

The Illiterate
William Meredith

Touching your goodness, I am like a man
Who turns a letter over in his hand
And you might think that this was because the hand
Was unfamiliar but, truth is, the man
5 Has never had a letter from anyone;
And now he is both afraid of what it means
And ashamed because he has no other means
To find out what it says than to ask someone.
His uncle could have left the farm to him,
10 Or his parents died before he sent them word,
Or the dark girl changed and want him for beloved.
Afraid and letter-proud, he keeps it with him.
What would you call his feeling for the words
that keep him rich and orphaned and beloved?

Give some thought to the form of the poem (meter, rhyme scheme, number of lines). What kind of poem is this? How does its form relate to its content—what interpretive insight does its form provide?

There are two levels of meaning in the poem. What is it apparently about, and what deeper level of meaning is there? (*Hint: The entire poem is an “extended simile.”*)

Note: One of the many meanings of the word “hand” is “handwriting” or “penmanship.”