

# The Harvest Moon



## SUMMARY

The autumnal full moon, red as fire, seems to roll and bob along the hilly landscape like a giant balloon. Then it floats up to the lowest part of the sky and rests there like an ancient gold coin. The harvest moon has arrived, and it makes a low, deep noise in the sky, like a big wind instrument. Its sound makes the earth vibrate throughout the night like a huge drum.

It keeps people awake, and they walk outside to where elm and oak trees seem to kneel down in silent prayer. The autumnal full moon has arrived!

Cattle and sheep, glowing in the moonlight, watch the moon in terror. The moon expands to fill the whole sky, seeming extremely hot, and slowly approaches the earth, as if the apocalypse has come.

This goes on until fields full of golden, upright wheat stalks call out, "We're ready to be harvested—harvest us!" and steam rises from rivers in the evaporating hills.

harvested, as if at the moon's signal, while rivers "Sweat" as if in terror or ecstasy. Everything in the poem responds to the seasonal shift that the moon's arrival signals, perhaps suggesting how all earthly things are linked by, and subject to, the rhythms of nature.

Since the change from summer to winter traditionally symbolizes life's progress toward death, the poem could also be implying that all natural things experience decline and loss (that the world eventually reaps the life it sows). Such decline is normal and inevitable, the poem seems to imply, part of a steady cycle of change that can nevertheless feel like "the end of the world."

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19



## THEMES



### SEASONAL CHANGE AND DISRUPTION

"The Harvest Moon" describes the change from twilight to nighttime and from summer to autumn.

These changes are marked by the appearance of a giant "harvest moon": a reddish-colored full moon associated with the beginning of fall. The poem portrays the earth as deeply, instinctively attuned to this moon's arrival and the transformation it signals; people, animals, and plants all respond to it with a mix of terror, eagerness, and awe. Through these details, the poem depicts seasonal change—especially autumnal change, which often [symbolizes](#) a decline toward death—as a disruptive, frightening, and extraordinary force that affects and connects all life on earth.

The poem treats the moon like a powerful authority "booming" down from heaven and which can't be ignored or denied; it's "flame," then a "vast balloon," a "gold doubloon," etc. that "[r]olls," "sinks," "swells," and "sail[s]" through the sky. Its arrival seems to transform the entire earth: the planet itself seemingly "replies" to it "all night, like a deep drum." In other words, the moon's appearance is so dramatic that it seems to rattle the whole planet.

Earth's creatures greet the moon with everything from fear to awe to a kind of joy. People walk outside, mysteriously unable to sleep; trees fall into a "religious hush"; farm animals "Stare [...] petrified" at the swollen moon. Wheat "Cr[ies]" out to be



### FEAR, AWE, AND THE APOCALYPSE

In addition to being a literal (if exaggerated) description of the transition from summer to fall, "Harvest Moon" can be read as an [allegory](#) about the apocalypse, particularly the Christian apocalypse depicted in the New Testament. The moon's fiery appearance in heaven seems to herald "the end of the world," causing both terror and wonder among earth's creatures. The [personified](#) wheat even cries out to be harvested, echoing biblical language about the "reaping" of souls on Judgment Day. Read in this way, the poem frames the end of the world as a "petrif[ying]" yet anticipated part of the world's cycle, as natural and inevitable as the change from summer to winter.

The poem is filled with religious language and [imagery](#), suggesting that the harvest moon's arrival is more than an ordinary seasonal event. For example, the moon appears in "heaven" and is "flame-red" (perhaps like hell-fire, or the fire and brimstone that rain down from the sky in the Book of Revelation). Its drum-like "[b]ooming through heaven" seems ominous or warlike (it may [allude](#) to the war in heaven that precedes the Last Judgment). Creatures respond to the moon with both anxiety and piety. People walk outside, unable to sleep, while trees maintain a prayer-like "vigil" or "religious hush," as if sensing that some profound or sacred event is underway.

As the poem increasingly echoes apocalyptic Christian literature, especially the Book of Revelation, the moon causes an apocalyptic *transformation* of the earth. This change is terrifying, yet not unexpected—and even perhaps *desired* by earth's creatures. Farm animals "stare petrified" at the moon (a possible allusion to animals staring at Jesus's birth; in Christian

tradition, the apocalypse ends with the second coming of Jesus). The growing moon "Fill[s] heaven, as if red hot"—another echo of the apocalyptic fire that fills the heavens in Revelation. Finally, the cry of the personified wheat ("We are ripe, reap us!") alludes to language from Revelation about the "reaping" of souls at the Last Judgment. It also implies that the earth isn't just fearfully reacting to this transformation but, on some level, *welcoming* it.

As an allegory, then, the poem suggests that the end of the world, Judgment, etc. are as natural and necessary as the cycle of the seasons. Frightening as this "end of the world" is, the earth's creatures are drawn to and ultimately seem to accept it.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 6-19



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-5

*The flame-red moon, ...  
... a gold doubloon.*

Lines 1-5 ("The flame-red [...] doubloon") introduce the poem's main image: the "harvest moon" of the title. The harvest moon is the full moon that occurs closest to the fall equinox, either in September or October. Traditionally, it marks the transition from summer to autumn, which is also the harvest season in farming communities.

At first, the poem portrays the moon playfully, using vivid descriptions and [figurative language](#) to evoke its dazzling presence in the twilight sky. This moon is "flame-red" and "vast"; it seems to move like a huge "balloon," slowly "Roll[ing]" and "bouncing" along the hilly horizon. As night falls, it rises: "takes off, and sinks upward / To lie on the bottom of the sky, like a gold doubloon." A *doubloon* is an antique Spanish coin often associated with pirates and seafaring tales, so this [simile](#) (and [oxymoron](#)) plays on the familiar image of gold treasure sinking to the bottom of the sea.

Notice, too, how the "balloon" [metaphor](#) transitions into the "doubloon" simile within the space of a line, mirroring the rapid visual changes of the moon itself. The moon is an ancient [symbol](#) of change, in fact. And over the course of the poem, this harvest moon not only *marks* a seasonal change but also mysteriously *transforms* the landscape below. It may even be a warning sign of disaster or doom.

Though the loose, "bouncing" rhythms and gaudy [rhymes](#) ("moon"/"balloon"/"doubloon") of this first [stanza](#) sound like lighthearted children's verse, the poem's [imagery](#) will grow pretty disturbing by the end! An early hint of this shift comes in

the poem's ominous first adjective: "flame-red."

### LINES 6-8

*The harvest moon ...  
... a deep drum.*

Line 6 announces that "The harvest moon has come." Technically, this line is superfluous, since the opening lines have already described the moon's arrival! But the announcement seems charged with a grander significance, as if this moonrise isn't just a normal nighttime occurrence but a fateful *event*.

Lines 7-8 then present a pair of [similes](#) describing the moon's effect on Earth. The moon goes "Booming softly through heaven, like a bassoon," and it seems to cause the earth to vibrate in response: to "repl[y] all night, like a deep drum."

Read as a fantastical description of natural events, this might mean that the mutual gravitational effect of moon and earth is like the call-and-response of instruments in an orchestra. Or it might suggest, by a playful associative logic, that this giant moon's arrival *seems* to be accompanied by "Booming" sounds; think of a giant's entrance in a fairy tale or a god's entrance in "heaven." Its grand appearance, in turn, seems to resonate throughout the landscape below. (Notice how the [alliteration](#) of "Booming"/"bassoon" and "deep drum," as well as the [assonance](#) in "Booming"/"bassoon," makes the language in these lines reverberate.)

Alternatively, these weird similes might suggest that something *supernatural* is happening. Maybe, in the world of the poem, the moon really is accompanied by "Booming" that causes the earth to shake! From here until the end, it's possible to read the poem in two main ways: as a description of a seasonal change that *feels* apocalyptic (because it ushers in the harvesting of plants, the slaughter of farm animals, the barrenness of winter, etc.), or as an [allegorical](#) description of some *actual* apocalypse.

### LINES 9-12

*So people can't ...  
... moon has come!*

Lines 9-12 ("So people [...] has come!") describe the moon's effect on humans and trees below.

This giant harvest moon, which is [figuratively](#) if not literally "Booming" through the sky, is so dazzling and strange that it keeps people awake at night. Sleepless, they walk out into the moonlight:

*So they go out where elms and oak trees keep  
A kneeling vigil, in a religious hush.*

The word "vigil" describes the act of keeping watch, praying, or conducting some other quiet ritual throughout the night. For example, nighttime sentries can keep a vigil (stay *vigilant*), but so can mourners sitting with the recently deceased. Here, the

poem draws on all the [connotations](#) of the word. Maybe these [personified](#) trees seem to watch expectantly for some momentous event; maybe they seem to mourn a loss (such as the end of summer or, as in line 16, "the end of the world"); or maybe they seem to pray. Their "kneeling" (bending toward earth) and "religious hush" certainly evoke some kind of worshipful ceremony. In any case, the sleepless "people" want to *join* their vigil—to head outdoors and quietly experience this strange celestial event.

After this image comes a [repetition](#) of line 6, only this time with an exclamation point at the end: "The harvest moon has come!" This is the one time the speaker's [tone](#) seems to shift, as if their emotions are showing through. Maybe the speaker, too, is awed, excited, and/or frightened by this moon; they seem to be *proclaiming* its arrival like a herald or prophet.

### LINES 13-16

*And all the ...  
... of the world.*

Whereas the previous [stanza](#) described how people and trees respond to the harvest moon, lines 13-16 describe the reaction of *animals*:

And all the moonlit cows and all the sheep  
Stare up at her petrified, while she swells  
Filling heaven, as if red hot, and sailing  
Closer and closer like the end of the world.

It's possible that these animals are "petrified" (fear-stricken) simply because the moon is weirdly large and red. Notice, though, that these are *farm* animals—specifically, "cows" and "sheep," two kinds of livestock that are often slaughtered for their meat. (In fact, both can be proverbially "led to the slaughter.") Since this killing traditionally took place before the winter months, perhaps the animals' fear is literally or [symbolically](#) linked to their own approaching demise. To them, the winter slaughter might well represent "the end of the world"!

And that's not the only eerie part of this stanza. In real life, due to a kind of optical illusion, the rising moon can seem especially large when it's still close to the horizon. The stanza *might* be describing that natural effect—but it also seems to hint at a divine or supernatural transformation. It's not normal for a moon to look so large that it "Fill[s] heaven," or seems to drift "Closer and closer" to earth! The word "heaven" and the "end of the world" [simile](#) force the reader to wonder whether this really is some kind of mythical or biblical armageddon. The apocalyptic Book of Revelation, for example, features a blood-red moon and fire raining from heaven; some modern depictions of the apocalypse also feature a comet or other "red hot" fireball hurtling toward earth. (Since the biblical apocalypse coincides with Christ's Second Coming, the animals'

staring might even [allude](#) to the Nativity scene—i.e., depictions of barnyard animals staring at Christ's birth.)

Finally, this is the first time the poem calls the moon "she"/"her" rather than "it." Does this sudden [personification](#) suggest that the moon is some kind of goddess? Or are these the female pronouns traditionally assigned to *ships*, since the moon is now "sailing" through the sky? However one reads this change, it's another sign that the moon is dramatically transforming—and scaring the heck out of livestock in the process.

### LINES 17-19

*Till the gold ...  
... the melting hills.*

Lines 17-19 ("Till the gold [...] hills") bring the poem to a dramatic conclusion, as the moon's arrival prompts an intense response from the entire landscape.

Building on the [personification](#) in previous [stanzas](#), the wheat fields in this farmland "Cry" out eagerly: "We are ripe, reap us!" This is actually an example of [anthropomorphism](#), as the non-human wheat is given human traits (the power of speech). Even though the poem's atmosphere has become less playful since the opening stanza, these human-like representations of the animal/natural world continue to echo children's literature (fairy tales, fables, etc.).

Of all the elements in the poem, the wheat seems most in tune with, and excited by, the harvest moon. After all, it's the thing that's supposed to be harvested! Its "gold" color even aligns with the moon's reddish "gold" (see line 5). It's so "ripe" for cutting down that it seems to *ask* to be "reap[ed]." (If the poem is read as an apocalyptic [allegory](#), these word choices might [allude](#) to the figure of the Grim Reaper and/or the "reap[ing]" of souls in the Book of Revelation. See the Context section of this guide for more.) The [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) in "ripe," "reap," and "rivers" dramatically accentuate the wheat's "Cry."

Meanwhile, "rivers / Sweat from the melting hills," as if in fear, excitement, or frenzy. In other words, the rivers flow down from the hills like trickles of sweat. Or perhaps the river water is evaporating in the heat (under the "red hot" moon).

Once again, these events could be read as either natural or supernatural. Maybe the speaker is just [hyperbolically](#) describing a hot autumn in which the wheat is ripe for the harvest. The hills might appear to be "melting" (shrinking) because their tall, "stiff" wheat stalks are getting cut down. On the other hand, this could be an armageddon scenario, in which earthly life in general is about to be "reaped" (killed) and the hills are "melting" in hellish doomsday heat. There's a way to reconcile these two readings: for plants and animals, the poem might be suggesting, the harvest before winter *seems* like doomsday.



## SYMBOLS



## THE HARVEST MOON

The harvest moon is both the main image and the main [symbol](#) in this poem. The moon is a traditional symbol of change, and the harvest moon (the full moon occurring closest to the fall equinox) is specifically associated with the transition from summer to fall. The moon in the poem represents this seasonal change—and possibly *apocalyptic* change as well (that is, change linked with the end of the world)!

Line 16 compares the swelling, fire-red harvest moon with "the end of the world." While this might be only a [hyperbolic simile](#), some of the poem's other details seem to [allude](#) to apocalyptic scenes from the Bible (see Context section for more). Thus, the moon "Filling heaven, as if red hot" (line 15) could symbolize doomsday or the wrath of God, and the harvest itself might symbolize the harvesting of people's *souls*. (For a folkloric version of this idea, think of the Grim Reaper with his scythe.)

Even if the "end of the world" here is only figurative, it suggests that, for many plants and creatures, the ordinary harvest season brings a kind of apocalypse. Crops will be "reap[ed]" (see line 18), some livestock (such as the "cows" and "sheep" in line 13) may be slaughtered, and the landscape will transition from the vibrancy of summer into the barrenness of winter.

## Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-7
- Line 12
- Lines 13-16



## POETIC DEVICES

## ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) adds to the poem's musicality and helps to emphasize its meaning at a few important moments. This device is especially prominent in the first and last [stanzas](#); in lines 3-4, for example, it mimics the "bouncing" and rising of the moon:

[...] Rolls along the hills, gently bouncing,  
A vast balloon,  
Till it takes off, and sinks upward

The bold, bouncy /b/ sounds give way to lighter /t/ sounds just as the moon "takes off" into the air. However, /b/ alliteration returns later in the stanza, along with /d/ alliteration, as the moon "Boo[m]s softly [...] like a bassoon" and the earth resonates "like a deep drum." In each of these phrases,

repeating consonants help evoke the percussive sounds the speaker is describing.

In the final stanza, the strong /r/ sounds in "ripe," "reap," and "rivers" (as well as the /p/ [consonance](#) in "ripe"/"reap") underscore the passionate "Cry" of the wheat fields:

[...] 'We are ripe, reap us!' and the rivers  
Sweat from the melting hills.

More generally, these sounds add emphasis to the climactic moment of the poem, when the harvest moon has its greatest impact on the earth below.

## Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "bouncing"
- **Line 3:** "balloon"
- **Line 4:** "Till," "takes"
- **Line 5:** "lie," "like"
- **Line 7:** "Booming," "bassoon"
- **Line 8:** "deep drum"
- **Line 18:** "ripe, reap," "rivers"

## ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) adds to the musical quality of this rhythmically offbeat, partly [rhymed](#) poem. Listen, for example, to the assonance (and [internal rhyme](#)) in line 5:

To lie on the bottom of the sky, like a gold doubleloon.

The chiming long /i/ sounds add to the playful, almost nursery-rhyme-like sound of the opening [stanza](#). Later in the stanza, the repetition of /oo/ sounds in "Booming" and "bassoon," and of long /i/ sounds in "replies" and "night," echoes the percussive ("drum"-like) sounds being described.

Assonance also adds intensity to the poem's sound as its ominous [imagery](#) intensifies. Readers can hear this effect, for instance, as the fiery moon grows gigantic in lines 14-15: "she swells / Filling heaven, as if red hot." The dense cluster of short /eh/ and /ih/ sounds seems to accentuate the moon's steady, sinister "swell[ing]."

Similarly, assonance fills the final stanza, as the poem reaches its dramatic peak:

Till the gold fields of stiff wheat  
Cry 'We are ripe, reap us!' and the rivers  
Sweat from the melting hills.

Whether the swelling of the moon is natural or supernatural, it seems to provoke an extreme response from the landscape. Once again, assonance heightens the intensity of the moment.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "moon," "moon"
- **Line 3:** "balloon"
- **Line 5:** "lie," "sky," "like," "doubloon"
- **Line 6:** "moon"
- **Line 7:** "Booming," "bassoon"
- **Line 8:** "replies," "night"
- **Line 9:** "people," "sleep"
- **Line 10:** "trees keep"
- **Line 11:** "kneeling," "vigil," "religious"
- **Line 14:** "swells"
- **Line 15:** "Filling," "heaven," "if," "red"
- **Line 17:** "Till," "fields," "stiff," "wheat"
- **Line 18:** "Cry," "We," "ripe," "reap," "rivers"
- **Line 19:** "Sweat," "melting," "hills"

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 10-11:** "So they go out where elms and oak trees keep / A kneeling vigil, in a religious hush."
- **Lines 14-16:** "Stare up at her petrified, while she swells / Filling heaven, as if red hot, and sailing / Closer and closer like the end of the world."
- **Lines 17-19:** "Till the gold fields of stiff wheat / Cry 'We are ripe, reap us!' and the rivers / Sweat from the melting hills."

**PERSONIFICATION**

The poem [personifies](#) several features of its pastoral landscape. Lines 10-11, for example, depict the surrounding trees as solemnly staring or praying:

[...] elms and oak trees keep  
A kneeling vigil, in a religious hush.

To keep a "vigil" means to keep watch, or to pray ceremoniously, during the nighttime. The words "kneeling" and "religious hush" point toward prayer, but these trees also seem to be watching the harvest moon as it rises and expands. Either way, they're personified; they seem to join the "people" who "can't sleep" (line 9) in gazing raptly at this celestial event.

In lines 14-16, the moon itself is personified; it changes from an "it" to a "she." Suddenly, it seems less like a celestial object than a powerful, godlike figure—an overwhelming presence "Filling heaven."

The personification in the final [stanza](#), after the mysterious moon "Fill[s] heaven," is the most dramatic of all. The autumn wheat fields actually "Cry" out to be cut down: "We are ripe, reap us!" In other words, these crops are very ready for the harvest—whether that harvest is literal, [symbolic](#), or both. (This is more specifically an example of [anthropomorphism](#), in which something nonhuman is portrayed as a human-like character.) The rivers' "Sweat" indicates that they're evaporating while the hills are "melting," but it also evokes human feelings such as fear, anticipation, or even agony. The transformation the moon brings may be natural or supernatural, but either way, the landscape seems to feel it as intensely as a person would.

Personification and anthropomorphism are also devices associated with children's literature, myths, fables, etc., so their appearance here aligns with the poem's nursery-rhyme-like cadences and mythical qualities.

**REPETITION**

Several forms of [repetition](#) contribute to the poem's music and meaning. For example, the speaker repeats several important words: "moon" appears five times, including in the title, and the variant "moonlit" appears in line 13. In four of these cases (again including the title), the speaker repeats the full phrase "the harvest moon." These repetitions help establish how central the moon is to the poem; it starts to seem almost like a [protagonist](#) and is even [personified](#) as "she"/"her" in lines 14-16.

Also note the [anaphora](#) of the word "So" at the beginning of lines 9 and 10:

So people can't sleep,  
So they go out where elms and oak trees keep

And listen to the repetition of the phrase "And all the" in line 13 (an example of [parallelism](#)):

And all the moonlit cows and all the sheep

These repetitions give the poem a faintly biblical cadence, since many biblical verses start with the conjunctions "And" and "So." These cadences, in turn, align with the poem's religious [allusions](#). For example, the image in lines 13-14 recalls biblical and popular depictions of Christ's Nativity (which include farm animals staring in fear or wonder):

And all the moonlit cows and all the sheep  
Stare up at her petrified [...]

Another important repetition occurs in lines 6 and 12, which repeat the same phrase, only with different punctuation. Line 6 calmly announces:

The harvest moon has come,

Line 12 is more excited:

The harvest moon has come!

This slight variation reflects the growing fear or excitement of the creatures watching the moon. The exclamation point makes the line sound almost like a prophetic announcement!

#### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The," "moon, the harvest moon,"
- **Line 4:** "Till"
- **Line 6:** "The harvest moon has come,"
- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "So"
- **Line 10:** "So"
- **Line 12:** "The harvest moon has come!"
- **Line 13:** "And all the," "moonlit," "and all the"
- **Line 16:** "Closer," "closer"
- **Line 17:** "Till"

## SIMILE

The poem describes the harvest moon through a number of [similes](#), which are initially playful but later unsettling.

First, line 5 compares the moon to "a gold doubloon," an antique Spanish coin last minted in the 1800s. This comparison suggests that the moon is large, round, shining, and gold or reddish-gold in appearance (see "flame-red" in line 1). It seems to "lie" still for a moment, like a coin after "sink[ing]" to "the bottom of the sky." (This [imagery](#) plays on the idea of treasure sinking to the bottom of the sea, since doubloons are popularly associated with pirates and other seafarers.) Yet this motionless moon has previously seemed to move ("Roll[ing]," "bounc[e]," etc.) and will soon do so again.

The speaker then compares the moon to a "bassoon"—a woodwind instrument with a low, rich sound—"Booming softly through heaven," and the earth below to a "deep drum" vibrating in "repl[y]" (lines 7-8). This might be a description of a surreal or supernatural event; after all, in the third [stanza](#), the moon seems to fill the entire sky. If it can do that, maybe it can make sounds, too! Alternatively, this simile might evoke the way the huge moon *seems* to make a "Booming," giant-like entrance, shaking the earth as if striking "a deep drum." In other words, the description might be playful [hyperbole](#).

When the moon "swells / Filling heaven," it does so "as if red hot" (lines 14-15). That is, it seems to expand dramatically, as though responding to intense heat. (This image might tie back to the "vast balloon" [metaphor](#) from lines 1-4; think of a hot air balloon that swells when its burner flame is lit.)

The moon grows so large, in fact, that it seems to approach earth, "sailing / Closer and closer like the end of the world" (15-16). The verb "sailing" might again suggest a balloon, or perhaps some kind of deity floating through heaven (this stanza refers to the moon as "she"). Regardless, the harvest moon resembles an apocalyptic omen. Whether or not it actually signals that the world is ending, it signals that *summer* is

ending—meaning that the lives of some of the plants and animals in this landscape will soon end, too.

#### Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "To lie on the bottom of the sky, like a gold doubloon."
- **Lines 6-7:** "The harvest moon has come, / Booming softly through heaven, like a bassoon."
- **Line 8:** "And the earth replies all night, like a deep drum."
- **Lines 14-16:** "while she swells / Filling heaven, as if red hot, and sailing / Closer and closer like the end of the world."

## METAPHOR

The poem uses [metaphors](#) as well as [similes](#) to capture the appearance and impact of the harvest moon (note that all this figurative language overlaps with the poem's use of [imagery](#)).

First, the speaker compares the moon to a balloon:

The flame-red moon, the harvest moon,  
Rolls along the hills, gently bouncing,  
A vast balloon,  
Till it takes off, and sinks upward [...]

This comparison implies that the moon is large, round, and full (a *harvest moon* is a full moon near the fall equinox). As it moves through the sky, it seems to "Roll[]" and "bounc[e]" along the hills before "tak[ing] off"—that is, rising above the horizon. Its "flame-red" color may tie in with the simile, too, because hot air balloons are heated by a burner flame.

The [oxymoron](#) "sinks upward" captures the way both moons and balloons rise slowly—as slowly as objects sink in water. This phrase also sets up the simile in the following line, which compares the moon to sunken pirates' treasure: "a gold doubloon" at "the bottom of the sky." Notice how these topsy-turvy visuals—which seem to imply that down is up and up is down—help portray the harvest moon as a disturbing, chaotic, transformative presence.

Another metaphor (which may also be a [personification](#)) appears in the final two lines of the poem, as "the rivers / Sweat from the melting hills." On the literal level, this phrase suggests that the rivers are trickling down from the hills like perspiration (or perhaps evaporating in the late summer heat). But the verb "Sweat" suggests that, like the rest of the landscape, these hills are responding to the "red hot" harvest moon with fear or excitement. There's even the suggestion that they're nervously sweating through some sort of apocalyptic event.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "The flame-red moon, the harvest moon, /

Rolls along the hills, gently bouncing, / A vast balloon, / Till it takes off, and sinks upward"

- **Lines 18-19:** "and the rivers / Sweat from the melting hills."

## ALLUSION

Although the poem doesn't contain any explicit [allusions](#), it seems to invoke biblical [imagery](#)—and specifically the apocalyptic scenes from the Book of Revelation. This final book of the Bible describes the world-shaking events leading up to the Last Judgment and Christ's Second Coming.

Once readers notice the echoes and parallels, they're hard to ignore. For example, "The flame-red moon" (line 1) echoes "the moon became as blood" (Revelation 6:12), as well as various images of "fire" falling from heaven (e.g., Rev. 8:7-8). The "rivers" that "Sweat" (trickle? turn to steam?) in lines 18-19 might echo the burning rivers in Revelation: "there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers" (Rev. 8:10). Most clearly, the "ripe" wheat crying out to be "reap[ed]" in lines 17-18 echoes Revelation 14:15-16, a [symbolic](#) description of the harvesting of human souls at the Last Judgment:

[15] And another angel came out of the temple,  
crying with a loud voice to him that sat on the cloud,  
Thrust in thy sickle, and reap: for the time is come for  
thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe.

[16] And he that sat on the cloud thrust in his sickle  
on the earth; and the earth was reaped.

Because the Book of Revelation is the most famous apocalyptic narrative in Western literature, it's a natural reference point for a poem that mentions "the end of the world" (line 16)—and describes an approaching harvest that may or may not spell some larger doom.

### Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The flame-red moon, the harvest moon,"
- **Lines 13-19:** "And all the moonlit cows and all the sheep / Stare up at her petrified, while she swells / Filling heaven, as if red hot, and sailing / Closer and closer like the end of the world. / Till the gold fields of stiff wheat / Cry 'We are ripe, reap us!' and the rivers / Sweat from the melting hills."

from summer to fall.

**Doubloon** (Line 5) - A gold coin formerly used in Spain and some of its territories.

**Bassoon** (Line 7) - A large woodwind instrument with a rich, resonant sound.

**Vigil** (Lines 10-11) - The act of staying awake to keep watch (over someone or something), or to pray ceremonially.

**Petrified** (Line 14) - Terrified; immobilized with fear.

**Reap** (Line 18) - Harvest; cut down and gather. (The word is sometimes used [metaphorically](#) in connection with death and the "harvesting" of souls, as in the folkloric figure of the Grim Reaper.)



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The Harvest Moon" contains four stanzas of varying length (eight, four, four, and three lines, respectively). It doesn't follow a consistent [meter](#); it's basically a [free verse](#) poem, though it does contain some [rhymes](#). In other words, the poem is formally loose, with a rough, irregular music all its own. This style is typical of Hughes's work: his poems tend to be strongly musical while avoiding neat, predictable structures.

"The Harvest Moon," which was published in a volume originally intended for kids, also contains some qualities often found in children's verse, such as playful rhymes and ear-pleasing (but not strict) rhythms. Interestingly, rhyme starts to fade over the course of the poem, even as the [imagery](#) grows increasingly ominous. In both form and content, then, the poem becomes less childlike—more grown-up and unsettling—as it goes on.

Although the [stanzas](#) don't follow any traditional structure, they do help organize the poem in a logical way. All are [end-stopped](#) with a period or exclamation point, and all are fairly self-contained in terms of their subject. The first stanza describes the moon's effect on earth, the second its effect on people and trees, the third its effect on animals, and the fourth its effect on fields and rivers.

### METER

"The Harvest Moon" doesn't have a [meter](#). Instead, it's written in a kind of loosely rhyming [free verse](#).

That said, there are some noticeably rhythmic moments. The first line of the poem, for instance, follows a roughly [iambic](#) (da-DUM, da-DUM) pattern:

The flame-red moon, the harvest moon [...]

Though this rhythm falls away in line 2, the poem returns to it sometimes. Listen to lines 3 and 6, for example:



## VOCABULARY

**Harvest moon** (Line 1, Line 6, Line 12) - The full moon that appears closest to the fall equinox (around the third week of September in the northern hemisphere), marking the transition

A vast balloon,  
[...]  
The harvest moon has come,

Again, most lines in the poem don't follow this rhythm. But it surfaces here and there, like a reminder of the steady "Booming" and "drum"-like vibrations (lines 7-8) in the background of this wild scene.

## RHYME SCHEME

"The Harvest Moon" contains [rhymes](#) but doesn't follow a regular [rhyme scheme](#). Its stanzas rhyme (or not!) as follows:

ABACADAD EEFD EGGH JKG

The first half of the poem sounds a bit like children's verse, with its "bouncing" cadences and zany rhyme words ("moon," "balloon," "doubloon," "bassoon"). Listen to lines 1-8, for example:

[...] moon, A  
[...] bouncing, B  
[...] balloon, A  
[...] upward C  
[...] doubloon. A  
[...] come, D  
[...] bassoon. A  
[...] drum. D

Interestingly, though, rhyme fades away as the poem goes on: there's only one rhyme in the final six lines, and it's an easy-to-miss [slant rhyme](#) ("swells"/"hills").

This shift may reflect the way the poem's content grows more serious and ominous toward the end. What initially seemed like a delightful, magical presence—the rising harvest moon—starts to look like an omen of "the end of the world" (line 16). In the process, the language starts to sound less like Mother Goose and more like "grown-up" poetry.



## SPEAKER

The poem provides little information about the speaker. It's narrated in the third person (there is no "I"), and for the most part, it presents its scene straightforwardly (though with playful rhythms and colorful [figurative language](#)).

The speaker's seemingly neutral [tone](#) slips at least once, however: in the exclamation "The harvest moon has come!" (line 12). Here, the speaker sounds excited or alarmed, as if making a fateful announcement. The arrival of a full moon in September wouldn't normally be a big deal, but the speaker seems to feel it is.

If this swollen, fiery moon is, in fact, a sign of "the end of the world"—a possibility raised in line 16—perhaps the speaker's

tone here is that of an apocalyptic prophet. The repeated "and"s in the following line—"And all the moonlit cows and all the sheep"—might be a way of reinforcing that idea, since, in older biblical translations like the King James Version, "And" is often used to connect verses.



## SETTING

"The Harvest Moon" is set in a rural landscape containing "elms," "oak trees," "cows," "sheep," "wheat," "rivers," and "hills." It takes place during the change from day to night and from summer to fall. Both transitions are marked by the appearance of a "harvest moon," or full moon occurring near the fall equinox.

This farmland is, in fact, ready to be harvested: the wheat fields "Cry 'We are ripe, reap us!'" But it's not clear whether the harvest is meant to be literal or [symbolic](#). After all, the harvest moon looks "like the end of the world"; it seems to be getting larger and closer to earth, disturbing people's sleep and terrifying livestock. As such, this might be an apocalyptic [setting](#)—modeled, probably, on the biblical Book of Revelation, which contains a "blood-red" moon, the reaping of the "harvest of the earth," etc.

This [allegorical](#) interpretation would help explain the "religious hush" of the trees and the ominous "Booming" of the moon in the skies. Alternatively, the poem might just be a [hyperbolic](#) account of an unusually large full moon, which signals the end of summer and the chilling approach of winter.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Ted Hughes (1930-1998) is one of the best-known British poets of the 20th century. His 1957 debut, *The Hawk in the Rain*, was a shock to the system of UK poetry; its percussive rhythms and raw [imagery](#) challenged the dominance of more restrained and formal poets, like [Philip Larkin](#). Many well-known Hughes poems, such as "[Wind](#)" and "[Hawk Roosting](#)," depict the power and violence of the natural world. Hughes's writing was also deeply influenced by his first wife, fellow poet [Sylvia Plath](#); during their (often tormented) marriage, the pair produced a rich, unsettling body of work.

"The Harvest Moon" appears in *Season Songs* (1975), a volume that was originally intended for kids but that, according to Hughes, "grew up" as he wrote it. The critic Nicholas Bland has [written](#):

The syntax in *Season Songs* doesn't exclude children from enjoying and understanding much of the verse. But some of the collection's major themes transcend



childhood experience. [...] Even so, the legacy of Hughes's desire that the collection should appeal to children remains evident.

Readers can hear a playful, Mother Goose quality in some of the rhythms and [rhymes](#) ("moon," "balloon," etc.) of "The Harvest Moon." But by the end, the poem isn't especially playful! Its imagery [alludes](#) to the apocalyptic scenes in the biblical Book of Revelation, in which "the moon became as blood" and an angel cries for the [metaphorical](#) "reaping" of human souls:

Thrust in thy sickle, and reap: for the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ted Hughes was born in Mytholmroyd in Yorkshire, England, in 1930. The poems of *Season Songs*, like much of his work, are influenced by the rural landscape of his upbringing. Hughes's father served in World War I, and the shadow of both world wars also informed Hughes's observations of nature and humanity.

Over the course of his prolific career (which ran from the 1950s until his death in 1998), Hughes saw major social change in the UK. He began publishing his work in a period of rapid post-war urbanization and industrialization, during which Britain saw a manufacturing boom in ships, cars, metals, textiles, and more. With this boom, however, came increasing pollution and destruction of natural environments. Hughes's poetry, with its interest in wild nature and often ominous (or apocalyptic) overtones, can be read as a skeptical response to the post-war enthusiasm for "civilized" progress.

"The Harvest Moon" takes place in a timeless-seeming rural landscape. It contains no historical references, apart from the metaphor of the "gold doubloon" (a Spanish gold coin last minted in 1849). This timeless quality is typical of Hughes's rural and nature poetry. However, if the poem is meant to depict the actual "end of the world" (as opposed to a seasonal change that *feels* apocalyptic), it might be set in the future!



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Hughes Documentary](#) — Watch a film about Hughes's life and poetry. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbAGbjXPCP8>)

- [Hughes, Remembered](#) — Read the 1998 New York Times obituary of Hughes, which discusses his controversial life and career. (<https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/30/books/ted-hughes-68-a-symbolic-poet-and-sylvia-plath-s-husband-dies.html>)
- [An Interview with Hughes and Plath](#) — Listen to a 1961 joint interview with Hughes and his first wife, American poet Sylvia Plath. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vqhsnk6vY8E>)
- [The Poet's Life and Work](#) — Read a short biography of Ted Hughes at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes>)
- [Exploring Hughes's Poems](#) — Three scholars at Cambridge, Hughes's alma mater, discuss the poet's work. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKMaeZ7Q1IM>)
- [What's a Harvest Moon?](#) — Learn more about the harvest moon from The Old Farmer's Almanac. (<https://www.almanac.com/content/what-harvest-moon>)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER TED HUGHES POEMS

- [A Picture of Otto](#)
- [Bayonet Charge](#)
- [Cat and Mouse](#)
- [Hawk Roosting](#)
- [Roe-Deer](#)
- [Snowdrop](#)
- [Telegraph Wires](#)
- [The Jaguar](#)
- [The Thought Fox](#)
- [Wind](#)



## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### CHICAGO MANUAL

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