



A CONSUMERIST ANALYSIS OF ROBERT FROST'S *THE DEATH OF THE HIRED MAN*: A SYNTHESIS OF ADAM SMITH AND KARL MARX

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Abstract

Robert Frost's narrative poem The Death of the Hired Man (1914) seems nothing more than a conversation between a husband and a wife about a dying laborer in its first glance. But taken from the perspective of political economy, it shows a deep commentary on the dynamics of labor under capitalism. This paper also explores this typical poem of Frost with the theoretical understandings of Karl Marx and Adam Smith to highlight the systemic errors in the practices of capitalist labor to the extent they connect to the exploitation and alienation of labor and ultimately proves that Frost's poem is a critique of capitalist practices in terms of its labor.

Keywords: *Marxism, Labor Exploitation, Alienation, Economic Injustice, Human Dignity*

Introduction: The Hired Man and the Human Cost of Labor

Robert Frost's *The Death of the Hired Man* is a masterfully crafted dramatic dialogue among three characters: Warren, Mary, and Silas—the hired man. Silas is an aged and worn-out laborer who returns to Warren and Mary's farm not to work, but to die. His arrival sparks a philosophical debate between Warren, the practical farm owner, and Mary, his empathetic wife. While Warren views Silas through the lens of productivity and timing, Mary sees him as a human being deserved of care and dignity, especially in his final moments, he needs self-care.

Beneath the surface of this tragic tale lies a deep commentary on the exploitation of human labor. In a capitalist framework, Silas was valuable only so long as he was productive. His life outside the realm of utility becomes negligible, echoing Karl Marx's critique of capitalism as a system that devalues human worth once it ceases to yield profit. This analysis aims to synthesize the ideas of Karl Marx and Adam Smith to evaluate how Frost, perhaps unintentionally, critiques the economic paradigms of his time.

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to explore the capitalist ideologies, economic injustice and labor exploitation. Robert Frost's *The Death of the Hired Man* (1914) is often praised for its rural imagery and philosophical depth, its critical engagement with capitalist labor dynamics has been largely overlooked. Most literary critiques focus on moral or existential aspects, neglecting the poem's profound socio-economic commentary. This study addresses the gap by analyzing how Frost portrays labor exploitation, alienation, class struggle, and the devaluation of workers through the character of Silas. By applying Karl Marx and Adam Smith's theories, the research highlights the poem's critique of economic systems that prioritize productivity over human dignity, offering a socially urgent reinterpretation of Frost's work.

Research Questions

1. How does *The Death of the Hired Man* reflect portrayal of labor, value, and human relationships?
2. How does Frost exert on identifying the elements of class conflict, labor commodification, and worker alienation.
3. In what ways can Karl Marx and Smith theories particularize class struggles to analyze the character of Silas and his relationship with Warren and Mary?

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To explore how the poem reflects broader socio-economic conditions, particularly the treatment of elderly and seasonal laborers in a capitalist system.
2. To contrast Warren's capitalist mindset with Mary's humanist approach, examining how these attitudes reflect differing values in labor ethics.
3. To examine the impact of labor exploitation and alienation on individual identity as portrayed through Silas.

Significance of the Study

This research offers a fresh perspective on *The Death of the Hired Man* by examining its economic subtext through Karl Marx's theories. This study highlights how the poem critiques capitalist values—particularly the disposability of labor, the illusion of freedom, and the emotional toll of equating human worth with productivity. By bridging literary analysis with economic theory, the study deepens readers' understanding of Frost's work while engaging with current issues around labor ethics, aging, and creating empathy in modern economies. This study helps to highlight the continuing relevance of Frost's depiction of insecure labor in today's global gig economy and aging workforce.

Literature Review

Past studies have primarily approached *The Death of the Hired Man* as an exploration of familial responsibility, mortality, and ethical compassion. Critics such as Harold Bloom emphasize the poem's moral tension between Mary and Warren, interpreting Silas's return as a symbol of human need for belonging and dignity. John Marsh (2011) focuses on the gendered ethical perspectives within the poem, noting Mary's empathetic stance as a moral counterpoint to Warren's utilitarian outlook, thereby emphasizing Frost's humanism. Similarly, Shamaila Amir and Muhammad Aurangzeb (2020) and (Afaq et al., 2022; Gil et al., 2025) analyze the poem through the lens of forgiveness and societal acceptance, reflecting on Silas's tragic demise as a result of social neglect. Walter Jost and George Monteiro (1994) contribute further by exploring the conversational structure and symbolic meaning of Silas's character, emphasizing how the poem communicates deep moral and philosophical ideas through ordinary dialogue. However, while these interpretations highlight ethical and existential themes, there remains a gap in understanding the economic subtext of the poem—particularly from a capitalist perspective. This study addresses that gap by re-evaluating Frost's work through a socio-economic lens, drawing on Karl Marx's (2019) critique of labor exploitation, alienation, and the "reserve army of labor" (Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*), as well as Adam Smith's (1937) moral philosophy from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Scholars such as Nicholas Phillipson and Emma Rothschild also stress that Smith believed markets must be underpinned by ethics and compassion, a theme echoed in the tension between Mary's humanism and Warren's capitalist reasoning. By incorporating these economic theories, this paper interprets *The Death of the Hired Man* as a subtle critique of capitalist structures, portraying Silas not merely as a tragic character but as a discarded worker within an

unforgiving economic system. This review thus bridges literary interpretation and economic theory, laying the foundation for a deeper, socially conscious reading of the poem.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework:

This study is qualitative in nature, contains the paradigm of Marxism. Data has been collected from the published articles, books, and theses. In the first step of the procedure of the analysis, Frost's narrative poem *The Death of the Hired Man* was read and its 'words and phrases' were marked out. In the second step, the marked sections of this poem were analyzed from the perspective of Marxist philosophy in order to explore the exploitation and alienation of labor.

Data has been examined through a consumerist analysis by bringing together Adam Smith's capitalist ideas and Karl Marx's critique of capitalism. Here is a structured set of ideas for a synthesis approach.

Karl Marx's theories of labor, class conflict, and alienation—articulated in *Das Kapital*, *The Communist Manifesto*, and *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*—form the core analytical lens for this study. Marx's concept of the "reserve army of labor," alienated labor and the commodification of workers are applied in this study. Meanwhile, Adam Smith's ideas from *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* are referenced to contextualize the economic rationality of Warren's perspective and the moral dilemmas within capitalist structures. This dual approach highlights the tension between economic pragmatism and moral responsibility.

Marxism is a theory and a method of socioeconomic analysis originated from the oeuvre of German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marxism is used to analyze and critique the capitalism that produced social conflict and class struggles in economic and social systems. As per Chalybäus (1854), in Marxism, the feudal ideas are completely past, the capitalist ideas are declining, and the socialist ideas are becoming valid. Marxism is a method of studying history in order to trace the natural laws which run through all human history and its purpose is to look not at individuals but the people as a whole.

Primary focus of Marxism is on the representation of class conflict and the reinforcement of class distinctions. It rejects class system that produces slavery and exploitation of the proletariat: "the accumulation of wealth in a pole is, simultaneously, accumulation of misery, torment of labor, slavery, ignorance, brutalization and moral degradation on the opposing pole, that is, from the side of class that produces its own product as capital" (Karl Marx, 1984). It believes in dialectical thinking—Hegel's Dialectics, believing in conflicting ideas that give birth to new ideas. Analysis of all phenomena must be informed by historical context. Marxism admires the knowledge and analysis of history (the materialist concept of history). "The history of all hitherto existing society has been the history of class-struggles" (Karl Marx, 1996). It deals history of society as "history of class struggle".

◆ **1. Adam Smith's Perspective (Capitalist / Consumerist Lens)**

- Division of labor & utility: Warren (the farmer) sees Silas (the hired man) in terms of his economic productivity—his usefulness during haymaking season. Smith's notion of labor as a key driver of wealth aligns with Warren's assessment of Silas's value.
- Self-interest & economic rationality: Warren considers hiring decisions based on profit and efficiency. Silas is "too old" and not reliable, hence less valuable in Smith's terms of productive labor.

- Invisible hand & moral sympathy: Smith also recognized moral sentiments. Mary's compassion echoes Smith's idea that a society functions not just on cold economics but also on sympathy and moral duty toward fellow humans.

◆ 2. Karl Marx's Perspective (Critique of Capitalist Structures)

- Alienation of labor: Silas embodies the alienated laborer—his entire life reduced to seasonal work, disposable when he is no longer productive. His identity and dignity are tied to his usefulness in labor.
- Exploitation and commodification: The farmer-worker relationship shows how labor is commodified. Silas is valued only for his physical productivity, not as a human being. When his body gives out, his "worth" vanishes.
- Class struggle and precarity: Silas's death at the margins reflects the vulnerability of workers under capitalism—no security, no retirement, no recognition after years of service. His plight dramatizes Marx's critique of the expendability of labor in capitalist society.

◆ 3. Consumerist Reading of the Poem

- Silas as a "consumable" labor commodity: Just as products lose value once they wear out, Silas loses his "market worth" once his strength fades.
- Economic logic vs. human compassion: Warren's pragmatism reflects capitalist consumerist logic (only the useful are kept), while Mary represents a counterpoint—value beyond consumption.
- Death as ultimate "consumption": Silas's final return to the farm could be seen as a desire for dignity, but he is "consumed" by the system, dying quietly without recognition—symbolizing the exhaustion of labor.

◆ 4. A Synthesis of Smith and Marx

- Smith's acknowledgment of both utility and sympathy allows us to see Warren and Mary as embodying these dual aspects: Warren = economic rationality; Mary = moral sentiments.
- Marx sharpens the critique: Silas's death dramatizes the harsh reality of labor commodification, which Smith's moral dimension alone cannot resolve.
- Together, they show that consumerist values reduce human beings to their labor utility, but at the same time, the poem urges reconciliation: a society must balance economic pragmatism (Smith) with human dignity and recognition of laborers (Marx).

The Death of the Hired Man reveals how capitalist consumerist logic (Smith's economic rationality) commodifies and eventually discards human labor, while also affirming Marx's critique of alienation. Yet, through Mary's compassion, Frost gestures toward Smith's moral sentiments—suggesting that an ethical economy must synthesize material productivity with human dignity."

Textual Analysis of *The Death of The Hired Man*

1. Labor Exploitation: When Productivity Defines Humanity

Karl Marx famously claimed in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, "The worker is nothing, the work is everything." Silas's difficulty echoes this sentiment. Once a

capable worker, he is now seen as a burden. Warren, the farm owner, is unwilling to let Silas stay because he no longer offers economic value: "When was I ever anything but kind to him? But I'll not have the fellow back." (Frost, 1914, p.39) This line reveals how capitalist systems reduce kindness to utility: workers are treated fairly only if they remain useful. Silas, now weak and old, is discarded—his past labor contributions expressed irrelevant.

2. Moral Worth Tied to Labor Capacity

Capitalism often equates a person's value with their ability to work. Warren articulates this explicitly:

"What good is he? Who else will harbor him at his age for the little he can do?" (Frost, 1914, p. 38)

In contrast, Mary's perspective is moral and humanist. She sees Silas's value as basic, not conditional on labor:

"He has come home to die: You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time." (Frost, 1914, p. 39)

Her use of "home" reframes the farm not as a workplace but as a shelter—highlighting the ethical gap between economic and emotional logic.

3. Class Struggle and the Unequal Power Dynamic

Marx's statement that "**The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles**" (*Communist Manifesto*) applies powerfully here. Warren represents the bourgeois landowner; Silas, the proletarian laborer. Silas has no property, no money and no security. His entire existence depends on the goodwill of his employer—who measures that goodwill in productivity. *"He just makes me feel bad about it."* (Frost, 1914, p. 38) This uneasy guilt suggests Warren's recognition of moral failing, yet he remains complicit in the capitalist logic that governs labor.

4. Labor as Transaction vs. Labor as Relationship

Frost's poem underscores a tension between economic relationships and social obligations. Warren perceives labor as a contract:

"He bundle every fault with him" (Frost, 1914, p. 37) . This reflects the capitalist understanding of labor as purely transferable. Silas, like many modern gig workers, navigates a world where loyalty is a luxury he cannot afford. Mary, however, believes in a moral bond that transcends productivity—a view near to a socialist ideal of mutual care.

5. Disposable Workers and the Gig Economy

Silas's life mirrors that of temporary and seasonal workers in the contemporary gig economy. Despite years of labor, he has no savings, property, or family:

"Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk, / And nothing to look backward to with pride..." (Frost, 1914, p. 39)

This line painfully expresses the psychological loss of unsettled labor, echoing Marx's argument that capitalism creates workers who are simultaneously overworked and undervalued.

6. Alienation of the Worker:

According to Marx, capitalist systems alienate workers from the fruits of their labor, from themselves, and from others. Silas exemplifies this alienation. He has worked hard but owns nothing. He is disconnected from Warren and even from himself, unable to articulate what he wants:

"He never did a thing so very bad. / He just makes me feel bad about it." (Frost, 1914, p. 38)

Silas is alienated in multiple ways:

- From **his labor**, as he is no longer capable of working.

- From **his employer (Warren)** who no longer sees value in him-self.
- From **society**, since he has nowhere else to go.
*"Nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope."* (Frost, 1914, p. 39)
- Silas has spent his life **working without reward**, a condition Marx describes as **alienation**, where workers are **disconnected from the fruits of their labor**. Silas, once a hired man, is now **old, sick, and powerless**, reflecting the fate of many laborers in a capitalist economy:

This poem shows the core of alienation: the absence of self-worth in a system that measures men by their utility.

7. The "Reserve Army of Labor" and Silas's Failure

Karl Marx's idea of the "reserve army of labor" means that there is always a group of jobless or part-time workers available. This group helps employers keep wages low and control workers. In *The Death of the Hired Man*, Silas is no longer part of even this group. He is too old and weak to be hired again. This shows how, in a capitalist system, workers are only seen as useful if they can still do hard work.

Marx's states that; **"The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates."**

(*The Communist Manifesto*, Section I: Bourgeois and Proletarians).

Warren makes this clear when he complains about Silas coming back only when he has no other choice:

"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."
(*Frost*, 1914, p. 38)

Warren's words show that Silas is only welcome when there's work to be done. Once the work is over, so is the need for him. He's treated more like a tool than a person. Silas's situation shows how unfair the system is. Frost uses Silas's story to show how harsh capitalism can be to those who are no longer "productive."

8. The Illusion of Freedom

Marx asserts that the proletariat is **"forced to sell himself piecemeal"** (*Communist Manifesto*). Silas's autonomy is fictional; he works not by choice, but by necessity:

"He thinks he ought to earn a little pay, / Enough at least to buy tobacco with." (Frost, 1914, p. 37)

Silas is a **seasonal worker** with **no choice but to work for survival**. His freedom to work or not is an illusion—without labor, he has **nothing**.

Textual Evidence:

"I should not be surprised if he came back again—

He's been on the road a week— I think he is,

He's just getting his strength back after a spell

Of hard work— the kind that makes you wish you were dead." (Frost, 1914, p. 39)

This shows the physical and emotional toll of labor on Silas, reinforcing the idea that labor under capitalism often leaves workers exhausted and without hope of improvement. This statement also captures Silas's economic and emotional displacement and shows how

workers do not accumulate wealth; they barely earn enough for survival. Silas's **wages are**

minimal, keeping him trapped in the cycle of **poverty and labor**, exposing the misconception of free will in economic participation.

9. The Absence of Social Security

Silas, after a life of labor, has no home, pension, or family. His only refuge is the very place that no longer wants him:

"Warren, he has come home to die." (Frost, 1914, p. 36)

This grim reality reflects the failure of capitalist systems to care for their workers once they stop producing.

10. Mary: The Voice of Humanism

Mary stands in stark contrast to Warren. She represents a Marxist-humanist alternative: *"From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs"*. (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 2023). Mary does not question what Silas can do for her. She focuses on what he needs now.

She sees things differently when she says:

"He comes to round out his life."

(Frost, 1914, p. 39)

Mary understands that Silas has come not to work, but to find peace before he dies. He wants to feel like he belongs somewhere. Her empathy challenges the cold rationality of capitalist economics, urging a society that prioritizes compassion.

11. Silas's Death: The Tragedy of Capitalism

Silas's quiet, lonely death serves as a haunting metaphor:

"Warren returned—too late." (Frost, 1914, p. 42) It means Warren is too late to help, too late to care, and too late to undo the harm inflicted by a lifetime of systemic neglect. Silas's end is a warning: capitalism discards those who can no longer serve it.

5. Discussion: Capitalism, Morality, and Human Worth

The interplay between Warren and Mary mirror contemporary debates about the ethical responsibilities of employers. While Warren's stance is grounded in economic logic, Mary disrupts this discourse with her immeasurable compassion. Her insistence on treating Silas with dignity reflects a moral critique of capitalist structures that reduce relationships to labor contracts. The poem thus functions as both a reflection of early 20th-century rural labor relations and a broader commentary on systemic inhumanity under capitalism.

6. Conclusion: A Poetic Critique of Economic Systems

Though Robert Frost may not have intended his poem to serve as a political critique, *The Death of the Hired Man* becomes a powerful lens through which to examine the failures of capitalism. Silas is not just a man—he is every worker who has labored without reward, aged without support, and died without dignity. Through characters like Silas and Mary, Frost challenges the commodification of labor, the devaluation of non-productive individuals, and the transactional nature of employer-employee relationships. By blending Marxist and Smithian insights, this paper demonstrates how Frost's poem demands a re-evaluation of the societies assign worth and administer justice to those who labor yet remain economically invisible.

The poem becomes a subtle yet powerful call for a more compassionate and equitable social order. This poem urges readers to ask difficult questions: Is economic productivity the only measure of a person's worth? Are we building a society that supports people—or merely uses them?



In Mary's quiet strength and unwavering empathy, Frost leaves us with a final hope: that humanity might prevail over profit.

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