William Holman Hunt’s *The Hireling Shepherd* (1851, oil on canvas) is a Pre-Raphaelite work with a number of interpretations.

We see a hired shepherd kneeling in a field with a young woman. His figure leans in towards her as he shows her a death’s-head moth. Her ambiguous reaction to his attentions could suggest that she is responding positively to his attentions. She falls backwards towards him and the close proximity of their hands suggests they are now, or will be, intimate.

While the couple interact with each other their flock of sheep are ignored and stray away to nearby fields. A group of sheep have entered a field of wheat, eating this crop will cause their deaths. We see evidence of this in two sheep who have returned to the shepherd but died, their stomachs swollen from ‘bloat’. The shepherd however is ignorant of this and continues his seduction of the young woman. She in turn has a lamb on her lap, it eats green apples, another food which is poisonous to these animals.

The shepherd has a beer keg tied around his waist. This implies he puts pleasure above duty and this will inevitably affect the animals in his care. When Holman Hunt exhibited the work at the 1852 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition he included a quote from Shakespeare’s *King Lear* which helps explain some of the meaning behind the painting;

“*Sleepest or wakest thou, jolly shepherd? Thy sheep be in the corn. And for one blast of thy minikin mouth, Thy sheep shall take no harm*”.

The above passage advises a shepherd that his flock are endangered *(in the corn)* and warns that unless he acts, by shouting (*one blast of thy minikin mouth)*, the sheep will perish.

At this time Hunt was becoming devoutly religious and the painting contains many Biblical and Christian allusions. The sheep might represent humanity, who have strayed from lives of spirituality and as a result are endangered. Alternatively the title of the painting uses the word ‘hireling’ which references a passage from the Bible. Also known as ‘the ‘Good Shepherd’, this passage describes a ‘good’ shepherd as one who remains with his flock and protects them, unlike the hired (hireling) shepherd who will abandon his flock at the first sign of danger.

The painting might be a metaphor for the role of the clergy at that time who were involved in scholarly debate about spiritual issues, to the detriment of churchgoers. By engaging in such conceptual discussions they alienated everyday people who lost interest in religion. Therefore the neglectful shepherd in this painting could be an allegorical representation of the clergy while churchgoers and the public are shown as the straying sheep.

The green apples which the young woman feeds the lamb possibly link to the character of Eve from the Old Testament who persuades Adam to eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Some of these apples have fallen from her lap and roll towards the viewer, perhaps tempting us to also sin. The lamb itself may be a visual depiction of the Lamb of God, who in this painting is being maltreated and suffers at the hands of mankind.

There are many references to dying within the painting. We see poppies, a traditional symbol of death, in the wheat field nearest the straying sheep. The death’s-head moth has a ‘skull’ form on its back. A bird walks on the grass close by the bloated sheep lying behind the shepherd. It is unafraid of their presence and their stillness indicates they are dead. These motifs highlight the need for viewers at that time to lead lives of religious faith and devotion to Christ as they will require salvation in the afterlife.

The painting is typically Pre-Raphaelite, due to Holman Hunt’s attention to detail. We see the dirt beneath the fingernails of the shepherd, each of his eyelashes is meticulously captured as are the shadows they cast on his face. The intensity of colour has been achieved through applying paint to a white ground. The red and white costume of the woman allows her to stand out from the surrounding landscape. Their ruddy complexions were deeply criticised at the time of the work’s showing. The shepherd appears sunburnt, his coarse features and wiry hair show the artist’s attempts to depict a real individual. This unidealised treatment of the human figure illustrates how the Pre-Raphaelite’s tried to capture reality as authentically as possible.

Holman Hunt painted the landscape ‘*en plein air*’ in Ewell, Surrey during the summer of 1851. Painting outdoors was a relatively new concept at this time and demonstrates the Pre-Raphaelite’s dedication in trying to capture a scene as accurately as possible. By including such intricate details and symbolism and with clear outlining of forms, Holman Hunt hoped that the message within the painting would be interpreted more directly by viewers.