

Millworker

James Taylor

Now my grandfather was a sailor, he blew in off the water
My father was a farmer and I, his only daughter
Took up with a no-good millworking man from Massachusetts
Who dies from too much whiskey and leaves me these three faces to feed

- 5 Millwork ain't easy, millwork ain't hard
Millwork it ain't nothing but an awful boring job
I'm waiting for a daydream to take me through the morning
And put me in my coffee break where I can have a sandwich and remember

- Then it's me and my machine for the rest of the morning
10 For the rest of the afternoon and the rest of my life

Now my mind begins to wander to the days back on the farm
I can see my father smiling at me, swinging on his arm
I can hear my granddad's stories of the storms out on Lake Erie
Where vessels and cargoes and fortunes and sailors' lives were lost

- 15 Yes, but it's my life has been wasted, and I have been the fool
To let this manufacturer use my body for a tool
I can ride home in the evening, staring at my hands
Swearing by my sorrow that a young girl ought to stand a better chance

- Well may I work the mills just as long as I am able
20 And never meet the man whose name is on the label
It be me and my machine for the rest of the morning
And the rest of the afternoon gone, for the rest of my life

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. Describe the narrator (as distinct from Taylor, the singer and songwriter). What situation is she in? How does she respond to it? What reaction do you have to Taylor's depiction of the narrator? Why do you think he chose to write the song from this point of view?
2. What is the tone of the song? Identify specific details that support your interpretation.
3. What are the first and fourth stanzas about, and why do you think Taylor chose to include this information in the song? How does the imagery in the fourth stanza relate to the rest of the song, and what significance do those memories have for the narrator?

4. In line 4, what reasons might Taylor have had for using the phrase “three faces to feed” rather than the more idiomatic “three mouths to feed”? Consider the rhetorical effect of that difference.
5. Discuss the significance of the song’s title. What impression of millwork (manufacturing wood products) does the song give? Identify specific details that support your interpretation.
6. Why does the narrator say that “[she has] been the fool” and that her life has been wasted (line 15)--is Taylor criticizing her decision to work at the mill? What is the effect of the metaphor in line 16? Why do you think the narrator stares at her hands on her ride home?
7. Discuss the relationship between the manufacturer (the owner of the mill) and the narrator (and with other millworkers by extension). How do you think Taylor intends the audience to perceive this relationship?
8. Discuss the significance of gender in the song.
9. What themes does the song express? How do you think Taylor wants the audience to react to the song? Identify specific details that support your interpretation.