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ROBERT FROST

Born: San Francisco, California; March 26, 1874

Died: Boston, Massachusetts; January 29, 1963

Although he was nearly forty when his first book was published Frost came to be acknowledged within his lifetime as one of America's greatest poets.

BIOGRAPHY

Famed as a New England poet, Robert Lee Frost was actually born in San Francisco on March 26, 1874, and named for a great Confederate general. His father, William Prescott Frost, Jr., was a foot-loose journalist who, as a teenager, had tried to run away from his Lawrence, Massachusetts, home and join the Confederate Army. After he died in 1885 his wife, Isabelle Moodie Frost, brought their young son, Rob, and daughter, Jeanie, back to Lawrence where her late husband's parents still lived.

Frost's poem "Once by the Pacific" demonstrates that the West Coast did help shape the poet's imagination but he grew to maturity in Lawrence, where he graduated second in his high school class, behind Elinor Miriam White, in 1892. Shortly thereafter the two became engaged.

After briefly attending Dartmouth College Frost took a series of odd jobs, which included newspaper reporting and teaching in a school run by his mother. In 1894, he published his first poem "My Butterfly," in a periodical called *The Independent*. He gathered this poem, along with four others he had composed, into a little book called *Twilight* which he presented to Elinor White as a preview of what he hoped would be substantial success as a poet. He married Elinor in 1895 and was already

a father when he entered Harvard College as a special student in 1897. Although he again failed to graduate and, in fact, later boasted of walking away from two colleges, Frost was a good student in his two years at Harvard, and what he learned of classical poetry certainly furthered his poetic development.

The Frosts' early married years were difficult ones. Their first son died in 1900, but four other children were born between 1899 and 1905. While continuing to write poetry, Frost supported his family by farming in West Derry, New Hampshire teaching at nearby Pinkerton Academy and accepting financial assistance from his paternal grandfather who left him a generous annuity when he died in 1901.

After more than a decade of this modest and obscure life, Frost made a momentous decision in 1912. He decided to move his family to England where, benefiting from the promotional efforts of his fellow American expatriate Ezra Pound, Frost published *A Boy's Will* (1913) and *North of Boston* (1914). He also developed friendships with other writers, particularly the English poet Edward Thomas. When the Frosts returned to the United States in 1915, he was finally gaining recognition as a poet.

Frost still hoped to combine farming and poetry and lived for several years after his return in Franconia New Hampshire, and in South Shaftesbury Vermont, but increasingly he played the role of a gentleman farmer. His 1923 volume, *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes*, which won the Pulitzer Prize the following year, made much of "the need of being versed in country things."

Having gained access to the literary and academic worlds, however, he undertook at this point three years as a poet-in-residence at Amherst College and two more at the University of Michigan. He later taught at both Amherst and Harvard, one of the colleges from which he had failed to graduate. His favorite activity became the performing of his own poems before chiefly academic audiences. Developing a chatty, informal style of discussing his poems that proved highly popular, he gained the reputation as he grew older, of a cheerful, homespun philosopher—a pose that is belied, however both by his poetry and by the conflicts of his personal life.

A number of poems in his 1928 book *West-Running Brook*, among them “Bereft,” “Acquainted with the Night,” and “Tree at My Window,” reflect a troubled spirit. Frost sensed in himself a precarious mental balance and feared a breakdown such as the one that led to the institutionalization of his sister Jeanie. Later his son Carol committed suicide and his daughter Irma had to be confined for a mental disorder. There were other tragedies—the deaths of his daughter Marjorie of puerperal fever in 1934 and of his wife in 1938, which devastated him.

His career, however, continued in high gear. His *Collected Poems* (1930) earned for him another Pulitzer Prize, as did *A Further Range* (1936), though critics disputed whether Frost’s title could justly be regarded as an allusion to the extension of his poetic range or simply to another range of New England mountains. In the 1930’s, when arguments raged over whether a poet ought to articulate a social commitment, Frost continued to write about solitary and rural figures, but “Departmental” wryly examines the subject of bureaucracy, and “Provide, Provide” twits those who would depend on the social legislation of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration for their security.

In the 1940’s Frost published two new books of poems, *A Witness Tree* (1942) and *Steeple Bush* (1947), as well as two masques—short dramatic works—on “reason” and “mercy,” respectively. By the time of *Steeple Bush*, Frost was seventy-three; his output slowed to a trickle, but honors flowed in. Both the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge made him a doctor of letters in 1957; he was named American poet laureate in 1958, and

he read a poem at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961.

The last year of his long life proved to be a capstone. He brought out a final book of poems, *In the Clearing* (1962), and in late summer of that year he visited the Soviet Union as a goodwill ambassador. The trip proved an ordeal for the eighty-eight-year-old poet, however, and soon afterward his health declined rapidly. In December, he entered Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston; he died on January 29, 1963.

ANALYSIS

Frost is that rare twentieth century poet who achieved both enormous popularity and critical acclaim. In an introductory essay to his collected poems Frost insists that a poem “will forever keep its freshness as a metal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went,” an observation that applies to most of his three hundred-odd poems. Once his work came into circulation, its freshness and deceptive simplicity captivated audiences that shied away from more difficult poets such as T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, while astute critics came to recognize the subtlety of thought and feeling that so often pervade these “simple” poems.

North of Boston ranks among the most original books of American poetry. Its title suggests its locale one of the titles Frost originally proposed for it, “Farm Servants,” indicates its typical subject matter. Most of its best-known poems—“Mending Wall,” “The Death of the Hired Man,” “Home Burial,” “The Wood-Pile”—are in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter). The language consists of everyday words, Frost having discarded the “poetic” vocabulary that he had occasionally used in *A Boy’s Will*. None of these features was new in poetry, but in combination they result in strikingly innovative poetry.

The works in this volume represent the conscious application of a theory which Frost set forth most directly in several letters to a friend named John Bartlett. He aimed to accommodate what he called “the sound of sense” to blank verse. He noted that many casual utterances of the people among whom he lived fell into a basically iambic rhythm: “She thinks I have no eye for these,” “My father used to say,” “Never you

say a thing like that to a man,” and so on. Writing poetry involved listening for and adapting to meter—what Frost called “sentence sounds.” In this way Frost created poems that did not only talk about rural New Englanders but also enacted them. Ten of the sixteen poems in *North of Boston* consist almost entirely of dialogue one is a monologue, and several others incorporate colloquial lines. Many readers do not even notice that the poems all “scan” according to the rules of iambic meter, but it is there, a firm substratum to Frost’s “sound of sense.”

To Frost’s credit, he refused merely to repeat the effects of this book in subsequent work. While he continued from time to time to base poems on dialogue—especially between husband and wife—dialogue does not dominate any of his later books. *Mountain Interval* (1916), his first book to appear originally in the United States, offers much greater variety in form: sonnets, poems in four- and five line rhymed stanzas, poems written in short lines and others in patterns made up of lines of different lengths. Several, including “The Road Not Taken” and “The Sound of Trees,” are reflective poems that raise deep questions and provide teasing or ambiguous answers in a fashion that delighted Frost. They also remind the reader that many of life’s important questions do not have answers both simple and unfailingly satisfying.

A number of Frost’s poems celebrate encounters with nature. The first poem in his first book “Into My Own,” and the last poem in his final book an untitled one beginning “In winter in the woods alone,” depict a solitary person entering the woods while in the long stretch between those poems the one that may be his best known of all, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” portrays the desire to do so. On one level, Frost can be seen as simply continuing the love affair with the wilderness so common in American mythology, whose literary manifestations include such classics as James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-1841) and Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). On another level, the woodsman—independent defiant of urban artificiality, at one with nature—is one of Frost’s conceptions of himself. These poems convey a number of themes and even more attitudes. The woods can be a place

for restoration of the spirit through vigorous activity and communion with nature, the locus of deep and sometimes sinister psychic forces, or a happy hunting ground for analogies of the human condition generally. Frost portrays both the perils and joys of isolation.

A considerable portion of Frost’s poems are set either in winter or at night or both. These are the times that tend to isolate people, to throw them on their own resources, to encourage reflection. Those readers who think that Frost’s reflections are always mild and cheerful have not read his poems carefully enough. In *West-Running Brook*, a group of poems gathered under the epigraph “*Fiat Nox*” (“let there be night”) suggests something of Frost’s nocturnal range. These poems include “Acceptance,” “Once by the Pacific,” “Be-reft,” “Tree at My Window,” and “Acquainted with the Night.”

Frost is also a daylight observer of ordinary people and their ways. The relationships of husbands and wives interested him particularly, and his range is wide, from the telepathic harmony of a couple in “The Telephone” to the marital disintegration of “Home Burial.” Perhaps no other poet has portrayed the give-and-take of marriage so variously and so vividly. His world is also one of neighbors passing tramps, and even garrulous witches.

Neither children nor sophisticated adults appear very often in his poetry. Rooted in the countryside his writing focuses on simple things and people. He used language with the same economy and precision his characters display in their use of the scythe, the axe, and the pitchfork. Demonstrating how much can be done by the skillful application of simple tools, Frost has left to an increasingly industrialized and impersonal society a valuable legacy of poems celebrating basic emotions and relationships.

“HOME BURIAL”

First published: 1914 (collected in *North of Boston*, 1914)

Type of work: Poem

Under the strain of their child’s recent death, a young couple try vainly to communicate.

“Home Burial” is an intensely dramatic poem about a bereaved and increasingly estranged married couple. The husband has just returned from burying their young son in a family plot of the sort that served northern New Englanders as cemeteries for generations. He mounts the stairs toward his wife “until she cowered under him.” What follows is a bitter exchange. The wife, unable to understand his failure to express grief vocally, accuses him of indifference to their loss; he, rankled by what he considers a groundless charge, tries blunderingly to assure her, but they fail to comprehend each other. At the end of the poem she is threatening to leave and find someone else who can console her while he threatens, “I’ll follow and bring you back by force. I will!”

The poem is nearly all dialogue except for a few sections of description which work like stage directions in a play, serving to relate the couple spatially and to underline by movement and gestures the tension between them. Although the poem does not require staging, it is easily stageable, so dramatically it is presented. The reader surmises that the two really do love—or at least have loved—each other and that the difficulties between them have resulted not from willful malice but from clashes of temperament and different training. The man is expected to be stoical, tight-lipped in adversity. Having learned to hide his feelings, he is unable to express them in a way recognizable to his wife, with her different emotional orientation.

She has watched with a kind of horror his energetic digging at the gravesite; he has made the gravel “leap up . . . and land so lightly.” She cannot understand that he has converted his frustration into a relevant and necessary physical activity, as men have traditionally learned to do. Nor does she realize that a seemingly callous remark of his about the rotting of birch fences may well constitute an oblique way of referring to the demise of the child that he has helped make. Instead she draws the conclusion that, because he does not grieve overtly as she does, he has no feelings. Because he is inexpert at oral communication, he cannot say the kind of thing that might alleviate her grief.

The poem becomes a painful study in misinterpretation that is in the process of leading to the disintegration of a marriage. The poem is also a

brilliant example of Frost’s success at unobtrusively adapting a vignette from life to the formal requirements of blank verse. In the early twentieth century avant-garde poets were strongly resisting traditional verse poems, but Frost had his own way of escaping the tyrannizing effects of meter.

Although “Home Burial” and the other blank verse poems in *North of Boston* look conventional on the page, and although the poet’s firm iambic support for the dialogue is readily apparent to wellversed readers, it is easy to forget that something such as the wife’s “There you go sneering now!” followed by his “I’m not, I’m not!” is a more or less regular pentameter line as well as an easily imaginable bit of argument between two disaffected people. Frost showed that ordinary people could inhabit a poem, could talk and argue and move convincingly within a medium that William Shakespeare and John Milton in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had tended to reserve for aristocrats and angels.

Unlike a play, Frost’s dramatic poem has no resolution. Will the wife leave, as she threatens? If so will he restrain her by force as he threatens, or will he resign himself to the status quo, as he has before? It is not Frost’s intention to solve this marital problem. He had known conflict in his own marriage and observed it in other marriages; he certainly knew the ways in which spouses might resolve or fail to resolve, their conflicts. What he chose to do was provide an opportunity to eavesdrop on a bereaved couple at an agonizing moment and feel their passion and frustration.

“THE ROAD NOT TAKEN”

First published: 1916 (collected in *Mountain Interval*, 1916)

Type of work: Poem

A traveler through life reflects on a past choice of route “that has made all the difference.”

The first poem in Frost’s book *Mountain Interval* “The Road Not Taken,” has long been a popular favorite. Like many of his poems, it seems

simple, but it is not exactly straightforward, and even perceptive readers have disagreed considerably over its best interpretation. It looks like a personal poem about a decision of vast importance, but there is evidence to the contrary both inside and outside the poem. Frost has created a richly mysterious reading experience out of a marvelous economy of means.

The first significant thing about “The Road Not Taken” is its title, which presumably refers to an unexercised option, something about which the speaker can only speculate. The traveler comes to a fork in a road through a “yellow wood” and wishes he could somehow manage to “travel both” routes he rejects that aspiration as impractical, however at least for the day at hand. The road he selects is “the one less traveled by,” suggesting the decision of an individualist someone little inclined to follow the crowd. Almost immediately, however, he seems to contradict his own judgment: “Though as for that the passing there/ Had worn them really about the same.” The poet appears to imply that the decision is based on evidence that is, or comes close to being, an illusion.

The contradictions continue. He decides to save the first, (perhaps) more traveled route for another day but then confesses that he does not think it probable that he will return, implying that this seemingly casual and inconsequential choice is really likely to be crucial—one of the choices of life that involve commitment or lead to the necessity of other choices that will divert the traveler forever from the original stopping place. In the final stanza, the traveler says that he will be “telling this with a sigh,” which may connote regret. His choice in any event, “has made all the difference.” The tone of this stanza, coupled with the title, strongly suggests that the traveler, if not regretting his choice, at least laments the possibilities that the need to make a choice leave unfulfilled.

Has Frost in mind a particular and irrevocable choice of his own, and if so, what feeling, in this poem of mixed feelings, should be regarded as dominant? There is no way of identifying such a specific decision from the evidence of the poem itself. Although a prejudice exists in favor of identifying the “I” of the poem with the author in the absence of evidence to the contrary, the speaker may not be Frost at all. On more than one occasion the poet claimed that this poem was about his

friend Edward Thomas, a man inclined to indecisiveness out of a strong—and, as Frost thought, amusing—habit of dwelling on the irrevocability of decisions. If so, the reference in the poem’s final stanza to “telling” of the experience “with a sigh/ Somewhere ages and ages hence” might be read not only as the boast of Robert Frost, who “tells” it as long as people read the poem, but also as a perpetual revelation of Thomas, also a fine poet.

What is clear is that the speaker is, at least, a person like Thomas in some respects (though there may well be some of Frost in him also). Critics of this poem are likely always to argue whether it is an affirmation of the crucial nature of the choices people must make on the road of life or a gentle satire on the sort of temperament that always insists on struggling with such choices. The extent of the poet’s sympathy with the traveler also remains an open question.

Frost composed this poem in four five-line stanzas with only two end rhymes in each stanza (*abaab*). The flexible iambic meter has four strong beats to the line. Of the technical achievements in “The Road Not Taken,” one in particular shows Frost’s skill at enforcing meaning through form. The poem ends:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The indecision of the speaker—his divided state of mind—is heightened by the repetition of “I,” split by the line division and emphasized by the rhyme and pause. It is an effect possible only in a rhymed and metrical poem—and thus a good argument for the continuing viability of traditional forms.

“THE OVEN BIRD”

First published: 1916 (collected in
Mountain Interval, 1916)

Type of work: Poem

In the call of a forest bird, the listener discerns the theme of diminishment.

“The Oven Bird” is an irregular sonnet that explores in various ways the problem of “what to make of a diminished thing.” The poet does not refer to the bird directly by its other common name of “teacher bird” (based on the resemblance of its reiterated call to the word “teacher”) but attributes to the bird an instructive discourse about diminishment the downward thrust of things. In the middle of summer, this bird reminds one of the fall (specifically the petal fall) that is already past and of the fall to come.

Like many of Frost’s poems, this one is built on paradox. This bird can be said to sing, but it is not particularly tuneful. Its repeated call in a trochaic or falling, rhythm does not have the upward lilt that humans generally consider cheerful or merry. The bird is a twentieth century teacher—not the oldfashioned lecturer but the modern one who contrives to induce the students to teach themselves. Like the teacher, the bird “knows,” and in knowing frames the kind of question that is intended to provoke thought, although without any guarantee of easy resolution. Paradoxically, the process of learning becomes one of discovering that some questions must be struggled with unendingly. Like the teacher bird, the poem supplies no answers.

Literally, the “diminished thing” of the poem is the weather and the natural year. The sonnet is full of words and phrases such as “old,” “early petal-fall,” “down in showers,” “dust is over all,” and “the bird would cease,” that suggest decline in the natural order. Knowing that people persist in interpreting nature in human terms, the poet can safely assume that the poem will be read as referring to the diminishment of human hopes, of life itself. Frost reinforces his theme by using a proportion of diminishment: “for flowers/ Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.” As expectations turn into past events and remaining possibilities steadily diminish, any thoughtful person must ponder “what to make” of that which is left.

Frost also enforces his theme rhythmically. He crosses the usual iambic rising rhythm with trochaic words, those with first-syllable accents. “Singer,” “flowers,” “summer,” “petal”—in fact, all

the two-syllable words of the poem—carry this accent. These words, nevertheless are all placed in positions that contribute to an iambic movement which might be taken as suggesting that, despite the declines and falls, both the cycle of seasons and human hopes endure.

The typical English sonnet ends in a rhymed couplet which often sums up or tops off the poem and gives a feeling of finality. This poem does have two couplets, but neither is at the end. It seems to be part of Frost’s strategy to avoid any sense of completeness or finality. Whatever continues, continues to diminish, but while the process continues something always remains. The only regular quatrain (the sort of rhyming unit one expects to find in a sonnet three times before the couplet) is the four lines that fall at the end. What to make of this feature is one of the persisting questions about this haunting poem.

“BIRCHES”

First published: 1916 (collected in
Mountain Interval, 1916)

Type of work: Poem

The tension between earthly satisfactions and higher aspirations emerges from the recollection of a childhood game.

In “Birches,” the speaker’s attention is first caught by a cluster of bent birch trees that he knows were bowed by ice storms. The sight reminds him of his boyhood sport of swinging on birch trees, although such an activity does not permanently bow them. Swinging on birches is a form of play that can be done alone, the competition strictly between child and tree. It is a sport requiring poise and good judgment; for a safe and satisfactory ride, one must climb to the very top of the tree and “launch out at just the right moment. A country boy might expect to master all the birches on his father’s land.”

The speaker dreams of swinging on birches again. From the perspective of adulthood, he envies his childhood capacity for launching out anew making a new beginning on a new tree. In

his mind, the game has become a way of escaping from earth, where life sometimes seems to be a “pathless wood”—but he knows that such a game is not a permanent escape from earth and that part of the fun is “coming back,” for life is not always a pathless wood, and the earth from which he contemplates escaping is “the right place for love.” The mature man thus recognizes a symbolic value that he could not have consciously realized when he was young enough to be a swinger of birches.

The poem consists of fifty-nine easily flowing blank verse lines. Though “Birches” has no formal divisions, it can be separated into three, almost equal parts: the observation and description of trees bent by winter storms, the recollection of the techniques of birch-swinging, and the grown man’s dream, energized by his awareness of the claims of both “earth” and “heaven.” Each part leads casually to the next: “But I was going to say” to the second part, “It’s when I’m weary of considerations” to the third.

The poem is marvelously vivid and concrete in its descriptions of both ice storms and child’s play. The stir of the trees after acquiring their load of ice “cracks and crazes their enamel”; casting their load off, they leave “heaps of broken glass.” The reader is made to see the boy “kicking his way down through the air” and the man “weeping/From a twig’s having lashed it [his eye] open.” Black and white are used suggestively and, as often in Frost, somewhat ambiguously. The white birches are first seen against the background of “straighter darker trees.” The sun shining on the ice coating of the tree trunks turns them prismatic. The boy climbs “black branches up a snow-white trunk/ *Toward* heaven” (“toward” being significantly italicized for heaven is not attainable), the white intimating the pure and heavenly aspiration, the black, the necessary physical, earthly steps, the “going and coming back.”

Far from being the simple reminiscence of a sentimental adult, the poem not only acknowledges that returning to the birch-swinging of childhood is a “dream” but also assesses the significance of the game from a mature viewpoint. Part of maturity is coming to understand and articulate the profundity of early experience.

“DUST OF SNOW”

First published: 1921 (collected in *New Hampshire*, 1923)

Type of work: Poem

A small event on a winter walk unexpectedly changes a person’s day for the better.

Frost was proud of his small, compact poems that say much more than they seem to say; his 1923 volume *New Hampshire* gathers several of these, including “Fire and Ice,” “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” and one of the shortest of all, “Dust of Snow.” One sentence long, it occupies eight short lines and contains only thirty-four words, all but two of them monosyllabic, and all of them part of even a young child’s vocabulary.

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree
Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

Much of the effect of this poem derives from its paradoxes or seeming contradictions, the first of which is in the title. Although the phrase “a dusting of snow” is common in weather reports, dust usually calls forth notions of something dirty and unpleasant quite unlike the dust of snow.

It is also paradoxical that the speaker’s mood is initially so negative on a presumably fine winter day after a fresh snowfall, that he has so far rued this day. Even more paradoxically, the agent responsible for provoking a change for the better is a bird normally condemned: the large, black, raucous crow. Even its important function as a devourer of carrion does not summon forth a favorable image. In medieval times the crow often symbolized the devil, and its larger cousin, the raven, was employed by Edgar Allan Poe and other writers to create a sinister or melancholy mood. This crow, however rescues the speaker from his previously rueful mood.

One paradox that Frost did not intend occurred to a woman who heard him read “Dust of Snow” and responded, “Very sinister poem!” When the puzzled author asked her why, she replied, “Hemlock—Socrates, you know,” alluding to the poison that the Greek philosopher was required to drink after his trial. Frost had intended no such suggestion and it contradicts the effect of the poem as a whole. Socrates’ hemlock was quite a different thing from the tree inhabited by Frost’s crow, and the woman’s misinterpretation exemplifies an important point: Not all the possible suggestions of a word or image are necessarily applicable in a given context. Frost depends on his reader to use imagination responsibly and to exclude meaning that will not make sense in a poem.

The rhyme and meter of this short poem contribute much to its effect. The firm iambic beat is established in the first three lines, but Frost knew exactly when to vary the rhythm to avoid a sing-song effect; thus there is an extra syllable (in a different place) in each of the next two lines, and after two more regular lines, the last line consists of two anapests. Furthermore, the rhyming words are important ones, and the most surprising one, “rued,” is reserved until the end. The reader is left with a memorable impression of an unexpected boon from an unlikely source. To be “saved” by a crow because of its unexpectedness, is more delightful than being saved by a song sparrow.

“TREE AT MY WINDOW”

First published: 1928 (collected in *West-Running Brook*, 1928)

Type of work: Poem

A person who has known trouble recognizes a kindred spirit in the tree outside his window.

“Tree at My Window” differs from most of Frost’s nature poems in its locale. Instead of being out in the fields or woods, the speaker is looking out his bedroom window at a nearby tree. He closes his window at night, but out of love for the tree he does not draw the curtain. This is an unmistakably modern nature poem. Whereas the transcen-

dentalists of the nineteenth century had regarded nature as profound, the speaker here specifically denies the possibility of the tree speaking wisdom. Instead, he compares the conditions of human and tree. He has seen the tree “taken and tossed” by storm, and if the tree can be imagined as having looked in at him asleep, it has seen him “taken and swept/ and all but lost.” That which brought them together is styled “fate”—but an imaginative fate, because of their respective concerns with “outer” and “inner weather.”

He sees the tree not as an instructor but as a comrade, a fellow sufferer. Between Frost and the transcendentalist faith in nature as a teacher lies a scientific revolution that denies the possibility of “sermons in stones,” and it is clear that the tree is physically, the person only metaphorically, storm-tossed. This metaphor, an old contrivance of poets remains a potent one when used as freshly as it is here. The speaker’s storm is only a dream, but dreams can be deeply disturbing; psychologists insist that they may be very significant.

“Inner weather” reflects a recurring theme in Frost, who in his personal life had to grapple with the maintenance of psychic balance. Inner doubt and conflict dominate a number of poems from Frost’s middle years including, in his 1928 book *West-Running Brook*, “Bereft” and “Acquainted with the Night”; “Desert Places,” in his next book, *A Further Range*, describes personal fear. In “Tree at My Window,” the kinship with nature is even more therapeutic and steadying than it was in the earlier “Birches.” Both tree and man have been “tossed” but survive. Frost would reassert nature’s steadying influence in later poems such as “One Step Backward Taken” and “Take Something Like a Star,” both in the 1947 *Steeple Bush*.

“Tree at My Window” has a distinctive form. First glance reveals it to be a neat, compact poem which uses the *abba* rhyme scheme made famous by Alfred Lord Tennyson in his long poem *In Memoriam* (1850). The first three lines of each quatrain are tetrameter lines, while the last line has either two or three strong beats. The rhythmical variations, however are quite unusual. Frost once observed that there are only two meters in English, strict iambic and loose iambic. This poem is definitely the latter. Out of the sixteen lines, only two—both short ones—are indisputably regular.

Frost worked extra unstressed syllables into most of the lines. Again Frost found a way to be rhythmically innovative without losing the sense of a traditional poetic structure.

“DEPARTMENTAL”

First published: 1936 (collected in *A Further Range*, 1936)

Type of work: Poem

Observing the funeral of an ant leads to a recognition of the strengths and weaknesses of human institutions.

“Departmental,” a Frost poem of the 1930’s, typifies its author in several ways. It is playful, full of clever rhymes, and closely observant of a natural scene that mirrors aspects of human life. In this Depression-era poem, Frost focuses on the popular theme of social organization. It is almost a fable though it implies, rather than states, its moral.

To follow an ant on a tablecloth, the poem says is immediately to see dutiful and specialized behavior. “Departmental” focuses on ants’ way of dealing with death. If a particular ant finds a dead moth, its only obligation is to report the moth to “the hive’s enquiry squad.” Even when it encounters the body of another ant, it merely informs the proper authorities who arrange for a “solemn mortician” to bring the body back home and give it a dignified burial, while the rest of the colony continue about their business: “It couldn’t be called ungente./But how thoroughly departmental.”

As observed, the ant colony excludes a host of what one considers human reactions. There is no “surprise” at death, no pausing to mourn or reflect on its meaning. The ant does not slow down, is not at all “impressed.” Other than a formal report there is no talk, no standing around and staring, as one expects at the scene of a fatal accident. Everything is routine, designated behavior and prescribed ritual. Ants are efficient; they eschew all the impractical reactions of human beings. Frost’s ants are not cruel, but they are unfeeling

and robotic in their reactions to death, as though it has been decreed that death is, after all, a commonplace event that should not be allowed to interrupt duty or waste the time of the populace.

Thus Frost calls attention to a basic difference between ants (at least as humans perceive them) and humans. The fact that death is common does not, for humans, negate its profundity. Human reactions are often not profound and seldom “useful,” but they betoken the human way of experiencing life. The ceremony of a funeral, moreover brings together in common cause people who otherwise may have few opportunities to socialize such differences hover in the background of Frost’s poem.

The differences between ant and human conduct however, also call attention to the bureaucratic or “departmental” likenesses. The ant world of Frost’s poem has been constructed with frequent analogies to specialized human institutions: janissaries, commissaries, courts, and the “state” funeral of a deceased dignitary. Ant behavior cannot be described successfully, it seems, without reference to concepts totally beyond the range of ants. Unlike ants, who do it instinctively, human beings have to learn to be efficient and impersonal. Because humans are capable of modifying their social norms, they run the risk of damaging specifically human ideas and feelings when they adopt the modes of social insects. Ants must be “departmental” people do not have to be. Like an ancient fable the poem amuses, then challenges its reader by comparing human conduct to that of other branches of the animal kingdom.

The lines are iambic trimeter, with a liberal sprinkling of anapestic feet. Rhymes are prominent chiefly in couplets, occasionally triplets, with one quadruplet. A number of them—“any” and “antennae,” “atwiddle” and “middle,” for example—are the sort of feminine rhymes that often serve to reinforce humor. It was axiomatic with Frost to convey inner seriousness with outer humor. “Departmental” shows him avoiding the sugar-coated pill by blending the “sugar”—the delight—and the “pill”—the enlightenment—in a poem that appears light and droll but that slyly satirizes a prevalent human weakness: a tendency to design human institutions inhumanely.

“DESIGN”

First published: 1936 (collected in *A Further Range*, 1936)

Type of work: Poem

The question of whether there exists a comprehensible plan or design in nature is a baffling one.

“Design” was completed for the 1936 volume *A Further Range*, but Frost had completed an earlier version of the poem as far back as 1912 without attempting to publish it. In the tradition of New England Puritanism, it details closely a small event in nature and attempts to interpret its meaning for humanity. Since the revolution in scientific thought stimulated by Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), however, poetry of this sort has been less likely to underline a received article of Christian or other transcendent faith. Frost’s poem is a questioning one in the form of an Italian sonnet whose octave, or first eight-line unit, is balanced against the closing six-line sestet.

The speaker comes upon “a dimpled spider, fat and white” that has captured and killed a moth against the background of a white flower called a heal-all. The octave describes the scene, which is all “in white” (to quote a phrase not in the poem that stood as Frost’s original title for it). The description is ironic: The disarmingly attractive spider and the moth are “characters of death and blight/Mixed ready to begin the morning right.” The spider is also compared to a snowflake, and the very name of the flower suggests the opposite of “death and blight.”

The sestet asks three questions, the third of which seems to answer the first two but is then qualified in the last line: Why did the killing take place on a white flower, what brought the spider and moth together, and was the event part of a sinister design? The final line of the sonnet then implies another question: Can such a small event of nature properly be considered as part of any design, either good or evil?

The answers to these questions hinge on the meaning of “design.” Before Darwin, the idea that the processes of nature, both generally and

in particular reveal a great design of the Creator prevailed in the Western world; overwhelmingly, this design was viewed as benevolent. A sparrow “shall not fall on the ground without your Father,” Jesus told his disciples. A few dissidents might have argued that God was malign or that the devil had gained control, but even they would take for granted a designing intelligence.

Nineteenth century scientific thought changed all this by dispensing with design and the necessity of a designer in favor of concepts such as Darwin’s “natural selection.” Frost’s poem shows the influence of the late nineteenth century American philosopher William James, who, while rejecting the simple Christian affirmation of a designer involved in every detail of creation, sought to retain the concept of design as a “seeing force” rather than a “blind force.” Frost appears to be mocking the idea of design in “small” events such as the confrontation of an individual spider and moth, but he characteristically leaves his most important questions unanswered.

The pattern of the poem is that of a traditional sonnet: descriptive octave followed by reflective sestet. Because of what he has been taught, the observer of the spider’s triumph both sees and reflects differently from a person of any earlier time. The poem dramatizes the impossibility of maintaining a view of God and nature similar to the one that satisfied people of past generations. At the same time, it embodies the difficulty of interpreting nature in a satisfactory way.

SUMMARY

The poetry of Frost has accomplished a feat rare in the twentieth century: It has received both critical acclaim and widespread popular acceptance. His poetry expresses common emotional and sentient experiences so simply and directly that its authenticity affects readers without expertise in reading poetry; the subtlety of his thought and the sublimity of his art are appreciated by those who ponder his work. The rural character or meditative speaker in a Frost poem represents not merely a person the poet has met or a mood he has felt but humanity in the process of being itself or discovering itself.

Robert P. Ellis

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DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is simple and what is complex in Robert Frost's poetry?
- Consider "Home Burial" as a poem about communication failure.
- What evidence is there in individual Frost poems that the "I" of the poem does not necessarily represent the poet himself?
- Frost wrote exclusively in meter, chiefly in iambic meter. How prevalent are variations and irregularities in the meter, and what do they accomplish?
- What examples of humor reinforcing seriousness can you find in Frost's poems other than "Departmental"?
- Doubts and fears are often expressed or implied in Frost's poetry. Give several examples.

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