Farmhand

SUMMARY

The speaker describes a young farmhand standing outside a dance hall as if he doesn't have a care in the world—casually smoking, leaning against the wall, or joking with a friend. Sometimes he stares off into the dark, covert night.

And yet, the speaker says, the farmhand always ends up gazing back at the dance floor—and at all the pretty, delicate girls twirling around on it—until the sound of the music coming from the hall slowly, painfully reminds him of some past trauma or rejection.

The farmhand's sunburned face and hairy hands aren't suited to dancing or romancing. His body was made for farm work—for making the mounds of dirt rise before his plow like waves in the ocean and for dealing with crops, whose slow growth reflects the slowness of his mind.

He doesn't have a girlfriend to play with his dark blond hair or to laugh at his jokes when they take walks together on Sundays. Instead, the only audience for his stories are his own uncomfortable wishes and jealous desires.

Even so, you'd be impressed if you ever saw him working the harvest, setting sheaves of wheat together with such natural strength and skill—or if you saw the way he listens like an enraptured lover to the clear, perfect sound of a new tractor engine.

THEMES

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

"Farmhand" centers on a young farmworker playing it cool outside a dance hall even as he inwardly longs to join the fun and find a girlfriend. The rough, practical farmhand doesn't feel like he belongs in the world represented by the dance floor, however, and instead is in his element only when out in the fields. Through his story, the poem suggests that people are suited to certain roles in life while also relaying the painful conflict that arises when someone's deepest desires conflict with those roles.

The farmhand is a skilled and dedicated laborer whose outward appearance reflects how suited he is to his work. He is "effortless and strong," for example, and the roughness of his hands reflects his intimate connection with the land. In other words, his external identity embodies the role he plays in society: that of a tough, practical, working man.

But the farmhand also clearly longs to break out of this role, at least during the dance. His internal desires thus don't totally line up with the identity he projects; though he seems easy with jokes and calm and collected outside the dance hall—apparently embracing his separation from such a frivolous party—deep down he has "awkward hopes" and "envious dreams," casting a lingering gaze on the girls at the dance and wishing he could find a girl to shower him with affection.

To the farmhand, these girls seem to represent an utterly alien form of life. While they are delicate, beautiful, and flower-like—clearly not used to the kind of manual labor that fills his days—his face is "sunburnt" and his hands are "hairy." The farmhand senses the contrast between himself and the girls deeply, despite what his seemingly confident persona might suggest.

The farmhand thus lingers at the door of the dance hall as though there is a kind of force field keeping him outside it. And in a way, there is: the speaker argues that the farmhand was in fact not "made for dancing or love-making." According to the poem, then, the issue isn't just that people's inner selves and appearances don't always match up; it's that people are *made* a certain way, and that they can't change who they are regardless of their heart's desires. The farmhand can no more do the latest dance craze than the young dancers can stack hay or drive a tractor, at least in the speaker's view.

As such, it's only when he's back in the fields where he presumably belongs that the farmhand becomes a vision of perfection, working the harvest in the way that, according to the poem, he was born to do. He hears a "new tractor engine" as though he is a "lover" listening to a "song," and the poem ultimately implies that there is beauty and grace (and, of course, some poignancy) in embracing the role one is meant to play.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

YOUTH, ANGST, AND ROMANCE

"Farmhand" illustrates the awkwardness and anxiety of youth—and, more specifically, of young romance. Through the lonely longing of the young farmhand, the poem speaks to the angst, hope, and potential disappointment that comes with growing up and falling in love. At the same time, the poem suggests that finding love requires taking a risk and putting yourself out there—even if doing so means potentially swallowing the bitter pill of rejection and heartache.

The speaker is clearly trying very hard to come across as cool, calm, and collected as he stands outside the dance hall—basically, to pretend that he doesn't care what goes on

inside. He casually lights a cigarette and leans "careless / Against the wall," yet the speaker makes it clear that this nonchalance is actually a studied defense mechanism. Like many teenagers and twenty-somethings, the farmhand wants to seem desirably aloof because that means he doesn't have to put himself out there and face potential rejection.

Indeed, deep down, the speaker feels the same longing for a partner that most young people feel, fantasizing about having a "girl" to go with him on Sunday walks and run her fingers through his hair. Yet he remains on the sidelines, never going inside the hall and in fact turning away from the dancing girls once the music "tears" an "old wound open." This mention of a "wound" suggests that he's been burned before—perhaps at a dance just like this one—and is too scared of facing that pain again. As such, he acts like he's above it all—and thus is left only with his own "awkward hopes" and "envious dreams" for companions.

Many readers can perhaps identify with the farmhand's attempt to build up an emotional wall to prevent himself from getting hurt, seeking solace instead in the less complicated world of his work. He listens "like a lover" to the perfect sound of a new tractor, for now free from the messy world of girls and romance. Yet though the speaker never says whether the farmhand regrets missing out on the opportunity for connection that the dance presents, the poem's melancholy tone implies that the young man will have a tender "wound" for some time to come.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

You will see ...
... the secret night.

The poem begins by describing the young farmhand of the title attending a dance—or, more accurately, standing outside the dance hall and pretending not to care about said dance!

The poem immediately distances the farmhand from everyone else by turning the reader into a direct observer of the scene: "You will see him," the speaker begins. The reader is thus aligned with the speaker, set apart from the young man and instead sharing in the speaker's observations.

These four lines show the young farmhand trying to appear cool and detached. He lights his cigarette in a "careless" way. He leans against a wall, tells jokes, and looks off into the middle distance like some kind of rural James Dean.

But the poem signals to the reader that, for all his outward projection of coolness, on the inside he's anxious and angsty. The farmhand's actions are presented as a kind of list, using both asyndeton ("At the hall door careless, leaning his back / Against the wall") and polysyndeton ("or telling some new joke / To a friend, or looking") to give the impression that all these actions are again somewhat studied and self-conscious. It feels like the farmhand is going through the motions of what he thinks he's *supposed* to do to seem like he's not interested in what's going on inside the dance hall.

A number of other devices here represent the farmhand's attempt to seem aloof. Lines 1-3 are all enjambed, for example, creating a kind of laid-back flow to the farmhand's actions.

The stanza is also full of soft /l/ sounds, in "will" and "light" (line 1), "hall," "careless," and "leaning" (line 2), "wall" and "telling" in line 3, and "looking" in line 4. This consonance has a languid gentleness to it that mirrors the farmhand's attempt at looking cool and unhurried.

Finally, it's worth reiterating that the farmhand is "at the hall door," rather than properly inside the dance hall itself. This paints him as a kind of outsider and a peripheral figure, as though some kind of force field—perhaps his status as a farmhand—prevents him from ever fully entering the perhaps more middle-class and modern world represented by the dance.

LINES 5-8

But always his ...
... old wound open.

The second stanza undercuts the farmhand's projection of detached coolness by introducing an all-important "But." In other words, all is not as it seems—the farmhand is not nearly as laid back as he wants to appear.

In many ways, the farmhand is actually no different from the other young people at the dance. He, too, feels a youthful lust and longing. That's why, in this stanza, his eyes "turn" to the dance floor where he can see "girls drifting like flowers." This simile creates a contrast between the farmhand and the objects of his affection. The girls are delicate, beautiful, and graceful; he is implicitly rough, unkempt, and unrefined. The farmhand is used to handling crops, not flowers.

The hall door thus functions as a kind of portal between two worlds—the world of hard work and manual labor, and that of loveliness and fun. The outdoors is the where the farmhand feels most comfortable, while the indoors represents something mysterious, desirable, and out of reach.

The music drifting out of the dance hall is a kind of emissary from this other world, and it sets the farmhand's mind in motion. He feels "an old wound open" within, a metaphor that suggests that his pride has been hurt in the past—that he was somehow rejected by the world inside the hall. Perhaps a girl denied his advances, or maybe he simply felt entirely out of

place in that very different social environment. Either way, this wound opens "slowly," contrasting with the swift, graceful movements of the dancing girls. The assonance here—that long, round /oh/ sound in "slowly," "old," and "open"—emphasizes that slowness.

As with the first stanza, the second uses enjambment throughout its first three lines. These lines flow forward before line 8 brings everything to a crashing halt, emphasizing the pain of the "old wound" with an impactful full stop.

LINES 9-12

His red sunburnt ...
... as his mind.

The third stanza focuses on the farmhand's physical appearance and mental character. Here the poem draws out yet more differences between the farmhand and the young people on the dance floor.

In contrast to the flower-like girls mentioned in the second stanza, the farmhand has a "red sunburnt face" and "hairy hands." His complexion is a product of his work; as an agricultural laborer, he spends much of his time outside and thereby catches a lot of sunshine. The hairiness of his hands, meanwhile, suggests that he is more rough, coarse, and even animalistic than the young women at the dance. The alliteration of "hairy hands" draws extra attention to the phrase, which implies that the farmhand isn't refined enough (or simply doesn't *feel* refined enough) to enter the hall.

In this stanza the poem expresses a viewpoint known as essentialism (which can be traced all the way back to the Greek philosopher Plato). Essentialism, as applied to people, relates to the idea that people are basically made for certain roles—that they have innate attributes that make them suitable for a particular way of life.

According to the poem, some people are simply "made for dancing or love-making," but the farmhand isn't one of them. Instead, he's "made" for agricultural labor—for turning up the soil, plowing fields, and tending to "slow-growing" crops. In other words, he was born to be a farmhand.

The poem presents this as an almost romantic notion through the metaphor of farmed earth as a kind of breaking wave. The speaker then compares the farmhand's mind to those "slow-growing crops," suggesting that the farmhand is more used to the slow seasonal rhythms of the earth than the faster beats found on the dance floor.

The end-stop at the end of line 12 emphasizes this slowness. In fact, it's the second time the farmhand's mind has been associated (fairly or not) with slowness, the first example being in line 8 ("Slowly in his mind [...]"). The phrase itself—"slow-growing"—again uses assonance of the round, open /oh/ sound to give the line a slow feel that mimics the farmhand's internal state.

LINES 13-16

He has no ...
... to yarn to.

In the fourth stanza the reader learns what's behind the farmhand's attempts to seem cool and detached—and what's behind his long, lingering looks into the dance hall.

Like many other young men his age, the farmhand wants a "girl" at his side, someone to run her fingers through his hair and laugh at his jokes. The poem, however, is emphatic that he *doesn't* have what he wants—and even perhaps is doomed never to have it. His gaze, then, is one of longing and desire, both for someone to call his own and for a lifestyle from which he is likely to remain excluded from by virtue of being a farmhand.

Alliteration and consonance create a light-hearted atmosphere in these lines, the sound of the poem mirroring the farmhand's imagined happiness—if he could just find the right girl for him. Note the shared /g/ and /l/ sounds of "girl" and "giggle," for example, which connect having a girlfriend with joyful laughter. That /g/ sound also has a bubbly quality to it that mimics such laughter.

The caesura after "walk"—a heavy full-stop—then brings this vision to an awkward and sudden end. Coming just before the final word of this line, this is caesura is undeniably—and intentionally—clumsy, the farmhand's fantasy abruptly getting replaced with his reality, which consists of "awkward hopes" and "envious dreams":

> When Sunday couples walk. Instead

Also note the parallelism (and asyndeton) of the two clauses in line 16—each of which follows the pattern "his [adjective] [noun]":

> He has his awkward hopes, his envious dreams to yarn to.

This parallelism hammers home the fact that both his hopes and his dreams—all his deepest desires—are out of reach. The poem more specifically describes these hopes and dreams as something that the farmhand "yarn[s]" to. The unusual word choice of "yarn" refers to the telling of a long, rambling, and perhaps implausible story. The farmhand only has his "envious dreams" for company—rather than a girl of his own. They're envious dreams, of course, because he knows other people *do* have the kind of reality that he longs for. In other words, he feels shut out of the world of dancing and young romance.

LINES 17-20

But ah in ...
... new tractor engine.

While the poem's focus so far has been on the farmhand's awkwardness and the way he doesn't seem to fit in at the dance hall, the poem ends on a clear and impassioned vision of the young man in his element—that is, out in the fields.

The stanza is introduced with another "But," the second example in which this word starts a stanza and indicates an important transition (the first was in line 5, which introduced the idea that the farmhand is not the cool cucumber that he might seem to be). Once again, readers are instructed to look directly at the farmhand as though he were right in front of them. The first line said "You will see him," while here the speaker tells the reader to "watch him" during the harvest.

Through this shift, the poem presents another contrast, this time between two aspects of the farmhand's identity. While the poem has made clear that he struggles with the dance hall environment, he is totally at home when it comes to the harvest (the time when crops are gathered).

In bold, strong language, the speaker describes the farmhand doing his physical labor, "Forking stooks, effortless and strong." A stook is an arrangement of different clumps of grain and is part of the harvesting process. The intense consonance and assonance of "Forking stooks, effortless and strong" suggests physical power and skill. The point here seems to be that the farmhand's inability to fit in with the dance hall doesn't rest on a lack of grace—it's more that he has the *wrong kind* of grace for that environment. This speaks to the poem's overall idea that people are "made" for certain roles in life. The farmhand makes for an impressive laborer because, on some innate level, he was born to do that work. (Of course, this is the speaker's perspective—and not necessarily one that the farmhand agrees with.)

The poem then ends on a simile, comparing the way that the farmhand listens to the sound of a "new tractor engine" with the way a "lover" (such as one of the young dancers in the hall) listens to music. In both instances, sound is intimately linked to identity. The engine sound, in being "clear" and "without fault" represents a kind of perfection, and it seems to embody the way that the farmhand is perfectly suited to his work. He understands the land, the seasons, the farming implements—in short, everything that his work demands of him.

Lovers, meanwhile, hear their romantic hopes, dreams, and disappointments sung back at them in the music of the dance hall. The poem thus seems to conclude on a note of respect for the farmhand, admiring his own version of perfection.

SYMBOLS

THE DANCE HALL

The dance hall is, of course, a literal dance hall in the poem—a place where young people gather to have fun. The farmhand feels out of place in the hall, being much more at home in the fields. But this other world—in which girls drift "like flowers" on the dance floor—is one that he *wishes* he could enter.

More broadly, then, the dance hall can be thought of as symbolizing the farmhand's deepest longings and desires. The "hall door" itself, mentioned in line 2, also becomes a kind of symbol, a portal between these two very different worlds—and, in a way, between two different possible lives.

The fact that the farmhand doesn't go inside the dance, then, represents him rejecting, or being too afraid to embrace, everything it represents. In other words, he fails to follow through his own "awkward hopes" and "envious dreams." He may feel more comfortable working the harvest, but the poignancy of the poem lies in the implication that he will, in some way, always feel like he's existing outside of his own heart, looking in on a life he wants but can't, or maybe just won't allow himself to, have.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "At the hall door careless, leaning his back / Against the wall,"
- **Lines 5-6:** "But always his eyes turn / To the dance floor and the girls drifting like flowers"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used throughout "Farmhand," mostly to bring the poem's images to life. These images are used to highlight both the farmhand's awkwardness at the dance and his skill and strength when it comes to agricultural work.

In line 6, alliteration comes in pairs:

> To the dance floor and the girls drifting like flowers

The two alliterative sounds—/d/ and /f/—suggest both the strong, punchy rhythms of the music in the hall and the delicateness of the dancing girls. The soft /f/ sound makes them seem gentle and almost otherworldly, while the /d/ projects youthful confidence (which the farmhand longs to possess).

In the third stanza, the poem focuses on the farmhand's physical appearance. He is described in line 9 as having "hairy hands," an alliterative phrase that is deliberately cartoonish and comic. This helps paint a kind of "Beauty and the Beast" scenario, with the farmhand seemingly lacking the physical traits that would make him feel more at ease at the dance.

The fourth stanza is full of alliteration. In lines 13-15, the poem constructs a kind of fantasy on the farmhand's behalf, as the

speaker imagines what the farmhand desires (and lacks):

> He has no girl to run her fingers through
> His sandy hair, and giggle at his side
> When Sunday couples walk. [...]

Notice how these alliterative sounds have a playful, carefree quality. The /h/ evokes the sound of laughter, while the /s/ sounds are whispery and intimate. In other words, the sounds help build an image of the girlfriend that the farmhand would like to have—and thus help underline that no such person currently exists.

In the last stanza, the poem describes the farmhand in his element. He "fork[s] stooks, effortless and strong," the clear alliteration here (as well as the consonance and assonance of this phrase) suggesting physical strength and skill. In the following line, the sounds are softer: the gentle /l/ sounds of "listening like a lover" reflects the sense of harmony that exists between the farmhand and one of his most important tools—the tractor.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "dance," "floor," "drifting," "flowers"
- **Line 8:** "old," "open"
- **Line 9:** "hairy hands"
- **Line 13:** "He has," "girl," "her"
- **Line 14:** "His," "sandy," "hair," "giggle," "his side"
- **Line 15:** "Sunday"
- **Line 16:** "He has his," "hopes," "his"
- **Line 18:** "stooks," "strong"
- **Line 19:** "listening like," "lover," "song"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used sparingly throughout "Farmhand," which maintains a casual, conversational tone for the most part. Generally speaking, assonance adds moments of melody to the language and enhances the poem's imagery.

In line 8, for example, long, round /oh/ sounds strengthen the metaphor of music ripping the scab off "an old wound":

> Slowly in his mind an old wound open.

The farmhand's inner pain, which might be related to romantic rejection he has experienced in the past, is described as a kind of "old wound." A wound, of course, is a kind of "open" whole. These /oh/ sounds, then, evoke the image of that wound itself through sound. The same sound repeats as assonance in line 12's "slow-growing," which also relates to the farmhand's mind.

Another example of assonance comes in line 11. Here the speaker describes how the farmhand is not "made" for dancing:

> But rather the earth wave breaking
> To the plough [...]

The assonance makes the line feel rhythmic, purposeful, and strong, hinting at the farmhand's agricultural skill. His farm work is so natural and intuitive that he makes the plowing earth—which takes a lot of physical effort—look like a kind of "wave breaking" across the land. Assonance here imbues the farmhand's work itself with a sense of music. Note how "wave breaking" also creates an end rhyme with "love-making"; the farmhand is as suited to his own work as the young dancers are to the dance floor.

Assonance in the final stanza has a similar effect, filling the lines with music while showcasing the farmhand in his element. In contrast to his awkward presence at the dance, the farmhand is a sight to behold when he works the harvest. "Ah" and "harvest" in line 17 help express the speaker's admiration for the farmhand, while the rhyme between "strong" and "song" once again creates a sense of music within the farmhand's labor itself.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Slowly," "old," "open"
- **Line 9:** "hands"
- **Line 10:** "dancing," "love-making"
- **Line 11:** "wave breaking"
- **Line 12:** "slow-growing"
- **Line 14:** "giggle," "his"
- **Line 17:** "ah," "harvest"
- **Line 18:** "strong"
- **Line 19:** "song"

CAESURA

Caesurae occur in four out of five stanzas in "Farmhand." They work closely with enjambment and end-stopping to create a sense of tension and release throughout the poem.

In the first stanza, for example, the reader gets a conflicting picture: the farmhand is at a dance, trying to seem cool and collected. While the smooth enjambment in the stanza supports this image, the placement of caesurae in lines 2-4 make the stanza's rhythm awkward and stilted, describing the farmhand:

> [...] careless, leaning his back
> Against the wall, or telling some new joke
> To a friend, or [...]

The caesurae here help bring to life the poem's contrast between outer appearance and inner feeling, making the farmhand's actions seem planned and stiff rather than totally spontaneous and smooth.

Another important example of caesura comes with the full stop in line 15:

> When Sunday couples walk. Instead

The period after "walk" brings the farmhand's fantasy about having a girlfriend to an abrupt end, emphasizing the fact that the farmhand *doesn't* have the "girl" he wants—that he's not half of "Sunday couple." The first word of the next sentence—"Instead"—is made all the more painful and sad.

But in the last stanza, the caesurae are used a bit differently. Here, the poem describes the farmhand in his element working the harvest, when an observer might see him:

> Forking stooks, effortless and strong –
> [...]
> Clear, without fault, of a new tractor engine.

These caesurae suggest balance, strength, and grace, with this section of the poem feeling the least tentative of all. This helps make the point that the farmhand is not always an awkward presence, and that he is capable of great physical beauty.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "careless, leaning"
- **Line 3:** "wall, or"
- **Line 4:** "friend, or"
- **Line 12:** "plough, and"
- **Line 14:** "hair, and"
- **Line 15:** "walk. Instead"
- **Line 16:** "hopes, his"
- **Line 18:** "stooks, effortless"
- **Line 20:** "Clear, without," "fault, of"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears throughout "Farmhand," lending music and lyricism to the speaker's description of the young worker and bringing the poem's images to life. Consider, for example, the way that the lolling /l/ sound runs throughout the first stanza. Here are lines 2 and 3 to illustrate:

> At the hall door careless, leaning his back
> Against the wall, or telling some new joke

The farmhand is trying hard to seem cool and suave here, and the fluid /l/ sound seems to conjure up this attempted coolness.

In the next stanza, consonance draws attention to the farmhand's pain. The /d/ and /n/ sounds of "mind an old wound open" suggest gritted teeth, as though the speaker is trying to keep this wound closed (even as the long /oh/ assonance evokes its slow, painful opening).

Consonance is especially important in the poem's final stanza, which paints a picture of the farmhand in his element. When he works the harvest—collecting the season's crops—he is a picture of strength, grace, and physical skill. All the sounds in this stanza—like "Forking stooks, effortless and strong"—seem purposeful and deliberate, like the farmhand himself. Consonance, then, helps the poem end on a positive vision of the farmhand at work, rather than the somewhat awkward presence he cuts in the opening stanzas.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "hall," "careless," "leaning"
- **Line 3:** "wall," " telling"
- **Line 4:** "secret night"
- **Line 6:** "dance floor," "drifting," "flowers"
- **Line 7:** "Before"
- **Line 8:** "mind," " an old wound open"
- **Line 9:** "sunburnt," "and ," "hairy hands"
- **Line 10:** "made," "dancing," "love-making"
- **Line 11:** "wave breaking"
- **Line 12:** "crops slow"
- **Line 13:** "He has," "girl," "run her fingers"
- **Line 14:** "His sandy hair," "giggle," "side"
- **Line 15:** "Sunday," "Instead"
- **Line 16:** "He has his," "hopes," "his"
- **Line 17:** "harvest," "him"
- **Line 18:** "Forking stooks," "effortless," "strong"
- **Line 19:** " listening like," "lover," "song"
- **Line 20:** "Clear," "tractor"

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopped lines appear at the end of every stanza in "Farmhand." Given that majority of the poem's lines are enjambed, these end-stops prevent the poem from building up *too* much momentum. The poem is about a conflict between two different sides of the farmhand's life—his skill as laborer vs. his awkwardness at the dance—and the end-stops evoke this conflict by preventing the poem being totally free-flowing throughout.

In fact, the first four end-stops all occur after the speaker has said something negative about the farmhand. The poem isn't necessarily trying to be critical of the farmhand, but rather to illustrate that he is in a kind of predicament, wanting to fit in with the other young people at the dance but struggling to feel comfortable. He feels "an old wound open" in his mind, and each of the first four end-stops seems to suggest—and widen—this wound, as if both reader and farmhand are being given time to dwell on his anxieties and pain. Each of these end-stops occurs after a mention of the farmhand's inner state (although line 4 is more indirect than the others):

> To a friend, or looking out into the secret night.

[...]
Slowly in his mind an old wound open.
[...]
To the plough, and crops slow-growing as his mind.
[...]
He has his awkward hopes, his envious dreams to yarn to.

The farmhand's longing look into the night in line 4 suggests an inner thoughtfulness, while the other three examples above all directly reference his psychological state. Each end-stop leaves a pause, a kind of painful silence that adds complexity to the farmhand's character.

The other two end-stops, both in the last stanza, serve an entirely different purpose. Here, the farmhand is depicted in his element—hard at work during the harvest:

Forking stooks, effortless and strong –

Notice how the dash after "strong" adds emphasis to the word, showing the reader that the farmhand *is* powerful and physically graceful—just not necessarily on the dance floor.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "night."
- **Line 8:** "open."
- **Line 12:** "mind."
- **Line 16:** "to."
- **Line 18:** "strong –"
- **Line 20:** "engine."

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is a major feature of "Farmhand." The majority of the poem's lines are enjambed, which, generally speaking, helps the poem create a sense of momentum or forward motion (which tends to then be disrupted at times by caesura or end-stopping).

In the first stanza, enjambment reflects the fact that the farmhand wants to appear cool, suave, and "careless." The flowing enjambment suggests that sense of detachment, of refusing to play by the rules or color inside the lines.

The second stanza ("But always [...] old wound open") is also enjambed until the stanza's last line. Here, that enjambment evokes the image of the girls "drifting like flowers" on the dance floor, as well as the ease with which hearing the music "tears / Slowly [...] an old wound open." Note how the word "tears" seems to stretch across the white space of the page, tearing the line itself in two.

The next two stanzas follow the same pattern: their first three lines are enjambed, flowing down the page until the forceful end-stop after their final lines. In this way, the poem's form reflects the push and pull between the farmhand's swirling internal desires and his firm reality, between what he longs for and what he has. Take the fourth stanza, where enjambment between lines 13-15 helps the speaker construct a vision of what the farmhand wants in life:

He has no girl to run her fingers through
His sandy hair, and giggle at his side
When Sunday couples walk. [...]

Smooth enjambment helps construct this fantasy of young romance, which then gets burst like a bubble by the caesura after "walk."

Finally, the enjambment in the last stanza helps the poem build a picture of the farmhand's physical grace. He isn't inherently awkward; it's just that the dance floor isn't his natural environment (according to the speaker, at least). In particular, the enjambment between "song" and "Clear" in lines 19 and 20 suggests the close union that the farmhand has with the tools that needs to do his work—a relationship that is "clear" and instinctive.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "cigarette / At"
- **Lines 2-3:** " back / Against"
- **Lines 3-4:** "joke / To"
- **Lines 5-6:** "turn / To"
- **Lines 6-7:** "flowers / Before"
- **Lines 7-8:** "tears / Slowly"
- **Lines 9-10:** "hands / Were"
- **Lines 10-11:** "love-making / But"
- **Lines 11-12:** "breaking / To"
- **Lines 13-14:** "through / His"
- **Lines 14-15:** "side / When"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Instead / He"
- **Lines 17-18:** "him / Forking"
- **Lines 19-20:** "song / Clear"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton appears a handful of times in the poem. The first stanza actually uses both asyndeton and its opposite device—polysyndeton—as the speaker describes the farmhand standing outside the dance hall. Both devices are highlighted below:

At the hall door careless, leaning his back
Against the wall, or telling some new joke
To a friend, or looking out [...]

This stanza lists out certain things that the farmhand does to seem distant and cool. The asydenton subtly evokes the "careless[ness]" that the farmhand hopes to project, making the

language sound quick, casual, and unstudied. The polysyndeton that follows in the very next line, in the form of that repetition of "or," then suggests that the speaker could go on and on when it comes to describing the farmhand's studied coolness.

Asyndeton again appears in line 16:

> He has his awkward **hopes, his** envious dreams to yarn to.

This line also features parallelism, with the clauses on either side of the comma following the same grammatical structure. The lack of conjunction draws attention to that parallelism and creates a kind of swift, piling up effect as the farmhand reflects on all the things he cannot have.

Finally, the asyndeton in the poem's last stanza evokes the ease and skill with which the farmhand works:

> [...] the song
> **Clear, without** fault, of a new tractor engine.

Asyndeton means that this final description flows quickly, no pesky conjunction popping up between "Clear" and "without fault" to disrupt things. The "song" of the tractor engine is smooth and pleasant.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "At the hall door careless, leaning his back"
- **Line 16:** "He has his awkward hopes, his envious dreams to yarn to."
- **Lines 19-20:** "the song / Clear, without fault, of a new tractor engine"

METAPHOR

The poem contains a few metaphors, some of which describe the young farmhand's state of mind. The metaphor in lines 7 and 8, for example, gives the reader the first glimpse into the farmhand's inner world as the music emanating from the dance floor "tears / Slowly in his mind an old wound open." This "old wound," like some kind of gaping psychological hole, might be based on previous romantic rejection, or simply the sense that, as a farmhand, he doesn't quite fit in with what is probably a middle-class crowd.

Later, in line 11, the poem describes the farmhand's plowing as "an earth wave breaking," metaphorically turning land into a kind of ocean. This imbues his work with an immense sense of strength and grace.

In line 16, the poem says that the farmhand has "his envious dreams to yarn to." To "yarn" is to tell a long, possibly rambling story. The metaphor implies that, while other young men have girls to talk to, the only audience the farmhand has for his stories are his "envious dreams."

In the poem's last two lines, simile and metaphor combine, describing how the farmhand can be found during the harvest:

> [...] listening like a lover to **the song**
> **Clear, without fault, of a new tractor engine.**

This metaphor compares the loud hum of a tractor engine with a "song." While the music at the dance made the farmhand feel "wound[ed]," this sound of the tractor makes him feel powerful and in his element.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "Before the music that tears / Slowly in his mind an old wound open"
- **Lines 11-12:** "earth wave breaking / To the plough"
- **Line 12:** "crops slow-growing as his mind"
- **Line 16:** "his envious dreams to yarn to"
- **Lines 19-20:** "the song / Clear, without fault, of a new tractor engine"

SIMILE

There are three similes in "Farmhand." The first draws on a fairly familiar comparison, likening young women to "flowers." In line 6, the speaker says that the young women in the hall are "drifting like flowers" over the dance floor. In other words, they're pretty, delicate, and graceful. The simile creates a contrast between the rough physical form of the farmhand and the beauty of the girls that he desires. It also implies that the girls' presence in the hall is as natural as that of a flower growing in a meadow.

The second simile combines compares the farmhand's mind to "slow-growing" crops. This simile paints the farmhand as lacking in the wit and social skills needed to find a "girl to run her fingers through / His sandy hair." At the same time, it presents his mind as in tune with the slower rhythms of the natural world.

The final simile comes at the end of the poem and presents the farmhand in a more positive light. This stanza depicts the farmhand in his element, working the harvest. He is described as:

> [...] listening **like a lover** to the song
> Clear, without fault, of a new tractor engine.

This simile relates to the music of the dance floor found earlier in the poem. While that music makes the farmhand feel left out and awkward, the "song" of a "new tractor engine" speaks to his heart. He hears—and feels—its music intuitively, which reflects his intimate relationship with the land.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "the girls drifting like flowers"
- **Line 12:** "crops slow-growing as his mind"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Or listening like a lover to the song / Clear, without fault, of a new tractor engine."

VOCABULARY

Plough (Line 12) - A farming tool used for turning up the earth.

Yarn (Line 16) - To tell a long and perhaps rambling story.

Forking stooks (Line 18) - "Fork" here is a reference to a tool used in farming (i.e., a pitchfork). Stooks, meanwhile, refers to an arrangement of harvested crops; crop stems are first bound together into bunches called sheaves, which are then leaned against each other to create stooks.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Farmhand" has a regular form, using quatrains (four-line stanzas) throughout. Each quatrain is also end-stopped in its final line, making the poem read like five connected yet individual scenes—like different parts of a short film. The poem feels steady and controlled as a result of this form, and, in a way, this reflects what the farmhand himself wants to project: an image of cool, calm detachment, despite the desire roiling in his heart.

METER

"Farmhand" is written mostly in free verse and thus doesn't have a clear meter throughout. The looseness of the meter, particularly early in the poem, reflects the seemingly "careless" attitude of the farmhand at the dance. That is, the poem projects the same kind of cool posture towards its sound that the farmhand projects when it comes to his appearance and mannerisms.

The most metrically regular section of the poem is lines 13-15, which are nearly iambic all the way (meaning they follow an unstressed-stressed beat pattern):

> He has no girl to run her fingers through
> His sandy hair, and giggle at his side
> When Sunday couples walk. Instead

Notice how this regularly coincides with an image "going steady"—of being in a romantic relationship. This steadiness is broken by line 16, which explains, with intentional clunkiness, that:

> He has his awkward hopes, his envious dreams to yarn to.

To "yarn" is to tell a long and perhaps rambling story—and, appropriately enough, the line itself drags on with an ambiguous meter, and ends on the uncertainty of an unstressed syllable ("yarn to").

RHYME SCHEME

"Farmhand" is quite unusual in terms of its rhyme scheme, or, really, it's lack thereof; while it does have a structural *pattern* going on, this pattern rarely actually *rhymes*.

Most of the poem's end-words have paired consonant sounds as opposed to full, perfect rhymes —"cigarette"/"night" and "back"/"joke" in stanza 1, for example. This not-quite-rhyming scheme mimics one of the most common patterns of all: enclosed rhyme, which goes ABBA:

> [...] cigarette A
> [...] back B
> [...] joke B
> [...] night. A

Other pairs, like "him" and "engine" in lines 17 and 20, use shared assonant sounds. The overall effect of all of these loosely connected pairings is to give the poem the sense that something is not quite as it seems. Bold, perfect rhymes at the end of each line might make the poem—and thus the farmhand's character—seem more confident and assured. He wants to seem totally cool and collected, but the awkward almost-rhymes suggest that he's trying to be something he's not.

There are some perfect rhymes in the poem, however, and they arrive at moments of clarity—moments when people lean into their roles. In lines 10 and 11, for example, the poem contrasts people who are "made" for things like "dancing or love-making" with those who, like the farmhand, are better suited to "the earth wave breaking / To the plough" (i.e., to outdoor labor). Because the poem so frequently gesture towards rhyme rather than actually using it, the clear rhyme of "love-making" with "breaking" calls readers' attention to this moment. The rhyme emphasizes the idea that these two kinds of people are essentially opposites (in the speaker's summation at least).

The poem ends by depicting the farmhand in a more positive light, showing how skilled and graceful he can be when it comes to working the harvest. Here, "strong" (line 18) chimes loudly and clearly with "strong" (line 19), suggesting the farmhand's natural aptitude for his work. Gone, for a moment, are the pseudo-rhymes that characterize the earlier poem, replaced by a matching pair that reflects the farmhand being well-matched to his work.

SPEAKER

"Farmhand" gives very little away about its speaker, instead keeping the reader's attention on the farmhand himself. The speaker acts as an omniscient narrator, able to describe the thoughts and feelings of the poem's main character. On the one hand, this helps the reader empathize with the farmhand's internal conflict and his reluctance to join in at the dance. But this also keeps the farmhand at a distance from the reader, with the farmhand given no chance to say anything about the picture the poem paints of him.

In keeping with this sense of distance, there are also two points in the poem at which the speaker seems to directly address the reader, asking the latter to "see" the farmhand first at the dance and then, at the end of the poem, to "watch" the farmhand working the harvest.

With the above in mind, it's possible to infer how the speaker sees the world. In the third stanza ("His red sunburnt face [...] crops slow-growing as his mind"), the speaker suggests that people are "made" for different roles in society. So though the speaker can detect the farmhand's inability to fit in at the dance, the speaker also admires the farmhand for his physical strength and graceful skill when its comes to his farm work. The reader, too, is invited to feel the same way.

SETTING

The poem has two settings: outside a hall in which a dance is taking place, and out in the fields during the harvest. Notably, the poem never moves *inside* the dance hall—a world the young farmhand feels barred from; all readers know is that young women are "drifting like flowers" on the dance floor, and that music is loud enough to reach the farmhand as he stands at "the hall door."

In this setting, the farmhand pretends to be cool and collected, even as readers know he's intensely aware of his "sunburnt face and hairy hands." He is "awkward" and "envious" in this setting, feeling utterly out of place despite his desire to join the fun.

The other setting appears only at the end of the poem, as the speaker instructs readers to "watch" the farmhand "in harvest"—that is, to look at him in his element, gathering crops and listening to the perfect "song" of his tractor. In this setting, he seems "effortless and strong." The poem, then, presents a contrast between two worlds—that of the dance and that of the fields—and leaves the reader with no doubt as to which suits the farmhand better.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Farmhand" was published in James K. Baxter's 1958 collection "In Fires of No Return." Baxter was one of New Zealand's foremost poets and playwrights of the 20th century. His own father was a farmer, and Baxter spent some of his early years on the family farm. Baxter also worked sporadically on farms during his young adulthood, suggesting that this poem may contain some autobiographical sentiments.

"Farmhand" also taps into a history of writing about the turbulence of adolescence and romance. "You May Turn Over and Begin" by Simon Armitage makes for an interesting comparison on the subject of youthful longing and lust. Baxter himself was heavily influenced by the Romantics, whose poetry celebrated the awe and wonder of the natural world. Much of Baxter's work explores the conflict between humanity and nature, with a specific focus on the vast grandeur of the New Zealand landscape.

"Farmhand" also has echoes of the pastoral poetic tradition—poems about landscape and rural life. As is typical of a pastoral poem, "Farmhand" celebrates the relationship between the land and those who work it (see Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" as an example).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

James K. Baxter was active as a writer from the 1940s up to his death in 1972, living and working in his native New Zealand. New Zealand had been home to a thriving Māori society for many centuries before British colonizers arrived, and later in his career, Baxter became a passionate activist for the preservation of Māori culture. Much of his later poetry features Māori tropes, ideas, and characters, and he also wrote a great deal of social and religious commentary.

Though the poem doesn't say too much about its specific historical context, it does offer a few clues. The "cigarette," the "dance floor," and strolling "Sunday couples" all point towards the mid-20th century, offering a vision of youthful romance that chimes with the relatively new idea (at the time) that adolescence and young adulthood represented a distinct stage in life, somewhere in between childhood and being fully grown-up. Dance halls were also popular in New Zealand (and many other countries!) throughout the 1940s and '50s, especially as rock 'n roll music made its way to more foreign shores. A place to socialize and tamely flirt, one British writer even called dance halls "the Tinder of their day."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Baxter's Biography — Learn more about the poet's life and work courtesy of the poetry foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/james-k-baxter)
- New Zealand's Dance Halls — Learn more about the dance hall craze that hit New Zealand's shores in the 1950s. (https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/afternoons/audio/20174516/new-zealand-retro-dance-halls)
- Baxter's Poetry Out Loud — Listen to the poet read one of his poems aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PxGXrlXig0)
- Baxter and Religion — An article about the poet's relationship with his faith throughout his lifetime. (http://wp.catholicworker.org.nz/the-common-good/the-spirituality-of-james-k-baxter/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JAMES K. BAXTER POEMS

- Elegy For My Father's Father

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