The Lammas Hireling

SUMMARY

After the Lammas festival (which celebrates the wheat harvest), I was happy and had a lot of money, such was the favorable deal I made with the young man I hired. My cows loved him—they had female babies that were plump and healthy. Farm productivity doubled. I liked him because he knew when *not* to speak.

One night I was having a nightmare about my dead wife, and I followed her voice to the hireling. There he was in low light, naked except for the fox-trap cutting into his leg. I realized he was a male witch, the sort that turns into a hare. Practicing magic, as the saying goes, brings you much pain and sorrow.

I resolved to shoot him and blasted a hole through his heart—you could see the moon on the other side. Under the moonlight, he became furry—like moss growing on a stone. His head became thinner and his top lip tucked up like a hare's. His eyes grew larger like bread in an oven.

I carried his lifeless body in a sack which seemed to become lighter with every step I took. I dropped him from a bridge into the water below. His body didn't make a splash. All my cows are diseased now. I never sleep, spending my nights melting coins into bullets. I spend my days, here, at church. Bless me for my sins, Father. I last made confession an hour ago.

THEMES

PASSION, SIN, AND GUILT

The poem tells a strange story. Back in the days of witchcraft and folklore, a farmer hires a young man to help on his farm. The speaker initially adores this "hireling" (as do the cattle), but soon kills him on suspicion of being a warlock—a male witch. After this, the speaker lives in fear of reprisal, repeatedly confessing his crime (ostensibly to a priest) without ever assuaging his guilt.

At least, that's how the speaker presents things. The farmer comes across as unreliable, and it's possible to read the supernatural parts of the story as a means for the him to justify murder. Indeed, in some interpretations of the poem, readers see the speaker as harboring sexual desire for the hireling, and this repressed, illicit passion spills out into violence. The poem ultimately explores the effects of guilt, as the farmer tries to excuse his actions before realizing, over and over again, that denial and obfuscation do no good in the face of divine judgment.

The speaker seems like a man struggling to keep control of his emotional life from the start. When he employs the hireling, everything seems to go well: takings from business double and the farmer has a "light heart." The mention of the "heart" and the "dot[ing]" cattle both suggest love and attraction, perhaps giving the reader an early sign that the farmer can't help but see the hireling in these romantic terms. Talking about the hireling, he also mentions how he "grew fond of company / that knew when to shut up." In other words, the speaker liked the tense silence between himself and the hireling. "Shut[ting] up" here is perhaps a sign of emotional oppression, and there's also again a suggestion of sexual tension; perhaps the speaker is implying that he consummated an affair with the hireling, and that the hireling smartly knew not to bring this up.

The speaker then starts talking about his dead wife, but the reader never learns anything about the circumstances of her death—and, given that the speaker comes to murder the hireling, this moment introduces significant doubt as to the reliability of the narrator. Pushed into an emotional fervor by dreams of his wife, the speaker suddenly suspects the hireling of being a warlock and shoots him in the heart. Emotion and passion, then, spill over into violent action.

The way that the speaker links the "torn voice" of his dead wife to the "pale form" of the hireling seems telling. The reader might rightly ask what this new employee could really have to do with the wife—but perhaps it speaks to the conflicting feelings of passion and guilt in the speaker's subconscious. Maybe, in the unhinged world of dreams, the speaker admits his latent desire for the hireling, swapping his old object of affection (the wife) for the new (the hireling). In doing so, he feels an intense sense of having sinned and, buoyed by the extreme nature of this emotional guilt, kills the hireling in order to destroy his illicit desire.

The speaker justifies this killing by confirming that the hireling was indeed a warlock. The supernatural way that the hireling dies seems to prove the speaker's theory—but, of course, the reader has no reason to definitively trust the speaker. Casting the hireling as a warlock grants the speaker an external reason for killing him, as opposed to admitting that his actions were driven by out-of-control emotion and guilt. Perhaps, then, the speaker is *most* afraid of himself and his own feelings.

Indeed, killing the hireling doesn't even solve the speaker's fraught emotional state—it makes it worse. Shifting into the poem's present tense, the speaker relates how he now spends his time making "ball" (ammunition) for his gun. He doesn't sleep, and calls on God for help—his last confession was only an hour prior. In other words, he now exists in a paranoid state of ongoing guilt and perceived sinfulness. This shows that the act of killing the hireling—perhaps, of trying to kill his own

desires—hasn't solved the speaker's internal conflict, but merely made it worse.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

SUPERSTITION AND FOLKLORE

"The Lammas Hireling" is a poem steeped in folklore and supernatural mythology. Over the course of the poem it becomes clear that folklore and myth become a means for the speaker—a farmer—to justify his killing of a young new male employee (the hireling). The poem thus explores the role the supernatural and folklore once played in people's lives *and* shows this role in action, the farmer using it to explain what happened with the hireling.

The poem hints at the hireling's secret (and alleged) witchiness in the first stanza. The effect that he has on the speaker's farm seems almost *too* good to be true, with the farm's productivity doubling in no time at all. The reference to "shut[ing] up" in line 6 further conjures an air of secrecy.

It's then in the middle two stanzas that the poem becomes intensely mystical. The farmer tracks down the hireling, somehow linking the voice of his dead wife to the physical form of the young employee. The hireling's nakedness seems to prove to the speaker that the hireling is in fact a warlock—a male witch. The hireling isn't actively practicing magic, but the speaker seems sure (or wants to come across as sure). He calls the hireling a "cow with leather horns," which is a reference to a hare—and hares have long been associated with witches and witchcraft. The speaker then uses a supernatural proverb in line 12 and 13, saying that "to go into the hare gets you muckle sorrow"—that is, to practice witchcraft (such as turning into a hare) brings you great pain. (Of course, it's the *speaker* who then inflicts this pain, eventually shooting the hireling through the heart.)

The poem then describes the magical transformation of the hireling into a hare, with the moon casting a kind of supernatural light over the scene. The farmer quickly kills the hireling, stuffs him into a sack that magically seems to weigh less "at every step," and then tosses the body into the water without a sound. On the one hand, these details suggest the hireling's mystical identity. On the other, they can be taken as symbolic manifestations of the speaker's newfound lightness upon having disposed of someone he viewed as a threat.

And again, as noted in our previous theme discussion, it's impossible to tell how much of this section is true—and how much of it is placed there by the speaker in order to justify his killing. That is, by placing the murder within the context of supernatural evil, the speaker attempts to absolve himself of guilt—though his hourly act of confession proves that he still feels intensely guilty.

Indeed, when the farmer's herd also suffers, the speaker again blames on the supernatural too: "my herd's elf-shot." This relates to a mythological belief that shooting pains are caused by invisible elves firing invisible arrows. Of course, the fact that the speaker no longer spends any time on his farm might have something to do with the cows' poor condition too! Perhaps the whole story is true, a creepy tale of a farmer getting more than he bargained for. Or perhaps the speaker's turn to the supernatural simply suggests a refusal to take responsibility for his actions.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-5
- Lines 6-21

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

After the fair, ...
... Yields doubled.

Before looking at the main body of the poem, it's important to put the title context. The poem is set some time in the past. It's not specified when exactly, but it's certainly a time in which folklore, the supernatural, and agriculture labor held greater sway over society. It's also probably set in Northern Ireland. Lammas Day is a festival on the 1st of August to mark the wheat harvest—again linking the poem to agricultural labor. The speaker appears to take on the "hireling"—his new employee—because he needs more help on his farm.

Moving on to the poem itself, the speaker appears to hire his young new employee at a country fair linked to the festival, and, for some reason, gets a highly favorable deal ("he struck so cheap"). Indeed, the speaker is cheered—he has a "light heart"—by this bit of business. Already, the poem is notable as much for the details it leaves out as the ones it includes—why, for example, did the hireling strike such a one-sided deal?

The short phrases are given a kind of light bounciness by the caesurae in lines 1 and 2:

> After the **fair, I'd** still a light heart
> and a heavy **purse, he** struck so cheap.

The enjambment between the two lines contributes to this feeling too. This lightness of touch helps convey how, at first, things seem to go well for the farmer and his new hireling—a little too well perhaps. The hireling brings appears to bring good fortune and has an instinctive relationship with the farmer's cattle (they "dote[]" on him). Business booms—in fact, it doubles.

It's also worth noting how the past tense affects the speaker's dramatic monologue. The poem already has a sense of foreboding, a sense that all these good things can't last forever. The word "still" makes an important contribution, separating the time when the speaker had a "light heart" from the poem's present, in which the speaker's heart is anything but light.

LINES 5-8

I grew fond ...
... his pale form.

The sentence that starts after line 5's caesura is crucial to understanding the speaker's character. As this poem is a dramatic monologue, everything that the reader learns about the speaker is filtered through the speaker's own choice of words. It's impossible to know, then, what the speaker chooses to deliberately leave out or misrepresent from his story. What he *does* say, however, offers clues to his personality and perhaps lets on more than he intends about what happened between him and the hireling.

Here, then, the speaker tells the reader one of the reasons why he liked the hireling so much: "I grew fond of company / that knew when to shut up." There's something dramatic about the enjambment here that signals a change in tone; "when to shut up" seems to suddenly introduce a hint or threat of violence to the poem. It also introduces the notion of repression to the poem: the speaker apparently prefers not to talk about his feelings. Given that the poem now shifts to a discussion of his dead wife, it's not unreasonable to suspect that the speaker might have had conflicted feelings towards the hireling, possibly of a sexual nature—and that these contributed to the fraught state of mind that resulted in him killing his young employee.

Indeed, the shift in the speaker's attention from the hireling to his late wife seems telling. Perhaps it signals that both represented objects of desire in his life. That said, there's no information about how the wife died—maybe the speaker is responsible for that death too. Indeed, the obvious alliteration in this line—"disturbed from dreams of my dear late wife"—feels in a way contrived, as if the speaker is trying to deliberately convince the reader that his wife really was "dear" to him. That said, part of the poem's power is in its ambiguity—this interpretation isn't necessarily correct!

This link between the dead wife and the young hireling is then emphasized in line 8. The speaker hunts down the voice of his wife to the "pale form" of the hireling (the emphasis on the body of the hireling suggests that this really does have something to do with the repression of sexual attraction). The assonance and consonance of the wife's "torn voice" with "form" further links these two characters in the speaker's psyche (though the speaker isn't necessarily conscious of this).

LINES 9-13

Stock-still in the ...
... runs, muckle care.

From line 9 onwards, the speaker describes the events that occur once he tracks down the "torn voice" of his late wife to the "pale form" of the hireling. Here, the poem takes an intentionally weird turn, ramping up its mythological and supernatural atmosphere.

The speaker finds the hireling frozen in the low light of a lantern (emphasized by the alliteration between "light" and "lantern"). The hireling is entirely naked, which again suggests that the violence that follows has something to do with repressed sexual desire. The hireling's foot is caught in a "fox-trap," a detail that goes unexplained—perhaps the speaker lay this trap for him. It's possible the speaker assumes the hireling had transformed himself into a hare and gotten caught in the trap.

The visual image here is bizarre and grotesque, and the speaker believes that he has found confirmation that the hireling is indeed a "warlock" (a male witch). The speaker provides no proof of this other than his own assertion. With the main detail being the hireling's nakedness, the poem thus draws a link between evil and the nude male figure. Again, this suggests that what's actually happening in the poem is the violent outburst of repressed sexuality (though it should be stressed that this can't be confirmed for certain).

The poem here alludes to an old Irish myth that witches turn into hares—"a cow with leather horns" is, according to Duhig himself, a riddle describing a hare. The mention of horns also gestures towards the shape of a phallus (a man's genitalia), perhaps another subconscious clue to the speaker's conflicted feelings towards the hireling. Lines 12 and 13 are truly (and intentionally) mysterious:

> To go into the hare gets you muckle sorrow,
> the wisdom runs, muckle care.

"Muckle" here means "more." Duhig explains these lines as follows:

> There's one rhyme in this that I suppose it might be helpful for people to have pointed out, and that's the one "to go into the hare gets you muckle sorrow, muckle care"- that's from the Annals of Pursuit which is a North Country witches' chant, restored by Robert Graves.

These lines, then, are some kind of supernatural proverb or spell. They are intended to justify the speaker's killing of the hireling—but it's hard for the reader to see how. Perhaps there is even another hint of sexual fantasy in the phrase "go into the

hare" (which also means "to transform into the hare").

LINES 13-18

I levelled ...
... rose like bread.

The section after the full stop caesura in line 13, at the start of stanza three, represents the poem's main event—the shooting of the hireling by the speaker. The speaker claims that this shooting is based on the knowledge that the hireling was a warlock (a male witch). The speaker blows "the small hour through his heart"—perhaps an allusion to the witching hour (between midnight and 1:00 am). Intensifying the poem's supernatural atmosphere, the speaker recounts how "the moon came out." It's almost as if the moon comes out of the hireling himself. The moon is a symbol of witchcraft, but this also spells out how there is now a hole where the hireling's heart used to be (a hole through which light can pass).

The speaker has a point to prove: his justification for killing the hireling *depends* on the hireling actually being a warlock, and so the speaker is keen to highlight the supernatural evidence of witchcraft. /L/ consonance runs through these lines to highlight the way the gunshot moves through the hireling's chest ("I levelled / and blew the small hour through his heart"). Perhaps it's significant that the speaker shoots the hireling specifically though the heart—the heart, of course, represents passion, attraction, and love. Again, this suggests that the repression of these feelings causes the killing the first place.

The hireling undergoes a transformation, supposedly turning into a hare (in keeping with the poem's mythological background). His body covers over with hair. Notice the speaker's focus on the hireling's physical appearance—it's another suggestion of homoerotic tension, which is a possible motive for the killing. The speaker lets slip that he finds the hireling's head "lovely." The sentences here all begin with the same word, "His" (a device known as anaphora), showing the speaker's intense focus on the hireling's body. Indeed, the focus on the "top lip" hints at sexual desire (kissing). The simile—"his eyes rose like bread"—ties this event back to the wheat harvest, when the two characters first met.

LINES 18-21

I carried him ...
... my herd's elf-shot.

After the full-stop caesura that follows "bread," the speaker recounts what he did with the hireling's body. It's worth noting the way that the story doesn't unfold neatly throughout the stanzas—that is, the different stanzas don't really correspond to the different sections of the speaker's story. Instead, the story unfolds somewhat awkwardly across stanzas, particularly here—and this perhaps reflects the speaker's troubled state of mind.

In fact, whatever the speaker's motives for killing the hireling, the fraught state of his mind is one thing that the reader *can* reliably confirm in this poem. The enjambment across the stanzas is intentionally cumbersome, perhaps to suggest the heaviness of the hireling's body (despite the speaker's protestation his body "grew lighter" with every step).

So, with the hireling shot dead, the speaker puts him in a sack in order to dispose of the body. There is a macabre sense of humor here—both the speaker and the hireling are more used to carrying sacks of agricultural produce than dead bodies. The speaker continues to try and convince the reader that the hireling was a warlock by claiming that "there was no / splash" when he dropped the body off the bridge. The enjambment creates an ironic emphasis on the word "splash."

After the full-stop caesura following "splash," the poem moves into the present tense. The speaker explains how his herd of cattle fell to ruin after he killed the hireling (which, again, he blames on the hireling's supernatural status). "Elfshot" is an allusion to the Anglo-Saxon explanation for certain shooting pains in animals (and people)—invisible arrows fired by invisible elves.

LINES 21-24

I don't dream ...
... my last confession.

The poem concludes with an image of the speaker in the present day, suffering from perpetual paranoia. Since he killed the Lammas hireling, the speaker has barely slept. This ongoing wakefulness is signaled by the enjambment after "dream" in line 21: "I don't dream / but spend my nights casting ball from half-crowns." Instead of sleeping, he spends his nights making ammunition for his gun. The alliteration, consonance, and assonance here create an image of something deliberately made, the construction of the poem's sound hinting at the speaker's making of ball (the ammunition). He seems, perhaps, to fear the hireling's return, or some kind of supernatural avenger.

The speaker informs the reader that he now spends his days "here." The location isn't specified, but it *is* suggested by the sentence that comes after the full-stop caesura: "Bless me Father for I have sinned." This is an allusion to the Catholic tradition, perhaps revealing that the speaker spends his days in a church (where he can confess his sins). This notion of sinfulness is important. Obviously, the speaker has committed the sin of murder. But it's quite plausible given the earlier evidence that his main source of guilt is his sexual attraction to the hireling, the moral transgression of his repressed sexuality. Indeed, perhaps that's why his paranoia is ongoing—he still feels that way.

Not only does this moment frame the speaker's words, it also casts the reader in the role of priest. That is, it is the reader who hears the confession. The poem ends by doubling down on this sense of ongoing paranoia with the speaker's absurd

statement in the last line:

> It has been an hour since my last confession.

This implies that the speaker is confessing on an hourly basis, ultimately suggesting that the act of confession *isn't* really helping with his sense of guilt. The poem thus ends on a cliffhanger, with no clue as to what will happen next to the speaker.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

Allusion is used throughout "The Lammas Hireling." Most of the allusions in the poem refer to folklore and mythology from Ireland and Britain. Part of the poem's power comes from the mystery of these allusions, and in particular the distance between what they mean to the speaker and what they mean to the reader. That is, to the speaker allusions to mythology help him justify killing the hireling—but most modern readers won't be familiar with his references. This creates tension throughout the poem, in keeping with the dark subject matter.

In line 11, the speaker alludes to an Irish riddle about hares: "a cow with leather horns." This plays on another myth, which says that witches sometimes turn into hares. Lines 12 and 13 continue this allusion, offering up a puzzling proverb:

> To go into the hare gets you muckle sorrow,
> the wisdom runs, muckle care.

"Muckle" here means much. The sentence is warning against witchcraft, but also has a faint suggestion of repressed sexuality (going "*into*"). The third stanza continues this allusion, with the hireling allegedly turning into a hare before the speaker's eyes. Relatedly, "elf-shot" in line 21 alludes to the Anglo-Saxon belief that shooting pains are caused by invisible arrows fired by invisible elves.

The other main allusion is in the last two lines:

> ... Bless me Father for I have sinned.
> It has been an hour since my last confession.

The two sentences highlighted above situate the speaker in the Catholic tradition, and suggest that he feels intensely guilty about what he has done (hence the obsessive confessions). The allusion also turns the reader into a kind of priest figure, hearing the speaker's confession (and casting judgment upon it). The guilt may not be about the killing itself, but the speaker's possible homosexual feelings towards the hireling.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-18:** "I knew him a warlock, a cow with leather horns. / To go into the hare gets you muckle sorrow, / the wisdom runs, muckle care. I levelled / and blew the small hour through his heart. / The moon came out. By its yellow witness / I saw him fur over like a stone mossing. / His lovely head thinned. His top lip gathered. / His eyes rose like bread."
- **Line 21:** "Now my herd's elf-shot."
- **Lines 23-24:** "Bless me Father for I have sinned. / It has been an hour since my last confession."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used relatively sparingly in "The Lammas Hireling."

An early, striking use of alliteration happens at the start of the second stanza:

> disturbed from dreams of my dear late wife,
> I hunted down her torn voice to his pale form.

The repeated /d/ sounds suggest restlessness, evoking the speaker's troubled sleep. But there's also something a bit try-hard about them, as though the speaker *really* wants to convince the reader that his wife was "dear" to him (though for all the reader knows, he could have killed her too).

The alliteration in the following lines, 9 and 10, comes as the speaker confronts the naked hireling, apparently convinced that the young employee is a warlock (essentially a male witch). The alliterative "stock-still" and "bloody boot" show the speaker's intense focus on the physical form of the hireling, perhaps suggesting repressed sexual attraction. And the soft /l/ sound of "light" and "lantern" suggests the darkness of the night.

Finally, the poem also uses alliteration in line 22 in the final stanza:

> but spend my nights casting ball from half-crowns

These alliterating /k/ sounds draw attention to the poem as a *made* object. This mirrors the speaker's obsessive nighttime activity—making "ball" (ammunition) for his gun so that he's armed should the hireling return (or something come to seek vengeance for the hireling's death).

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "heart"
- **Line 2:** "heavy," "he struck so"
- **Line 4:** "cream"
- **Line 5:** "company"

- **Line 6:** "knew," "night"
- **Line 7:** "disturbed," "dreams," "dear"
- **Line 8:** "hunted," "her," "his"
- **Line 9:** "Stock-still," "light," "lantern"
- **Line 10:** "stark," "but for," "bloody boot," "fox"
- **Line 11:** "him," "warlock," "with," "horns"
- **Line 12:** "go," "gets"
- **Line 17:** "His," "head," "His"
- **Line 18:** "His," "him"
- **Line 19:** "sack," "step"
- **Line 21:** "don't dream"
- **Line 22:** "casting," "crowns"
- **Line 23:** "Father for"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is used sparingly in "The Lammas Hireling," occurring only in the third stanza:

> His lovely head thinned. His top lip gathered.
> His eyes rose like bread.

This section describes the hireling's transformation—having been shot through the heart by the speaker—from human form into a hare (supposedly confirming his identity as a warlock).

The anaphora achieves three main effects. Firstly, it slows the poem down, making this moment intense and dramatic (caesura also contributes here). Secondly, it gives the reader a sense of the stages of the hireling's transformation, each phrase describing the next step in the transition from human to hare. Thirdly and finally, the anaphora shows the speaker's intense focus on the hireling's physical form. The speaker can't take his eyes off the hireling, noticing the minutiae of his supposed transformation. This lingering perhaps suggests an element of repressed sexuality, which could be the real cause for the killing in the first place (indeed, the word "lovely" seems to give the game away here).

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-18:** "His lovely head thinned. His top lip gathered. / His eyes rose like bread."

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used quite sparingly in "The Lammas Hireling." The vowel sounds in the poem are undoubtedly evocative, but this isn't necessarily through their similarity. Indeed, many of the poem's sonic effects are achieved not through sound patterning but through the unfamiliarity of its words, phrases, and diction. Instead, assonance achieves a quieter, more subtle effect.

That said, assonance *is* used in the very first line:

> After the fair, I'd still a light heart

The assonance here is delicate, suggesting this short-lived "lightness" of heart that the speaker experienced when he first employed the young hireling. Another significant example is in line 8, the second line of stanza two:

> I hunted down her torn voice to his pale form.

The two /o/ sounds create a link here between the "late wife" and the hireling ("voice" is arguably assonant here as well). What's behind this link is up to the reader to theorize, but it could be that the wife's voice seems to attach to the hireling's physical form, indicating a conflict in the speaker's sexuality (that is, he was *supposed* to desire his wife but instead has repressed homosexual feelings).

Striking assonance appears in lines 14 and 15, which are part of the stanza that describes the supernatural transformation of the hireling into a hare.

> and blew the small hour through his heart.
> The moon came out ...

The assonance on the /oo/ sound here adds a musical quality to these lines that, in combination with the consonance of this stanza, is suggestive of a spell or incantation.

There is also assonance in line 22, which describes the speaker's current nighttime obsession:

> but spend my nights casting ball from half-crowns

The use of assonance here reminds the reader that the poem is something that is made and constructed. This in turn relates to the single-mindedness of the speaker's nocturnal habits—*making* ammunition for his gun in case the hireling, or some other creature, should return.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I'd," "light"
- **Line 2:** "heavy," "he," "cheap"
- **Line 3:** "him: in his," "time"
- **Line 4:** "mine," "fat as cream"
- **Line 5:** "Yields doubled," "grew," "company"
- **Line 6:** "knew when to shut up. Then one"
- **Line 7:** "dreams," "dear"
- **Line 8:** "torn," "form"
- **Line 10:** "but," "one bloody"
- **Line 11:** "warlock," "horns"
- **Line 12:** "go," "sorrow"
- **Line 13:** "runs, muckle"
- **Line 14:** "blew," "through"

- **Line 15:** “moon,” “ witness”
- **Line 16:** “him,” “over,” “stone”
- **Line 17:** “His,” “thinned. His,” “lip”
- **Line 18:** “His”
- **Line 19:** “sack that,” “every step”
- **Line 22:** “my nights casting,” “half”
- **Line 23:** “here,” “me,” “sinned”
- **Line 24:** “It”

CAESURA

Caesura is used throughout "The Lammas Hireling." In fact, fourteen of the poem's twenty-four lines have at least one caesura! This has a general effect on the poem, disrupting its flow and conveying the troubled mind of the speaker. Indeed, though the poem is an unreliable dramatic monologue, the one thing that the reader knows for sure is that the speaker's mind is fraught and on edge. The abrupt stop-start rhythms created by the caesurae are a key part of this effect.

That said, the caesurae in lines 1 and 2 give the opening a lightness of touch:

> After the fair, I'd still a light heart
> and a heavy purse, he struck so cheap.

This fits with the speaker's happy memories of the initial meeting between him and the hireling. The next key caesura is in line 6, quoted with line 5 for context:

> Yields doubled. I grew fond of company
> that knew when to shut up. Then one night,

This caesura adds a dramatic punch to the speaker's statement that one of the reasons he liked the hireling was because he "knew when to shut up," the full stop caesura making the sentence itself shut up accordingly.

In lines 17 and 18, the caesurae work with the anaphora (the repeated "His" at the beginning of the phrases):

> His lovely head thinned. His top lip gathered.
> His eyes rose like bread. I carried him

These caesurae slow the poem down, making this section more dramatic.

The other key caesurae is in line 21, quoted with line 10 for context:

> and dropped him from a bridge. There was no
> splash. Now my herd's elf-shot.

The caesura after "splash" could even be called ironic—the speaker is attempting to prove the hireling was an evil supernatural being by claiming that he made no "splash" in the water. But the caesura creates huge emphasis on the word "splash," making it louder and perhaps suggesting that there really *was* a splash when the body hit the river.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “fair, I’d”
- **Line 2:** “purse, he”
- **Line 3:** “him: in”
- **Line 4:** “heifers, fat”
- **Line 5:** “doubled. I”
- **Line 6:** “up. Then”
- **Line 11:** “warlock, a”
- **Line 13:** “runs, muckle,” “care. I”
- **Line 15:** “out. By”
- **Line 17:** “thinned. His”
- **Line 18:** “bread. I”
- **Line 20:** “bridge. There”
- **Line 21:** “splash. Now,” “elf-shot. I”
- **Line 23:** “here. Bless”

CONSONANCE

Consonance is a subtle presence throughout "The Lammas Hireling." The poem does use very evocative language, but this is often achieved through the strangeness of its vocabulary or phrases rather than obvious sound patterning. Instead, consonance quietly underpins the poem's more noticeable strangeness.

The first four lines are very consonant, creating a sense of beauty and richness that reflects the initial good fortune that farmer seems to have with the hireling. Note the gentle /t/ sounds, the humming /m/ sounds, breathy /h/ and /f/, and resonant /d/:

> After the fair, I'd still a light heart
> and a heavy purse, he struck so cheap.
> And cattle doted on him: in his time
> mine only dropped heifers, fat as cream.

The sound here conveys the speaker's long-gone happiness—which was back when he first employed the hireling and business was going well.

The middle two stanzas represent the peak of the poem's use of consonance. The main effect is to make this section sound almost like a spell, or series of spells—which fits with the supernatural content. For example:

> the wisdom runs, muckle care. I levelled
> and blew the small hour through his heart.
> The moon came out. By its yellow witness
> I saw him fur over like a stone mossing.

The sounds in this section are part of the speaker's attempt to prove that he was justified in killing the hireling. The intensity of the consonance (combined with assonance of phrases like "blew," "through," and "moon") creates a sense of richness. The language feels elevated and special, like that of an epic tale (or, again, a spell or incantation).

The last few lines use /s/ consonance, along with the /z/ and /sh/ sounds:

> ... I don't dream
> but spend my nights casting ball from half-crowns
> and my days here. Bless me Father for I have sinned.
> It has been an hour since my last confession.

These /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds (also known as sibilance) are tied to the speaker's obsession about his own sinfulness. The sounds are like whispers of his guilty conscience.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Line 21
- Line 22
- Line 23
- Line 24

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used throughout "The Lammas Hireling." Indeed, every stanza has at least once instance of enjambment. The first effect to notice is the way that the enjambment works with caesura throughout the poem to make it feel fraught and tense, reflecting the speaker's guilt-ridden and paranoid state of mind.

At first, though, the enjambment between lines 1 and 2 sounds light, evoking the speaker's happier times (when he first employed the hireling):

> After the fair, I'd still a light heart
> and a heavy purse, he struck so cheap.

Likewise for lines 3 and 4:

> And cattle doted on him: in his time
> mine only dropped heifers, fat as cream.

These instances capture the speaker's buoyancy after the fair. But the enjambment changes direction with lines 5 and 6:

> Yields doubled. I grew fond of company
> that knew when to shut up.

Notice the way that this suddenly and violently changes the poem's tone. Out of nowhere the speaker describes how one of his main reasons for liking the hireling was his ability to "shut up." This phrase suggests aggression and anger, perhaps hinting at the speaker's repression of his attraction to the hireling. From here on in, the poem is much darker.

The enjambment between lines 13 and 14, at the beginning of stanza three, creates a sense of heightened drama as the speaker describes shooting the hireling:

> ... I levelled
> and blew the small hour through his heart.

The enjambment at the end of this stanza is even more dramatic, enjambing over the stanza break:

> His eyes rose like bread. I carried him
> in a sack that grew lighter at every step

The awkwardness of the enjambment here suggests the cumbersome weight of the hireling's body (the speaker's suggestion that he "grew lighter at every step" shouldn't necessarily be trusted).

The enjambment between lines 20 and 21 creates ironic emphasis on the word "splash": "There was no / splash." This makes the poem land on it heavily (which seems to contradict the speaker's insistence that the body made *no* splash because of its supernatural reality).

And in lines 21 to 22 in the fourth stanza, the enjambment after "dream" suggests the ongoing sleeplessness of the speaker as he sits up: "I don't dream / but spend my nights casting ball." It's as if the speaker is expecting retribution, waiting for someone to show up for revenge.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "heart / and"
- **Lines 3-4:** "time / mine"
- **Lines 5-6:** "company / that"
- **Lines 13-14:** "levelled / and"
- **Lines 15-16:** "witness / I"
- **Lines 18-19:** "him / in"
- **Lines 20-21:** "no / splash"
- **Lines 21-22:** "dream / but"
- **Lines 22-23:** "half-crowns / and"

METAPHOR

"The Lammas Hireling" uses such strange vocabulary and phrases that it's sometimes hard to know what the speaker intends literally or metaphorically! That's part of the poem's mysterious power.

In the beginning, the speaker uses one of the most common metaphors in the English language: comparing the "heart" to an emotional state. The "light[ness]" of the speaker's "heart" conveys how happy he was when he first employed the young hireling. (This also contrasts with his shooting of the hireling through the *heart*, suggesting it is a crime of passion.)

In line 8, the speaker references his wife's "torn voice" to describe the feeling that her voice is coming from the hireling's "pale form": "I hunted down her torn voice to his pale form." It's as if the dead wife's voice has been ripped away from her and installed in the hireling's body.

Lines 11, near the end of stanza two, uses metaphorical language in its allusion to witchcraft and mythology: "A cow with leather horns" is a riddling metaphor for a hare. It imagines the hare's long ears as cow horns made of flaps of leather.

The third stanza contains the key metaphorical moments in the poem:

> ... I levelled
> and blew the small hour through his heart.
> The moon came out. By its yellow witness
> I saw him fur over ...

"Blow[ing] the small hour" is a metaphor for a gunshot, as if the speaker is marking the time by shooting the hireling. The moon's appearance could be interpreted as a figurative way to describe the hole created by the gunfire. And finally, "its yellow witness" metaphorically describes the moonlight as a witness to this crime.

Next, in the rest of the stanza, the transformation of the hireling from human to hare could be interpreted as metaphorical description of the hireling's dying moments. That is, rather than being read literally, this moment could be interpreted as comparing the hireling's death to a transformation into an animal.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a light heart"
- **Line 8:** "her torn voice"
- **Line 11:** "a cow with leather horns"
- **Lines 13-19:** "I levelled / and blew the small hour through his heart. / The moon came out. By its yellow witness / I saw him fur over like a stone mossing. / His lovely head thinned. His top lip gathered. / His eyes rose like bread. I carried him / in a sack that grew lighter at every step"

SIMILE

"The Lammas Hireling" uses three similes.

The first occurs in the first stanza, when the speaker says the cattle are "fat as cream." This is a straightforward simile, saying the fat content of the cows is as high as the fat content as cream. This simile of course also ties in with the fact that these fat cows are probably also producing a lot of milk.

The next similes are both in the third stanza, when the speaker describes shooting the hireling and the latter's subsequent death. The first is in lines 15 and 16:

> The moon came out. By its yellow witness
> I saw him fur over like a stone mossing.

According to the (unreliable) speaker, the hireling turns into a hare by the light of the moon. This transformation is "like a stone mossing"—like a stone gathering moss, except, of course, much quicker. Of course, a stone is in an inanimate object, so this simile also suggests the stillness of death.

The other simile is part of the same section, again describing the hireling's death/transformation: "His eyes rose like bread." There is a kind of irony at play here—describing the dead eyes like rising bread reminds the reader of the poem's gentle opening. Back then, the speaker was overjoyed by the hireling, and business was booming (rising). The Lammas festival marks the harvesting of the wheat (which in turn is used in bread), and in a way the hireling's life too has been harvested—cut away from its life force. This is also a straight-up bizarre image, which casts doubt on the speaker's state of mind.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "fat as cream"
- **Lines 15-16:** "By its yellow witness / I saw him fur over like a stone mossing."
- **Line 18:** "His eyes rose like bread."

VOCABULARY

The Lammas Hireling () - *The Lammas* is an old festival that marks the wheat harvest, falling on August the 1st. *Hireling* means new employee. The speaker, then, hires the young "warlock" at the Lammas fair (a common way of finding laborers).

Fair (Line 1) - A kind of festival with stalls and amusements. This one also has people looking for work.

Light Heart (Line 1) - Happy; high in spirits.

Heavy Purse (Line 2) - Lots of money.

Struck So Cheap (Line 2) - The hireling was a bargain to employ.

Doted (Line 3) - Paid affectionate attention to.

Dropped Heifers (Line 4) - Gave birth to healthy female cows (which is what a cattle farmer tends to want).

Yields (Line 5) - This could relate to agricultural produce (like milk) and/or financial return.

Stock-still (Line 9) - Frozen without movement.

Fox-trap (Line 10) - As the name suggests, a trap for foxes laid on the ground (that closes its sharp teeth when triggered). Just *why* the hireling is caught in this trap is unknown.

Warlock (Line 11) - A male witch.

Muckle (Line 12, Line 13) - A dialect word meaning "much."

Levelled (Line 13) - Aimed (with a gun).

Small Hour (Line 14) - Could be a reference to the witching hour (between midnight and 1 a.m.).

Elf-Shot (Line 21) - Suffering from shooting pains. This refers to an Anglo-Saxon myth that invisible elves fire invisible arrows that cause these pains.

Casting Ball (Line 22) - Making ammunition.

Half-Crowns (Line 22) - A type of coin.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Lammas Hireling" consists of four sestets (six-line stanzas). The poem is a dramatic monologue told in the past tense—up until the final stanza, which brings the action into the present.

The first stanza describes a brief period of happiness. Just after taking on the hireling from the fair, everything was going well for the speaker. His farm was making profits and he was feeling happy. Things take a darker turn in the second stanza when the speaker links his dead wife's voice to the "pale form" of the hireling, perceiving the latter to be a male witch. In the third stanza, the speaker recounts how he shot the hireling, and how the hireling (supposedly) transformed into a hare (proof that he was supernatural and evil).

The final stanza offers up a kind of perpetual present, with the speaker spelling out his repetitive behavior: he confesses his crime during the day and makes ammunition by night. This final stanza also transforms the reader's role, making the reader into a priest figure who hears the confession.

One other thing to note about the form is the way the sentences unfold. They are abrupt and disjointed, often stretched or stopped by enjambment and caesura. Furthermore, no stanza is self-contained: in each, the ending sentence wraps around into the next stanza. This gives the poem a fraught sense of tension, which fits with the speaker's troubled state of mind.

METER

"The Lammas Hireling" is written in free verse, so it doesn't have a metrical scheme. The free verse allows the poem to create a more disjointed feel that fits with the speaker's troubled state of mind (so troubled that he doesn't sleep and confesses in church all day long!). The lack of meter also perhaps signals that the speaker is thinking on his feet, trying to create a convincing story to justify his killing of the hireling.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Lammas Hireling" doesn't use rhyme. In fact, it doesn't use all that much sound patterning generally. This is probably for two reasons. Firstly, it would seem too orderly and organized if the poem *was* neatly rhymed—it wouldn't really fit with the speaker's sleepless and paranoid state of mind. Secondly, the vocabulary and phrases in the poem are already intensely strange, drawing on folklore and mythology. Keeping the tone fairly conversational lets this strangeness ring out more clearly.

That said, there is an exception fo this. It's the internal rhyme between the end of the second stanza and the beginning of the third: "To go into the hare gets you muckle sorrow, // the wisdom runs, muckle care." The rhyme here gives the sense that this is a kind of proverb. In fact, according to Duhig (as quoted by the Poetry Archive):

> There's one rhyme in this that I suppose it might be helpful for people to have pointed out, and that's the one "to go into the hare gets you muckle sorrow, muckle care"- that's from the Annals of Pursuit which is a North Country witches' chant, restored by Robert Graves.

So, just as the speaker is about to kill the hireling for practicing witchcraft, he himself breaks away from his conversational tone into a witchlike chant. In doing so, he captures the supernatural feeling of this scene and also casts doubt on his reliability as a

narrator.

SPEAKER

The first-person speaker in "The Lammas Hireling" is a farmer from sometime in the past. The poem takes the form of a dramatic monologue—so the only words that the reader has to go on belong to the speaker himself. This makes the speaker an unreliable narrator. It's hard, then, to necessarily trust his account of events, particularly as it seems so fantastical.

One of the most noticeable things about the speaker is the strangeness of his language. Either he genuinely believes in warlocks, witches turning into hares, and malicious elves—or he feels that mentioning these will help make him seem less guilty over the hireling's death.

And though the poem starts lightly, with the speaker recounting a happier time, violence soon starts to creep into his language and, then, his actions. He seems extremely confused by the hireling, and there's strong evidence that this is based on repressed sexual desire (though this evidence is veiled and unclear, since the speaker wants to hide it). With that in mind, the "light heart" in the first stanza seems to suggest passionate feelings for the hireling, and the fondness of the hireling's ability to "shut up" conveys the speaker's unwillingness to talk openly.

But it's in the speaker's unconscious mind where this sinful attraction takes shape. He confuses his dead wife with the hireling, suggesting a conflict of desire. It's plausible to read the killing as an act of unspent sexual desire, the speaker trying to eradicate his homosexual feelings by destroying the very thing that brings them into existence.

But killing the hireling only makes the speaker more paranoid. Back in the poem's present day, all the farmer can do is confess his sins or make ammunition for this gun. In other words, the intensity of his feelings—and his inability to resolve his inner conflict—makes him go insane.

SETTING

"The Lammas Hireling" is set in the past, though it's not specified exactly when. The emphasis on agricultural labor and folklore and mythology (drawn from British and Irish traditions) suggests that it's at least as far back as the 18th century, possibly further. Seasonally, it begins after the Lammas fair, which falls on the 1st of August and marks the wheat harvest.

That said, the above elements of the setting only really exist in the poem because they are selected by the speaker himself. Furthermore, the poem makes an important shift in the final stanza, switching to the present tense. The speaker uses a key word, "here," which leads in to his act of confession: "Bless me Father for I have sinned." That makes it likely that the speaker is actually in a church, casting the reader unwittingly as the priest (hearing the sins of the speaker).

The supernatural world is also an important part of the setting, informing the atmosphere of the poem (if it's only a metaphor, or even a lie). The third stanza in particular has a very fairy tale-like quality to it.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Ian Duhig is a contemporary British poet and short story writer. He has published seven collections with the publishers Bloodaxe and Picador and won numerous poetry awards, including the National Poetry Competition twice (once for this poem itself).

Duhig's work is steeped in a love of language and wide cultural learning. This poem intentionally makes use of the arcane—references and vocabulary that most readers will not, on first glance, be familiar with. This is part of the way the poem builds its atmosphere of mystery and suspense, with phrases like "to go into the hare gets you muckle sorrow" requiring the reader's active engagement.

Poetry, of course, has a longstanding relationship with witchcraft—with poetry often thought of as casting a kind of spell, and magic spells themselves often borrowing the rhythms and cadences of poetic form. Readers who like this sort of thing should read Duhig's collection of the same name (*The Lammas Hireling*). Sylvia Plath's "Witch Burning" is similarly about the punishment of a supernatural creature. Also worth checking out is the anthology *Spells: 21st Century Occult Poetry* complied by Rebecca Tamás, So Mayer, and Sarah Shin.

In its use of an unreliable narrator and the dramatic monologue form, the poem also has links to the works of Robert Browning. His poem "My Last Duchess" makes for relevant reading—it too has a narrator telling the story of how someone died, perhaps inadvertently implicating themselves in the crime.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Lammas Hireling" doesn't specify when it is set, but it certainly feels like a fairly distant past, a time in Britain and Ireland when belief in witches and the supernatural held greater control over the population. Lammas day is a festival which marks the annual wheat harvest (August 1st), though it is no longer practiced widely in the British Isles. Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* is born on Lammas eve—the night before, also signifying that her life ends before it's meant to.

Duhig himself emphasizes the influence of the Northumbrian landscape (in the northeast of England) on the poems in this collection, though the main idea comes from a story he heard in

Northern Ireland (as quoted by the Poetry Archive):

> [The poem is] based on a story I heard when I was in Northern Ireland, out for a very late night walk, a local person pointed out a house he told me was where the local witches used to live, and in their tradition witches would change into hares, and when the father was dying, his family was very embarrassed because the father's body was turning into a hare's and this bloke told me the story said he attended the funeral and the last thing you could hear was the hare's paws beating the lid of the coffin as they lowered it into the ground. Hare stories are sort of found all over England and Europe in fact. There's one rhyme in this that I suppose it might be helpful for people to have pointed out, and that's the one "to go into the hare gets you muckle sorrow, muckle care"- that's from the Allansford Pursuit which is a North Country witches' chant, restored by Robert Graves. "A cow with leather horns" is another name for a hare – if you think about it you'll see why. The story is: a farmer gets a young man from a hiring fair, which is how labour was engaged well into the last century, and takes him home with him, and finds he's got more than he bargained for.

It's easy to forget how much of a hold ideas of witchcraft and the supernatural once had over people. Witchcraft was not always considered evil, though was often treated with suspicion and fear. It was officially deemed an offense in Britain in 1563. From the late 15th century to the mid-1700s around 200,000 supposed witches were killed or tortured. Witches were often depicted as haggard old women (making this poem a kind of subversive take on the usual cliché).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More Poems and a Bio of Duhig — A valuable resource from the Poetry Archive. (https://poetryarchive.org/poet/ian-duhig/)
- Witchcraft and Britain — A short and interesting take on witches' place in society through the centuries. (https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Witches-in-Britain/)
- The Allansford Pursuit — A witches' chant restored by poet Robert Graves from manuscript fragments (which the Duhig's poem alludes to). (https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/1552775-the-allansford-pursuit---robert-graves)
- Duhig Interviewed — An insightful interview with the poet for The Compass magazine. (http://www.thecompassmagazine.co.uk/ian-duhig-interview/)
- A Reading by Ian Duhig — Footage of Duhig performing the poem in 2016. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrBwK-b9zwo)

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