

Poem Analyzer: Graven's, 'The Broken Horse'

[Poem Analyzer Analysis Performed in Jan. 2026]

<-Begin Poem->

The Broken Horse by G.E. Graven

I arrived quite promptly at the market square
in hopes that a buyer of my horse would be there.
I required the pounds for a debt I would pay
on a drunken wager lost yesterday.

Since I hadn't the coinage to make the debt good,
I had three horses, and one of them could.
The eldest was frail and sickly indeed,
and this one I'd barter to cover the deed.

“*Damn this mare,*” I mused to myself,
“*I have two others in much greater health.*”
So this one I marched to the market square,
a crooked old horse and a broken down mare.

I grinned at the fancy of the next to own her,
Indeed he would curse me, that dejected owner.
But of concern to me was a debt to be paid
regardless of trade or deceit that I played.

It soon became solid as the day wore on
I would have no purchaser for which to pawn
this decrepit old mare I began to detest,
and I lowered her price to a second-best.

The market square secured its shops
as dark clouds clustered over naked tree tops,
and the sun sank low in the village West,
along with the outlay to an any-best.

The beast was not fancied, this seemed certain.
The village fled home from the stormy curtain
that swelled to black in the Eastern sky,
and men scurried by as loud as I'd cry.

A gale wind coughed, and I fell, chilled to the bone.
The eve had fallen, and I surrendered home.

The distance was great, so I left the square
with arrears unsettled, on a crooked mare.

The air was ice and inkwell black,
I made hasted homeward ~ I headed back
to a simple cottage on the seashore's shelf,
lived in by none but my ripe-aged self.

I charged on thunder while galloping East
through a wooded trail of many o' beast.
Yet the clouds cracked open and wept their souls
as I dashed up the path of mud-filled holes.

With reins in hand and hooves at trail
I galloped away on a mount so frail
that she cracked like a twig and fell to the ground.
I drew my colt and she neighed no sound.

I scurried on foot through the sleeting aire
when I heard the wind whisper a whimper where
the pitch of night stood: front, back, and side ~
the *whimper-o'mourn* when the living has died.

A cold like steel had ripped me apart,
considering the dead that I strode without heart:
*'I pressed the horse with unbroken strain
whilst blind to the beast's compiling pain.'*

My pace had quickened at this culpable thought
and through the sea of sleet I fought
my way to safety, to my shelter on the shore
where the unrested being will concern me no more.

But the horror had established it truth at once
when I heard a neigh from the broken horse
that I erased with my colt ~ a shot to the head
and checked it for life; I'm sure she was dead.

Yet now I gathered the following steps
of the once-dead beast and then perhaps
the dragging sound of a twisted hoof
as it scraped the rocks in horrid proof
that the horse's immortal was haunting its master ~
the soul that slew her was the whole she was after.

“*Away, you pest!*” I snapped at the wind,
but it squalled all the greater and stinging again,
pulling and tugging at my buttoned coat seam
whilst infecting my ears with a yowling scream.

For many o' mile I charged through the rain
to flee this beast of wandering pain.
Its horrible hoof lay scratching the stones
and flushing a madness through my very bones.

Finally I broke through the fields of my home
and fixed my sight on its comforting stone.
I broke with a passion whilst gasping for aire
since I knew at the cottage, my saneness was there.

Upon reaching the door, I spun wide around
to see only sleet and a fallow ground.
I found no hoofed demon as I imagined last ~
I bent over heaving whilst convulsions passed.

I studied the earth at a branch I could feel
lodged in the rear of my split boot heel
that mimicked the sound of a dragging hoof,
my fear was madness as there lay the proof.

Then I mused at the fancy of my spurious fright
of fleeing from ghosts in the midst of night.
I unbolted the door and my cheeks flushed red
as there stared the mare with a gap in her head!

>-End Poem-<

<-Begin Analysis->

Theme

Central Idea: The poem explores themes of guilt, consequence, and the haunting nature of one's actions. It portrays the speaker's moral conflict as they attempt to rid themselves of a burden (the horse) that symbolizes their guilt over a past decision linked to a debt. The haunting presence of the horse serves as a metaphor for the inescapable consequences of one's actions and the psychological turmoil that arises from wrongdoing.

Subject Matter: The subject matter revolves around a man's desperate attempt to sell a sick horse to pay off a debt incurred from a drunken wager. As he navigates this moral quandary, he experiences a supernatural realization of his guilt, culminating in an eerie confrontation with the horse he attempted to abandon.

Language

Word Choice: The language of the poem is rich and evocative, with a blend of archaic and contemporary diction that creates an atmospheric quality. Words like "crooked," "dejected," and "haunting" contribute to a somber tone, while vivid imagery (e.g., "dark clouds clustered over naked tree tops") paints a bleak picture of the environment, mirroring the speaker's internal conflict.

Literary Devices:

- **Imagery:** The poem is replete with imagery that evokes both the physical landscape and emotional states. Phrases such as "gale wind coughed" and "ice and inkwell black" create a vivid setting that enhances the mood of despair.

- **Personification:** The horse is personified, especially in its haunting afterlife, which underscores the theme of guilt and the consequences of one's actions.

- **Metaphor:** The horse serves as a metaphor for the speaker's guilt and moral burden. The "dragging sound of a twisted hoof" symbolizes the inescapable nature of his conscience.

- **Alliteration and Assonance:** There are instances of alliteration (e.g., "galloping East") and assonance that enhance the poem's musical quality.

Sound and Rhythm

The poem employs a consistent rhythmic structure, primarily in iambic tetrameter, which creates a steady flow. Each line varies slightly in syllable count but generally maintains a rhythmic pattern that supports the narrative's pacing. The use of enjambment allows for a seamless progression between thoughts, while occasional end-stopping emphasizes critical moments of realization or reflection.

Syllabic Patterns: The lines generally have between 8 to 12 syllables, creating a rhythmic cadence that feels almost balladic.

Stresses: The stresses often fall on key emotional words, heightening the sense of urgency and despair in the speaker's journey.

Structure

Framework: The poem is structured into multiple stanzas of varying lengths, which contributes to the narrative flow. The line breaks are often placed at natural pauses, allowing for moments of reflection.

Rhyme Patterns: The poem primarily follows an ABAB rhyme scheme, which lends a musical quality to the reading. This regularity contrasts with the chaotic themes of guilt and haunting, emphasizing the internal conflict of the speaker.

Punctuation and Pauses: The use of punctuation is deliberate, creating pauses that enhance the suspense and emotional weight of the narrative. Commas, dashes, and periods punctuate moments of reflection, while the absence of punctuation in certain lines builds tension.

Context

Who: The poem's speaker appears to be a man grappling with guilt over a past decision, specifically related to his treatment of a horse.

What: The poem recounts the speaker's attempt to sell a horse in order to pay off a debt while confronting the consequences of his actions.

Where: The setting is primarily in a market square and the speaker's cottage by the seashore, which serve as contrasting backdrops for the themes of despair and guilt.

When: The poem is set during a stormy night, which adds to the atmosphere of tension and foreboding.

Why: The speaker's motivation for selling the horse stems from a need to settle a debt incurred through irresponsible behavior, reflecting on how one's choices can lead to unforeseen consequences and haunt them thereafter. The poem serves as a cautionary tale about the moral implications of one's actions and the psychological effects of guilt.

>-End Analysis-<