling class reap what they sow? What will happen to "those who shaped him"—that is, the rulers who distorted this working man in the first place—when this man, this "dumb Terror," finally calls out to God after so many "centuries" of silence?

The poem thus ends in a state of crisis, one in which the salvation of society depends on the most powerful and wealthy people exercising Christian morality as well as good political judgment. And they must do so before the working class claims its human rights, through whatever means necessary.

At the same time, the poem's attitude toward the possibility of lifting up the humanity of the laborer is thus uncertain. By the end of the poem, the laborer's "reply to God" is ambiguous, both a "dumb" or inarticulate sound, and a desperate cry, a plea for justice. It is unclear if the ruling class—or the reader, for that matter—will understand the laborer's "reply." Using the power of poetry to communicate what the working class cannot for itself, the speaker makes a passionate call for justice.

There are many poetic devices at work in these lines that build up the intensity of the poem's final moments. For example, the alliteration and consonance of the /w/ sound in line 10, plus the repeated /erl/ sound, evokes the whooshing sensation of wind:

> When whirlwinds of rebellion shake the world?

The polypoton of "kingdoms and with kings" reflects the sheer scope of the inevitable reckoning, which will come for both society at large and those who sit at the top of it; no one will be safe. The sibilance of the final line ("silence of the centuries") then closes the poem on a hissing, sinister note. The failure to "protest" against the exploitation of the working class is like an unspoken sin, a spiritual state that only gets worse during "the silence of centuries."

SYMBOLS

LIGHT AND VISION

Light and vision are referenced directly or alluded to multiple times throughout the poem and come to take on symbolic meanings. Put very simply, light and looking upward/the sky/the heavens are associated with life, truth, God, and human dignity. Light and sight are further connected to the poem's ideas regarding divine judgment, brought down by a God who is omniscient or able to see everything. By contrast, looking down, darkness, and blindness are all associated with ignorance, oppression, and sinfulness.

Markham's epigraph, "Written after seeing Millet's World-Famous Painting," sets up the opening lines in which the worker "leans / Upon his how and gazes on the ground." The worker is physically bent, forced to lean over by the weight of "burden of the world" that rests "on his back." He is thus perpetually looking *down*, his gaze affixed on the dirt and soil, and this reflects his status as an oppressed "Slave to the wheel of labor." The speaker also emphasizes the exhausted, vacant expression in the worker's face, described as "The emptiness of ages." The light of his consciousness—"the light within his brain"—has been extinguished.

The speaker says this is a perversion of what God meant for humanity upon its creation. Human beings are *supposed* to look upwards—to "trace the stars and search the heavens for power"—yet the laborer has no use for (and, indeed, cannot even look up to see) constellations like the "Pleiades." Vast "gulfs" exist between this laborer and "the seraphim," or angels up in Heaven, again implying that the working man is tethered to the ground.

The poem blames the ruling class for denying the worker the ability to look at the sky in wonder, contrasting star-gazing with the vacant gaze of the worker in the fields. Because both classes are part of God's creation, according to the poem, it is a *violation* of the divine order that only some people are afforded "the upward looking and the light" while others are not.

The ruling class becomes associated with darkness as well, however, in the mention of "the world's blind greed." Lack of sight is again connected here to spiritual degradation. Society has become so used to exploiting the working class that it no longer *sees*, or even cares about, the human damage caused by modern capitalism.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** " Written after seeing Millet's World-Famous Painting"
- **Lines 1-4:** "Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans / Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground, / The emptiness

of ages in his face, / And on his back the burden of the world. "

- **Line 10:** "Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?"
- **Line 13:** "To trace the stars and search the heavens for power;"
- **Line 17:** "Down all the stretch of Hell to its last gulf "
- **Line 18:** "There is no shape more terrible than this—"
- **Line 19:** "the world's blind greed"
- **Line 22:** "What gulfs between him and the seraphim! "
- **Lines 23-24:** "what to him / Are Plato and the swing of Pleiades?"
- **Line 27:** "Through this dread shape the suffering ages look"
- **Line 28:** "Time's tragedy is in that aching stoop; "
- **Line 29:** "Through this dread shape humanity betrayed, "
- **Line 36:** "How will you ever straighten up this shape; "
- **Line 38:** "Give back the upward looking and the light; "

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

The poem uses anaphora often to emphasize its thematic ideas. For example, note the repetition of "Who"/"Whose" in the first stanza:

> **Who** made him dead to rapture and despair,
> ...
> **Who** loosened and let down this brutal jaw?
> **Whose** was the hand that slanted back this brow?
> **Whose** breath blew out the light within this brain?

These questions are rhetorical, and the speaker knows exactly who this "Who" is: the ruling class. The use of "Who"/"Whose" is a way to repeatedly call out this class, perhaps until the rulers own up to their sin. Think of the way a teacher might scold a misbehaving student by saying, "You know who you are."

The repetition of "To" at the starts of lines 12-14 reflect the breadth of God's power and vision for humanity. Each "To" lays out another thing that human beings are meant to do, and each "To" also is something that that laborer is unable to do—thereby denying God's will.

Later, the speaker uses anaphora of "More" in lines 19-21 to illustrate the worker's miserable condition, piling on the things that pale in comparison. Anaphora amplifies the sense of incomparable misery while also adding to its meaning. There is nothing "more" revealing of greed, nothing "more" ominous for the state of the human soul, and nothing "more" threatening to the universe, than the exploitation of the worker.

The poem's final stanza uses anaphora to again pose a question repeatedly, heightening the effect of Markham's appeal to the moral conscience of the poem's reader. Lines 44, 45, and 47 all ask "How" history will look back on the state of the exploited worker. Through the emphasis of repetition, these questions suggest that society will *fail* to change in the ways the poem calls for. The phrases "How will" and "How answer" point to a future in which society's response to the crisis of labor exploitation is very much in doubt.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Who"
- **Line 8:** "Who"
- **Line 9:** "Whose"
- **Line 10:** "Whose"
- **Line 12:** "To"
- **Line 13:** "To"
- **Line 14:** "To"
- **Line 19:** "More"
- **Line 20:** "More"
- **Line 21:** "More"
- **Line 43:** "How"
- **Line 44:** "How"
- **Line 46:** "How"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Rhetorical questions are ones that don't expect a response from a reader, listener, or audience. They make a point, however, by *implicating* the audience as responsible in some way for the premise of the question—for its assumptions and stakes. Rhetorical questions are invaluable to this poem, as the speaker repeatedly calls out the ruling class as being responsible for the exploitation of the working class (and thus, in the poem's vision, responsible for the perversion of God's vision for humankind).

For example, lines 12 through 17 pose two rhetorical questions. Each of these functions in roughly the same way, to ask if "this" (the worker) is really God's creation. The answer to the questions is self-evident. The power and majesty of "sea and land," "the heavens," and "Eternity" is *obviously* at odds with the misery of the worker. This is the assumption the rhetorical question depends on—the premise, in other words, that the speaker expects the reader to agree with.

Making this point through a *question* instead of an outright *assertion* heightens the contrast between God's creation and society's exploitation of labor. Simply asking if they are the same highlights the absurdity of comparing them in the first place. The reader is thus moved to reflect on the stakes—for Christian morality, but also for the reader's soul—of the self-evident difference between "the handiwork you give to God," according to line 35, and how part of humanity has been

exploited to the point of becoming a "monstrous thing distorted and soul-quenched."

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-16
- Lines 23-26
- Lines 33-41
- Lines 42-49

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is a way of transforming abstract ideas, such as injustice, into concrete feelings and actions, such as suffering and protest. Alternatively, it is a way of bringing abstractions to life by identifying them with human characteristics and features.

"The Man with the Hoe" deploys both modes of personification. For example, in lines 29 through 31, the speaker asks the reader to picture the abstract ideas of "Time's tragedy" and "humanity betrayed" in terms of the worker's "aching stoop." The personification of "Time" here reinforces the symbolic status of the worker: he represents not just the oppression of one man, but of the working class throughout all of human history. The "Future" is similarly personified in line 43, suggesting that it is an entity with the ability to look back upon this oppression and judge it.

The poem insists that society has dehumanized the working man, metaphorically turning him into a "thing." On the one hand, this is kind of like an *anti*-personification, the denial of human attributes from this worker. But line 6 then goes on to attribute emotions and moral judgments to this "thing" which cannot express grief or feel hope. This is thus a complicated use of personification. Reduced to a nonhuman object, the worker takes on human qualities again, but now with a universal meaning beyond his personal experience. That is, through both dehumanization and then personification, the worker comes to represent injustice against the working class more generally.

Line 19 uses personification twice to bring the worker's thing-like body to life: first, as a speaker of judgment, "tongued with censure," and second, to dramatize the *object* of the worker's censure: "the world's blind greed." Greed here is personified as well, its blindness playing into the symbolic associations of light and sight that are at play throughout the poem (for more on this, head to the Symbols section of this guide).

Line 48 concludes the poem by once again personifying the worker's dehumanized condition of "dumb Terror" (with "dumb" here meaning mute, or unable to speak). Ultimately, the speaker suggests, the inhuman *treatment* of workers will *itself* "reply to God"—it will protest, in other words, like a human speaker.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "The emptiness of ages in his face,"
- **Lines 6-7:** "A thing that grieves not and that never hopes, / Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox? "
- **Line 19:** "More tongued with censure of the world's blind greed—"
- **Lines 27-28:** "Through this dread shape the suffering ages look; / Time's tragedy is in that aching stoop; "
- **Line 43:** "How will the Future reckon with this Man? "
- **Line 48:** "When this dumb Terror shall reply to God "

REPETITION

Repetition is used to emphasize certain ideas, phrases, and images in the poem. One major form of repetition here is anaphora, discussed in its own device entry. There are other specific forms as well, however. For example, the poem turns to polyptoton a handful of times. Take "Dream He dreamed" in line 15. The repetition here underscores that human beings are the physical manifestation—the "Dream"—of God's will (what "He dreamed"). The polyptoton emphasizes the intimate connection between human beings and God, thereby underscoring that the "distorted" shape of the laborer is an affront to God.

In lines 31-32, the repetition of "protest" twice reflects the dual nature of this protest: it is at once a judgment on the state of the world and a "prophecy" about what will come should nothing change; this protest reflects both the *current* situation and foretells of *future* destruction. Later, the polyptoton of "with kingdoms and with kings" emphasizes the sheer extent of the worker class's inevitable "rebellion." This rebellion will disrupt the ruling systems in place—those kingdoms—and will also topple those with all the power in society, the "kings." In other words, the repetition here emphasizes that should the working class come to claim its due, no one, nowhere, will be safe.

The poem also often uses repetition of single words, such as "thing" and "shape," to drive the poem's main argument: that labor has been exploited and objectified under modern capitalism. Slight variations, such as "shaped" in line 16, draw a contrast between the shape of the worker's body and *how* humans were shaped by God, emphasizing the destructive consequences of labor exploitation for divine creation.

The language of time ("ages," "centuries," "Future") and space ("world," "lands," "universe") repeats throughout the poem as well. This highlights the historical scale of the injustice of labor exploitation, while also pointing to the long-term consequences for society: a sin committed on such a scale, for the speaker, will bring the extreme judgment of God whose creation was, according to Christian doctrine, the "universe."

An entire line, "O masters, lords and rulers in all lands," is

repeated at the beginning of the poem's final two stanzas, emphatically identifies the poem's audience as the ruling class. Rhetorically, the poem foregrounds its purpose of protest and moral judgment by symbolically speaking in the voice of the worker and addressing a particular reader (the wealthy) otherwise distant from the plight of workers.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Who"
- **Line 8:** "Who"
- **Line 9:** "Whose"
- **Line 10:** "Whose"
- **Line 11:** "Is this"
- **Line 12:** "To"
- **Line 13:** "To"
- **Line 14:** "To"
- **Line 15:** "Dream He dreamed," "shaped"
- **Line 18:** "shape"
- **Line 19:** "More"
- **Line 20:** "More"
- **Line 21:** "More"
- **Line 22:** "What"
- **Line 25:** "What"
- **Line 27:** "Through this dread shape"
- **Line 29:** "Through this dread shape"
- **Line 31:** "protest"
- **Line 32:** "protest"
- **Line 33:** "O masters, lords and rulers in all lands, "
- **Line 34:** "is this"
- **Line 36:** "this shape"
- **Line 42:** "O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,"
- **Line 43:** "How will"
- **Line 44:** "How"
- **Line 46:** "How will," "with kingdoms and with kings"
- **Line 47:** "With," "thing"

ALLITERATION

The entire poem is knit together by alliteration, which creates continuity between words within a line or across lines. For example, take lines 1 and 2:

> Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
> Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,

The alliterative /h/ sound here immediately links the laborer to the tools of his trade (the "hoe"), underscoring that he is a "Slave to the wheel of labor." The hard /g/ of "gazes" and "ground" then underscores that his view is downward, tethered to the earth. This, in turn, reflects the poem's broader symbolic treatment of light and vision as things that have been denied the laborer (for more on this, see the Symbols section of this guide).

Alliteration may add to the urgency of what is being expressed as well. In line 7, for instance, the /st/ of "Stolid and stunned" draws readers' attention to this phrase, insisting that they don't look away from the sorry state of the laborer. The harsh, popping /p/ sounds of line 39 add to the intensity of the speaker's description of the way that the laborer's treatment reflects the debasement of humanity itself (and, it follows, of God's image):

> Plundered, profaned and disinherited,

This same alliterative sound then connects this debasement to "protest," and that "protest" to "prophecy"—reiterating that the state of the working man is itself a judgment on and a warning to the ruling class:

> Cries protest to the Judges of the World,
> A protest that is also prophecy.

The injustice suffered by workers—that plundering and profaning—ignites the "protest" of a possible revolt against their condition, a "prophecy" of the future.

Alliteration can also be used more gently, as in line 26. Here, the /r/ sounds of "rift," "reddening," and "rose" reflects the beauty of the line, evoking the rising sun and the folds of rose petals—beauty that the worker is denied.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "he"
- **Line 2:** "his hoe," "gazes," "ground"
- **Line 4:** "back," "burden"
- **Line 5:** "dead," "despair"
- **Line 6:** "not," "never"
- **Line 7:** "Stolid," "stunned," "brother"
- **Line 8:** "brutal"
- **Line 9:** "back," "brow"
- **Line 10:** "breath blew," "brain"
- **Line 11:** "this the Thing the"
- **Line 13:** "stars," "search," "power"
- **Line 14:** "passion"
- **Line 15:** "Dream," "dreamed"
- **Line 16:** "deep"
- **Line 17:** "Down"
- **Line 18:** "terrible"
- **Line 19:** "tongued"
- **Line 20:** "signs," "soul"
- **Line 24:** "Plato," "Pleiades"
- **Line 26:** "rift," "reddening," "rose"
- **Line 28:** "Time's tragedy"
- **Line 30:** "Plundered," "profaned"
- **Line 31:** "protest"
- **Line 32:** "protest," "prophecy"

- **Line 33:** "lords," "lands"
- **Line 34:** "give," "God"
- **Line 38:** "looking," "light"
- **Line 42:** "lords," "lands"
- **Line 45:** "When whirlwinds," "world"
- **Line 46:** "kingdoms," "kings"
- **Line 49:** "silence," "centuries"

CONSONANCE

"The Man with the Hoe" creates a thick web of abstract ideas and concrete sensations that echo each other through consonance. This device, much like alliteration and assonance, serves to draw connections between words across lines of the poem and to add intensity to certain moments.

The rhetorical questions of lines 8-14 features strong consonance that serves to ramp up the poem's intensity. Nearly every single word in these lines might be considered consonant, and they are almost all intensely assonant as well. These repeated sounds combine with the repetitive force of anaphora in these lines to reflect the speaker's passion and anger upon calling out the ruling class for having so distorted a creature of God:

> Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw?
> Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?
> Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?

The rhetorical intensity keeps up through the next lines, the hard /g/, /d/, /p/, /t/, and /s/ sounds in particular making it sound almost as though the speaker is spitting out these lines in disgust or disbelief:

> Is this the Thing the Lord God made and gave
> To have dominion over sea and land;
> To trace the stars and search the heavens for power;
> To feel the passion of Eternity?

Consonance can work more subtly too to draw connections between thematic ideas. The poem's third stanza, for example, begins by identifying the "lords" and "rulers" of capitalism with the idea of property, "all lands." The /l/ sounds here draw attention to the line and firmly establish the link between the ruling class and the shape of society itself. This /l/ sound in "looking" and "light" in line 38. Consonance thus strikes a contrast between the worker's earth-bound, lowly state and the divine state of creation, "the light"—a contradiction which only the ruling class is able to fix.

Along these lines, the word "immortality" echoes "immemorial infamies" and "immedicable" later in the same stanza, once again setting up the contrast between the eternal salvation of the soul and the sinful state of capitalist exploitation of workers.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "he"
- **Line 2:** "his hoe," "gazes," "ground"
- **Line 4:** "back," "burden," "world"
- **Line 5:** "made," "dead," "despair"
- **Line 6:** "not," "and," "never," "hopes"
- **Line 7:** "Stolid and stunned," "brother," "ox"
- **Line 8:** "loosened," " and let down," "brutal"
- **Line 9:** "hand," "slanted back," "brow"
- **Line 10:** "breath blew," "light ," "within," "brain"
- **Line 11:** "this the Thing the Lord God made and gave"
- **Line 12:** "To ," "have dominion over," " sea and land"
- **Line 13:** "To trace," "stars," "search," "heavens for ," "power"
- **Line 14:** "To ," "feel," "passion," "Eternity"
- **Line 15:** "Dream," "dreamed," "shaped," "suns"
- **Line 16:** "upon," "deep"
- **Line 17:** "Down," " all," "stretch," "Hell," "last gulf"
- **Line 18:** "shape," " more terrible"
- **Line 19:** "More tongued," "censure," "world's blind greed"
- **Line 20:** "More filled," "signs," "portents," "soul"
- **Line 21:** "More fraught"
- **Line 22:** "him," "seraphim"
- **Line 23:** "Slave," " of," " wheel of labor"
- **Line 24:** "Plato," "swing of Pleiades"
- **Line 25:** "reaches," "peaks," "song"
- **Line 26:** "rift," "reddening," "rose"
- **Line 27:** "dread shape," "suffering," "look"
- **Line 28:** "Time's tragedy," "aching ," "stoop"
- **Line 29:** "dread shape," "betrayed"
- **Line 30:** "Plundered," "profaned," "disinherited"
- **Line 31:** "Cries protest," "Judges," "World"
- **Line 32:** "protest," "also prophecy"
- **Line 33:** "lords," "rulers," "all lands"
- **Line 34:** "give," "God"
- **Line 35:** "distorted," "soul," "quenched"
- **Line 36:** "straighten up," "shape"
- **Line 37:** "immortality"
- **Line 38:** "looking," "light"
- **Line 39:** "music," "dream"
- **Line 40:** "Make," "immemorial infamies"
- **Line 41:** "immedicable"
- **Line 42:** "lords," "rulers," "all lands"
- **Line 45:** "When whirlwinds," "rebellion ," "shake," "world"
- **Line 46:** "will," "with kingdoms," "with kings"
- **Line 47:** "With," "shaped"
- **Line 48:** "shall"
- **Line 49:** "silence," "centuries"

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration and consonance, assonance is very important

to the overall sound of this poem. It supports those other devices, ramping up the poem's intensity in certain moments, drawing readers' attention to various words and phrase, and creating sonic connections between thematic ideas across the poem's lines.

Consider the opening sentence, which spans four lines, as an example:

> Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
> Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,
> The emptiness of ages in his face,
> And on his back the burden of the world.

The long /e/ sound in "centuries" echoes "he" and "leans," while the long /a/ sound of "weight" anticipates "gazes," "ages," and "face." Finally, the sentence concludes with the assonant/consonant sounds of "burden" and "world." All this assonance adds momentum to these opening lines, the shared sounds pulling the poem forward and perhaps even reflecting the pull of the worker towards the ground.

Assonance continues to imbue the poem with a sense of momentum as it goes on. Take the /oo/ sounds of "Who loosened," "brutal," "Whose," and "blew" across lines 8 to 10. Here the question of *who* "blew out the light" (God's light) in the brain of the worker is linked to the "brutal" reality of capitalism. The repeated vowel sound functions to implicate the capitalist in the brute-like condition of the worker.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "weight," "centuries he leans"
- **Line 2:** "gazes"
- **Line 3:** "ages," "face"
- **Line 4:** "burden," "world"
- **Line 5:** "made"
- **Line 7:** "stunned," "brother"
- **Line 8:** "Who ," "loosened," "brutal"
- **Line 9:** "Whose," "hand," " that ," "slanted," " back"
- **Line 10:** "Whose," "blew"
- **Line 11:** "Is this," "Thing," "made," "gave"
- **Line 12:** "and land"
- **Line 15:** "Dream He dreamed," "shaped"
- **Line 16:** "ways," "ancient"
- **Line 17:** "stretch," "Hell"
- **Line 18:** "terrible"
- **Line 19:** "censure," "blind"
- **Line 20:** "signs," "portents for"
- **Line 22:** "him," "seraphim"
- **Line 23:** "Slave," "labor," "him"
- **Line 24:** "Plato," "swing," "Pleiades"
- **Line 25:** "long ," "reaches," "peaks," "song"
- **Line 26:** "dawn"
- **Line 27:** "shape," "ages"
- **Line 28:** "is in," "aching"
- **Line 29:** "shape," "betrayed"
- **Line 30:** "profaned"
- **Line 33:** "lands"
- **Line 34:** "is this," "handiwork," "give"
- **Line 35:** "This," "thing distorted"
- **Line 36:** "will," "straighten," "this ," "shape"
- **Line 37:** "it," "with ," "immortality"
- **Line 38:** "looking"
- **Line 39:** "Rebuild in it," "music"
- **Line 40:** "immemorial," " infamies"
- **Line 41:** "Perfidious," "immedicable"
- **Line 42:** "lands"
- **Line 43:** "Man"
- **Line 44:** "answer"
- **Line 46:** "will it," "with kingdoms," "with kings"
- **Line 47:** "With," "him," "thing," "is"

ALLUSION

"The Man with the Hoe" alludes to other works as well as to ideas from art and philosophy. For example, the poem's epigraph indicates that the entire poem was written in response to seeing this painting by the French artist Jean-François Millet.

In line 24, "Plato" alludes to the Greek philosopher of antiquity and founder of classical Western thought, and "the swing of Pleiades" to a cluster of stars named for the seven divine sisters of ancient Greek philosophy. These allusions are meant to illustrate the vast gap between the peaks of human progress and the lowly situation of the working man.

"The rift of dawn, the reddening of the rose" (line 26) is perhaps an allusion with a second allusion built in, first to the description of daybreak that begins Book Five of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "Now Morn, her rosy steps in the eastern clime," and second, to the image of the "rosey-fingered" dawn in Homer's *Odyssey*, the ancient Greek epic poem, which inspired Milton. Again, such epic tales and journeys have no meaningful value to the worker, because all he can focus on is his labor.

In line 48, "this dumb Terror" is perhaps a historical allusion to the Reign of Terror in France (1793-1794), a period of mass violence and public executions during the French Revolution after the First Republic was established. The Revolution was infamously bloody and led to the beheading of many an aristocrat, making this allusion a stark warning for the ruling class addressed in this poem.

Finally, the poem alludes most often to the Bible (which is also, of course, quoted at the top of the poem).

- The "ancient deep" (line 16) alludes to the primordial waters of creation described in the Book of Genesis: "And the Spirit of God moved upon the

face of the waters" (King James Bible).
- "To feel the passion of Eternity," understood in the context of the Christian tradition, alludes to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, or the Passion of the Christ, when Jesus of Nazareth was executed by Roman soldiers at Calvary for his radical beliefs.
- Echoing the Bible, "the world's blind greed" alludes to the profit motive in modern capitalism, which accumulates wealth at whatever cost. The world is blind or indifferent to the universally harmful effects of greedy behavior.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** "Written after seeing Millet's World-Famous Painting"
- **Lines 11-18:** "Is this the Thing the Lord God made and gave / To have dominion over sea and land; / To trace the stars and search the heavens for power; / To feel the passion of Eternity? / Is this the Dream He dreamed who shaped the suns / And marked their ways upon the ancient deep? / Down all the stretch of Hell to its last gulf / There is no shape more terrible than this—"
- **Line 19:** "More tongued with censure of the world's blind greed—"
- **Lines 23-24:** "Slave of the wheel of labor, what to him / Are Plato and the swing of Pleiades?"
- **Line 26:** "The rift of dawn, the reddening of the rose?"
- **Line 45:** "When whirlwinds of rebellion shake the world?"
- **Line 48:** "this dumb Terror"

APOSTROPHE

"The Man with the Hoe" begins with a series of rhetorical questions addressed to the person, the "Who," responsible for treating the worker like "A thing." The speaker knows the answer to these questions, of course, and the reader is meant to understand that the speaker is calling out the ruling class.

If there were *any* doubt regarding whom the speaker is talking to, in the poem's final two stanzas call out capitalist rulers explicitly through apostrophe. Lines 33 and 42 offer the same direct address: "O masters, lords, and rulers in all lands." Here, the poem calls on the ruling class to consider its treatment of workers and take up the charge of reform. But by using general and universal terms—and generally flattering ones—the poem is able to appeal to a sympathetic reader while also indicting the greedy ruling class. The poem's audience is both, although its call to action may only be heard by reformers, not by those who caused the problem in the first place.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 33:** "O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,"
- **Line 42:** "O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,"

VOCABULARY

Rapture (Line 5) - An experience, intensely felt, of joy or pleasure. For certain forms of Christianity, the rapture is the idea that with the second coming of Christ, the faithful will be raised up into heaven.

Stolid (Line 7) - A word for describing a person who shows little emotion or animation.

Dominion (Line 12) - Authority, control or power; in capitalist society dominion would typically be exercised as the right to own land or property.

Tongued (Line 19) - Marked or called out by.

Censure (Line 19) - The disapproval of someone or something expressed through a formal statement.

Portents (Line 20) - A sign of warning about something that will happen in the future, usually an event with great negative consequences.

Fraught (Line 21) - A condition of being filled with the possibility of risk or danger; likely to result in something bad.

Seraphim (Line 22) - Angels.

Dread (Line 29) - Used here as an adjective, dread is an old-fashioned word for "dreadful," "awful," or "greatly feared."

Plundered (Line 30) - To plunder is to steal good from a person or a place, usually in a time of war or disorder. Plundered is the past participle of the word, describing the state of something that was stolen from.

Profaned (Line 30) - Something, usually something sacred, is profaned when it is treated with disrespect.

Disinherited (Line 30) - To disinherit means to remove someone from inheriting, or taking possession of, wealth, rights, or titles from the previous generation. For example, a child is disinherited when cut out of the parent's will or legacy.

Protest (Line 31, Line 32) - Protest is the expression of disagreement, disapproval or opposition, often in a public setting such as a political demonstration or a public medium such as the newspaper. Part of the tradition of "protest poetry" in the United States, "The Man with the Hoe" protests the exploitation of the working class under capitalism. Line 32 shows how the poem combines protest with prophecy, lamenting the fallen state of the world and foretelling the divine judgment of society.

Soul-quenched (Line 35) - Soul-quenched is an adjective that applies a certain meaning of quenched as "extinguished" or "stifled," to describe the state of the worker's spirit as repressed or beaten down.

Immortality (Line 37) - Immortality is everlasting life. In Christian and other religious doctrines, it refers to the promise made by God to human beings who follow the divine law. Christianity promises the afterlife to believers and to those who repent of their sins. Markham suggests that the "shape" of human beings, no matter their economic class, is a physical sign of divine creation or "immortality."

Immemorial infamies (Line 40) - Evil deeds or qualities that are so longstanding, or so old, that no memory exists of their origins.

Perfidious wrongs (Line 41) - Deceitful or untrustworthy acts that injure or offend someone or something.

Immedicable woes (Line 41) - Trouble, suffering, or distress that is not cured, fixed, or helped by medicine.

Reckon (Line 43) - To take something into account; to deal with something.

Brute question (Line 44) - A question that is unreasoning, unintelligent, or so simple as to be inarticulate or non-verbal.

Dumb (Line 48) - Mute, unable to speak.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Man with the Hoe" consists of four stanzas of different lengths. The poem does not follow one particular poetic form, but instead draws from several. It may be described as an English or irregular ode: a poem structured by stanzas of different lengths, whose meaning derives from its descriptive power. It is also a protest poem, addressing political or social issues of the day by offering a critique of injustice and the ruling classes on behalf of the oppressed. Finally, Markham writes in the mode of a jeremiad, a poem that laments the moral state of society and contains a prophecy of its downfall.

Markham addresses the ruling class and society as a whole while describing the condition of the worker and the majesty of divine creation. What results is a dramatic contrast: the poem heightens its moral judgments by implicating its audience as responsible for the injustices they describe.

METER

The poem's meter is blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter. This means that its lines contain five poetic feet, each with a pattern of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable: da DUM. However, the poem is not always consistent in this meter. For example, line 1 should be scanned as follows:

Bowed by | the weight | of cent- | uries | he leans.

The line begins with a stressed syllable (Bowed) followed by an unstressed syllable (by), before returning to a strict iambic pattern. Thus, the first beat is actually trochee, which is the *inverse* of the iamb: a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable.

Line 2, meanwhile, is written in strict iambic pentameter. It should be scanned as follows:

Upon | his hoe | and ga- | zes on | the ground,

Broadly speaking, the poem's use of iambic pentameter elevates its tone. This is the same meter used by Shakespeare, after all; its use here lends the lines a noble, timeless quality. The variations throughout, meanwhile, serve to keep the long poem from feeling *too* stiff or stilted, and to draw attention to certain words. In the above example, for instance, the initial stress on "Bowed" underscores the intensity of the burden the laborer bears; it presses down on the line's meter itself.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Man with the Hoe" is written in blank verse, and as such has no rhyme scheme. Words and syllables at the ends of lines are different throughout the poem and follow each other in no particular order. A rigid rhyme scheme might feel too neat and tidy for a poem filled with such passion; the point here isn't necessarily to create beautiful-sounding language, but rather to fight for justice for the working class. Steady rhyme might theme seem overly lyrical and poetic. That said, the poem is still filled with elevated language. It liberally employs alliteration, assonance, and consonance throughout in order to emphasize various ideas and draw sonic connections across its lines.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker can be thought of generally as a kind of moral witness: an observer of the world who addresses society at large in order to call down judgment on its sins. Because there is no explicit identification of the speaker in pronouns such as "I" or "we," the poem's perspective may be considered impersonal or third-person. Nevertheless, Markham makes the poem a vehicle for expressing the protest of the worker. For example, the final stanza poses the worker's "question" for society and "reply to God." Thus, the poem serves as a medium for a collective act of speech which otherwise might not be heard by Markham's literate audience. In other words, the poem seeks to reflect the plight of the working class, which cannot speak for itself.

As such, the speaker is clearly not *of* this class. The speaker expresses sympathy for the laborer's plight while also remaining at a clear distance. The laborer is described as a broken, monstrous "Thing" whose body and mind have been bent by centuries of toil and exploitation. The speaker also draws on ideas from Social Darwinism to paint a picture of this

man, whose external appearance—with its loose jaw and sloping brow—are meant to represent the worker's lack of intelligence and inner devastation. To modern readers, of course, such ideas are distinctly problematic. Nevertheless, the speaker does this to make clear that the laborer lacks the ability to protest in his own behalf.

SETTING

The speaker begins the poem by describing a laborer bent over his hoe in a field. The poem's setting aims to be much broader than this, however, using this laborer to represent the working class throughout history. Indeed, the poem stretches back "centuries" as it describes the exploitation of workers. It brings the reader back to the moment of creation itself to underscore that these workers, too, are human beings made in God's image. Later the poem flashes forward into the future, where it predicts inevitable rebellion and judgment against those who dare continue with this exploitation. The poem can be thought of as encompassing all of human history, in a way.

Of course, Markham was also responding to a specific moment, and the attitude of the poem's speaker reflects the increasingly industrialized economy of the United States at the turn of the 20th century. The actual artwork being described in the poem was painted between 1860-1862 in France, but Markham wrote this poem in the United States in 1899. The labor conditions Markham seeks to expose thus cross generations and national borders, and aren't tied to a single place.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

This poem is Markham's most famous work, first published in 1899. Markham wrote the poem after seeing the French artist Jean-François Millet's painting of the same title (1862), which depicts a slack-jawed peasant leaning on his hoe in a field.

This is a protest poem, concerned with calling for justice for the working class rather than following a specific literary form. Praised by the populist politician, William Jennings Bryan, Markham was at the same time criticized by his friend, the journalist and essayist Ambrose Bierce, for making literary concerns second to those of social advocacy and reform. That is, Bierce felt his work was more concerned with ideas than actual poetry.

In a way, this squares with the Moderism that began to take hold in the early 20th century. Modernist writers tended to reject strict dictates regarding what poetry actually *is*, often eschewing steady rhyme and meter. To be sure, Markham's verse features some very lofty language (and is written in blank verse), but it also is not overly concerned with following a specific poetic form.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Markham was a key literary figure in the early stages of the American Progressive Movement, which advocated for social reform and the rights of workers and women. The movement led to the formation of the nation's first large trade unions, the regulation of child labor, and women's suffrage.

"The Man with the Hoe" made Markham internationally famous. After its debut at a poetry reading on New Year's Eve in 1898, the poem was published in January 1899 in the *San Francisco Examiner* and met with immediate acclaim. Reprinted in newspapers across the United States and translated into 37 languages, "The Man with the Hoe" would become a battle cry for the American labor movement, appearing in newsletters and at meetings of workingmen's associations. It even appeared in speeches by union leaders and the clergy.

The poem quite obviously draws from socialist rhetoric, and Markham himself was allegedly radicalized in part after reading Karl Marx (*The Communist Manifesto*). In a capitalist society, the "means of production"—basically, raw materials, factories, etc.; the things used to produce economic value—are privately owned. Those owners are represented here by the "masters, lords and rulers in all lands" whom Markham addresses at the end of the poem. These "rulers" aren't actually doing the work themselves, yet they're the ones enjoying all the profits.

Think of a man who owns acres of land that are farmed by poor laborers. Those laborers are the ones actually tilling the fields, but because they don't own the land itself—the means of production—they don't get to share in any excess profits, which instead go to the landowner. The "man with the hoe" in this poem is clearly not profiting from his work; instead, as a "Slave" to labor, he's working simply to survive. One tenet of socialist and anti-capitalist thinking is that *workers* should own the means of production, that workers like the man in this poem shouldn't be forced to transform themselves into beasts of burden in order to fill the "world's blind greed."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Markham in California — More details about Markham's life, including photos and additional poems. (http://www.sjsu.edu/people/annette.nellen/website/markham.htm)
- Relationships and Influences — Markham's aesthetics may have gone out of style, but his influence lives on. Learn more at Poetry Out Loud. (https://www.poetryoutloud.org/poet/edwin-markham/)
- The "World-Famous Painting" — See Jean-François

Millet's painting that inspired this poem. (http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/760/jean-francois-millet-man-with-a-hoe-french-1860-1862/)

- Markham's Life Story — At the Poetry Foundation, a biography and overview of Markham's career (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edwin-markham)
- The American Labor Movement — Learn more about the history of labor in the United States. (https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/labor)

HOW TO CITE

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