

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 hand¹
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?

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. Give some thought to the **form** of the poem (**meter**, **rhyme scheme**, number of lines). What type of poem is this? How does its form relate to its content—what interpretive insights might its form provide?
2. What are the possibilities in lines 9-11 intended to suggest?
3. Why does the man turn the letter over in his hand (line 2)? What possible meanings does “letter-proud” (line 12) have? Describe his emotional response to the letter. What dilemmas does he face?
4. What **rhetorical device** is the last sentence (lines 13-14) an example of? Discuss its purpose and its effect.
5. Consider the significance of the poem’s title. What is the poem apparently about, and what deeper level of meaning is there? (Hint: The entire poem is an **extended simile**.) What meanings does the key phrase “touching your goodness” (line 1) suggest?
6. Why do you think Meredith chose to explore the central idea of this poem through an extended simile?

¹ Note that one of the many meanings of the word hand is “handwriting or penmanship.”