



POEM ANALYSIS

“Fire and Ice” by Robert Frost

Essay by T Fleischmann

Author: Robert Frost

Born: March 26, 1874; San Francisco, California

Died: January 29, 1963; Boston, Massachusetts

Country: United States

Culture: American

ABSTRACT

This essay provides an explication of the Robert Frost poem “Fire and Ice.” Frost was known for his use of colloquial language while addressing complex themes, a technique that is used to particularly strong effect in this work. In a deceptively simple and casual tone, the poet ponders the apocalypse and our powerlessness to our own emotions. The poem also references Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, both in style and content, giving it further philosophical significance.

KEYWORDS

- Apocalypse
- Dante
- Death
- Iambic
- Modernism
- Paradox
- Terza Rima
- Understatement

TYPE OF POEM

Homage; Iambic; Modified Terza Rima

APPEARS IN

New Hampshire by Robert Frost

The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged by Robert Frost

A widely celebrated poet during his lifetime and a major influence on American poetry to this day, Robert Frost led a relatively quiet life of farming, writing, and teaching. He found his success as a writer fairly early on, but this did not lure him away from the farms and New England landscapes that provide the setting for much of his work. In addition to embracing the natural beauty of rural life, he is also known for employing colloquial language as it was commonly spoken. This language makes his writing easier to approach and engage with than other modernists’ work, while still giving him the space to investigate complex philosophical themes.

His poem “Fire and Ice,” included in the 1923 Pulitzer Prize winning collection *New Hampshire*, is a powerful example of simple language being used to accomplish nuanced philosophy. The brief poem uses nine lines (short lines at the start and even shorter phrases by the end) to consider two possible fates for the world—destruction by fire and destruction by ice. Its iambic meter provides a rhythm and musicality to the poem, but the irregular number of meters and rhymes prevent it from becoming too stylized. Beneath the surface of this consideration, however, the poem evokes Dante’s *Inferno* and raises ethical and philosophical questions about life.

On a manifest level, the poem equates fire with desire and ice with hate, telling the reader that we can consider these forces as symbols. We also know that the speaker is familiar with these two emotions, as he has “tasted of desire” (3) while claiming to “know enough of hate” (6). By cluing us in to this, Frost invites us to consider what it means that both desire and hate are capable of ending the world. The poem itself then begins to collapse the polar opposites of love and hate, devoting the first four lines to fire and the last four to hate, with the surprisingly casual comment “But if I had to perish

twice" (5) in the middle to hinge them together. Indeed, the tone of the entire poem is so casual as to suggest that the speaker doesn't care about his fate and is indifferent to which force, love or hate, ends him. Phrases like "some say" (1, 2) elevate this indifferent tone, as does the conclusion that death by icy hate would "suffice" (9). Like with much of Frost's work, however, looking closer at the language reveals that there is more going on than the flippant, casual tone initially suggests.

One of the most famous literary considerations of hell and the world's destruction comes from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which Frost is directly referencing here. Just as Dante presents us with nine levels of hell, each smaller than the last, so too does Frost give his poems nine lines, constricting as they go. He also employs a modified terza rima rhyme scheme, an interlocking rhyme scheme made famous by Dante's work, and a meter reminiscent of Dante's. The end-word of the second line in the first tercet "ice," for example, supplies, however loosely, the rhyme for the following tercets. These stylistic cues strengthen the homage, but the clearest link between the two poems comes in theme, as Dante's narrator finds sinners perishing in both ice and fire. With this link established, readers can carry over the philosophy of Dante and Aristotle to Frost's deceptively simple poem (Serio). Hatred and ice, then, represent sins of logic, while fire and love represent sins of emotion. In the eyes of Dante, and in the second death of Frost's poem, hatred and ice become the worst sins, as they are born out of the logical mind that is supposed to allow people to avoid such behavior.

With all of this complex history and philosophy in the air, Frost maintains his casual, detached pose. He ends by facing the apocalypse (and a second death) without distress, which is the final point of the poem. The reader is made to feel restricted as the lines condense, the rhyme scheme cut off before it can be completed with "Is also great / And would suffice" (8-9). As Baron Wormser says, "One feels how insubstantial words are beside the forces of nature" (417). Much like the paradox of combining fire and ice, love and hate, we are given the paradox of our own powerlessness in the face of destruction and emotion, and find ourselves equally powerless to love as we are to hate.

With its quiet musicality and colloquial tone, "Fire and Ice" is representative of much of Frost's later poetry, inviting rigorous thought with deceptively simple verse. It is this compression of thought that continues to make Frost's work an important source of inspiration for poets today.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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