



FROST



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foreword

Robert Frost looms as a giant figure on the American literary landscape. By concentrating on the **countryside, language and experiences of America**, his poetry has done much to establish an American poetic identity. In **fact, his wry, countrified, New England narrative voice** has often been praised as the quintessential voice of American literature. His determination to weave poetry out of *everyday experience* distinguishes him from most other poets of his age. His poems are *honest, open and autobiographical*. It has often been said of Frost that he never really tired of retelling the story of his own life. He was also the undisputed master of poetic forms. Writing in a period dominated by free verse, in a time when poetry seemed to have given up on punctuation and capital letters, Frost insisted that poetry have a definite **form**, that it be **dramatic** and that it rely on voice **tones** to vary the effect of its **rhythms**. If you are reading the poetry of Robert Frost for the first time, one of the things that should strike you straight away is that his poems are **deceptive**. What at first appears to be a simple and **accessible** nature poem will often yield **complex, rich and interesting** interpretations. If you would like to read more about Robert Frost's life, there is a short biography at the back of this booklet.

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The Tuft of Flowers

Donne

I went to turn the grass once after one
Who mowed it in the dew before the sun.

The dew was gone that made his blade so keen
Before I came to view the leveled scene.

I looked for him behind an isle of trees; 5
I listened for his whetstone on the breeze.

But he had gone his way, the grass all mown,
And I must be, as he had been—alone,

“As all must be,” I said within my heart,
“Whether they work together or apart.” 10

But as I said it, swift there passed me by
On noiseless wing a bewildered butterfly,

Seeking with memories grown dim o’er night
Some resting flower of yesterday’s delight.

And once I marked his flight go round and round, 15
As where some flower lay withering on the ground.

And then he flew as far as eye could see,
And then on tremulous wing came back to me.

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I thought of questions that have no reply,
And would have turned to toss the grass to dry; 20

But he turned first, and led my eye to look
At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,

A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared
Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared.

The mower in the dew had loved them thus, 25
By leaving them to flourish, not for us,

Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him,
But from sheer morning gladness at the brim.

The butterfly and I had lit upon,
Nevertheless, a message from the dawn, 30

That made me hear the wakening birds around,
And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground,

And feel a spirit kindred to my own;
So that henceforth I worked no more alone;

But glad with him, I worked as with his aid, 35
And weary, sought at noon with him the shade;

And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech
With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.

“Men work together,” I told him from the heart,
“Whether they work together or apart.” 40

1 to turn the grass – to toss grass so that it will dry.

2 dew – moisture that is deposited from the air in small drops on plants, especially at night.

3 keen – enthusiastic, sharp.

6 whetstone – a stone on which the gardener would sharpen the blade of his knife or his scythe.

12 bewildered – confused, dazed or disorientated.

13 grown dim – become faint or dark.

18 tremulous – quivering or trembling.

22 brook – a small stream.

23 A leaping tongue of bloom – perhaps the speaker is echoing the Bible here. In the Bible, a tongue of flames descended on the Apostles (Christ's

followers). For the speaker (and, indeed, for the butterfly), the tuft of flowers offers a moment of insight and inspiration that brings him into closer harmony with the natural world.

24 scythe – a long, curved blade used for mowing long grass.

26 to flourish – to grow in abundance or to thrive.

29 lit upon – met or came upon.

33 kindred – very close or similar to.

33 a spirit kindred to my own – here, the speaker feels so close to the absent gardener that it is as if they are working in the field together.

Content

- First published in the collection A Boy's Will, 'The Tuft of Flowers' revisits one of Frost's favourite subjects: the work associated with farm labour.
- In this poem, Frost moves from a belief that all men are individuals, leading separate lives, to a conviction that we all share a common bond of humanity.
- In the opening stanza, the poet tells us that he went down **'to turn the grass'**, so that it would dry. This grass had already been **'mowed [...] in the dew before the sun'** by an unnamed person.
- In the second **heroic couplet**, the speaker makes it clear that some hours have passed since this person worked in the field. Nevertheless, the speaker looks and listens for signs of the worker:

I looked for him behind an isle of trees;

I listened for his whetstone on the breeze.

- It soon becomes apparent that this man **'had gone his way'** once his work was finished. The speaker is left completely on his own.
- In the fifth couplet, he contemplates the implications of his solitude and comes to the conclusion that ultimately all men are alone, **'Whether they work together or apart'**.
- At that moment, a **'bewildered butterfly'** stumbles into the poet's view. In the speaker's imagination, the butterfly is drawn to this place by the dim memory of the flower it visited the previous day.
- However, in the next **couplet**, we learn that that flower has been mowed and lies withering on the ground. Confused and lost, the creature flies **'round and round'** until it almost vanishes from the poet's sight. The butterfly returns to the speaker's line of vision. This

the speaker now feels that he is linked to the worker.

- The arrival of the butterfly and the sight of the unharmed flowers lead him to believe that he can see and hear the mower.
- You will remember that this is something he initially felt unable to do. The intensity of the speaker's feelings grows until he feels:

[...] a spirit kindred to my own;

So that henceforth I worked no more alone;

- No longer alone, the poet now imagines himself working with the man. United by a common bond of fraternal appreciation of beauty and even our shared humanity, he addresses his fellow worker directly.

'Men work together,' I told him from the heart,

'Whether they work together or apart.'

- The poem's final **heroic couplet** reverses the speaker's previous belief that we are all alone and separate.

2. Stylistic Features

- In 'The Tuft of Flowers', Frost uses a number of carefully worked-out **images** in order to **evoke** his moment of **epiphany**.
- The poem opens with a depiction of the speaker's isolation. However, this sense of loneliness is not, as it first appears, simply a personal experience.
- It is **symbolic** of the loneliness of the **human condition**. As the speaker puts it, he is lonely **'as all must be'**.
- To begin with, the speaker feels confident that this is an undeniable truth that concerns all humankind; yet, the arrival of a simple butterfly leads him to reassess this conviction.
- The butterfly heralds an awakening in the poet's consciousness. As the it lands on the blossom, the poet is made aware of the mower's appreciation of the beauty of these same flowers. Many critics have pointed out the similarities between the work of the unnamed gardener and that of the poet.

Both work in isolation and both professions appreciate a kind of beauty that many fail to see.

In a letter that Frost wrote to his friend Sidney Cox, he had the following to say about flowers:

I like flowers you know but I like 'em wild, and I am rather the exception than the rule in America. Far as I have walked in pursuit of flowers, I have never met another in the woods on the same quest. Americans will dig for peas and beans and such like utilities but not if they know it for posies.

- So, it is possible to read 'The Tuft of Flowers' as an **extended metaphor / conceit** for the creative process. In this poem, the speaker recognises in himself the appreciation of aesthetic beauty that led the mower to spare the flowers and, with this recognition, he senses a bond between his ideals and the other man's ideals, between his craft and the other man's craft.
- The flowers then become a **symbol** for artistic appreciation and the bonds of humanity that transcend ordinary, everyday experiences.
- Just as in the opening couplets Frost was willing to generalise his personal loneliness so that it became symbolic of the **human condition**, his delight now leads him to generalise his feelings of fraternal kinship for this unnamed man and his work.
- In the poem, the tuft of flowers serves as a **catalyst** that provokes in the poet feelings of common purpose with the entire human race.
- However, this moment of spiritual recognition does not occur spontaneously; it is something that requires work. The act of cutting the grass becomes a **metaphor** for the spiritual journey that the poet must undertake. This is not an easy process, as it prevents the poem from becoming too sentimental. It provides us with a sharp reminder of the fact that all beauty is fleeting. There is a sense of understanding between the speaker and the mower because they both appreciate the beauty of these flowers.

prevents the poem from becoming too sentimental. It provides us with a sharp reminder of the fact that all beauty is fleeting. There is a sense of understanding between the speaker and the mower because they both appreciate the beauty of these flowers.

In order to relate his feelings to us, Frost uses a number of particularly peaceful **images** and **sound effects**. The poem is set in a grassy field with a brook running through it. The soft sounds create an **onomatopoeic** effect of silent tranquillity. The speaker mentions the scythe '**whispering to the ground**', he tells us that he can hear '**wakening birds around**', and listens for the whetstone '**on the breeze**'. The **regular rhyming** scheme (aa, bb) offsets the poem's irregular meter. This, in part, gives the poem its insistent, old-fashioned and genteel sound. Some of the archaic-sounding words used by Frost add to this effect: '**o'er night**' and '**henceforth**,' for example.

Most of the **heroic couplets** make use of **end-stopped rhyme** and each one contains a separate thought. This makes 'The Tuft of Flowers' easy to read and contributes to its peaceful, contemplative and **appealing tone**. One of the most striking stylistic features of the poem is the **paradox** that is used to highlight its central **theme**. The idea that '**Men work together [...] Whether they work together or apart**' is an unusual, if not contradictory, one. However, in order to grasp the meaning of the poem fully, it is necessary to embrace this notion. Finally, Frost employs a series of very subtle **motifs** to highlight the idea that man is united to his fellow man. The poem contains a number of thought-provoking **insights into the human condition**. **These include the fact that:** we are all linked by our need to work, that we all share an instinctive appreciation of beauty and that men are driven by a need to respect living things. This is a beautiful poem that causes us to pause and consider the nature of the world in which we live.

'The Tuft of Flowers' is a very complex poem that is certainly worth mentioning in an essay. If you decide to include it, you might want to consider the following points:

1. *The poem is typical of Frost's personal and confessional style.*
2. *'The Tuft of Flowers' is highly structured around a very **accessible** narrative. In this narrative, the poet's mastery of **form** leads to a restrained and contemplative **tone** of voice.*
3. *The final message of the poem is uplifting. Once again, this is typical of Frost. However, there are darker poems on the Leaving Certificate course and you may wish to contrast 'The Tuft of Flowers' with a dark poem like 'Design'.*

FROST

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Commentary

FROST

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Mending Wall

I
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing: 5
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean, 10
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again. 15
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!" 20
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across 25
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder

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If I could put a notion in his head:
 “Why do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it
 Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
 Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
 What I was walling in or walling out,
 And to whom I was like to give offense.
 Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
 That wants it down.” I could say “Elves” to him,
 But it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather
 He said it for himself. *I see him there,*
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
 Not of woods only and the shade of trees.

And he likes having thought of it so well
 He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

Sisyphus

Commentary

1. Content

Writing about ‘Mending Wall’ in 1955, Frost said:

It’s about a spring occupation in my day. When I was farming seriously we had to set the wall up every year. You don’t do that any more. You run a strand of barbed wire along it and let it go at that. We used to set the wall up. If you see a real wall set up you know it’s owned by a lawyer in New York – not a real farmer. This poem is about that spring occupation.

In this **deceptively complex poem**, the speaker opens with a bold statement:

***Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
 That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
 And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
 And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
 The work of hunters is another thing:***

- Here, the poet suggests that there are two types of people: those who like building walls and those who don’t. The speaker says that he has arrived many times after the ‘**hunters**’ have damaged the wall. He has set himself the task of rebuilding these damaged sections. In line 11, he tells us that in springtime he has walked the line with this neighbour in order to help him to: ‘**set the wall between [them]**

once again'. The speaker stays on his side of the wall and his neighbour keeps to his own side.

- Doggedly, they each replace the boulders that have landed on their side of the barrier. The work is tough and they '**wear [their] fingers rough with handling**' these rocks.
- At one point in the work, it becomes clear that the wall is actually not necessary. His neighbour's land contains pine trees and Frost's field contains an apple orchard.
- The poet now engages in light-hearted criticism of his neighbour's need to maintain this wall. He would like to remind his neighbour that his:

*[...] apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.*

- The only reply that this man can offer the speaker is that: '**Good fences make good neighbors.**'
- The speaker, in turn, would like to ask him: '**Why do they make good neighbors?**'
- Seeing as there are '**no cows**' to protect, the poet would like to know exactly what it is he is '**walling in or walling out**'. Continuing in the same playful manner, the speaker would like to suggest that the land needs to be protected from '**elves**'.
- Thinking of this, the poet sees his neighbour:
*Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.*

- The **image** of the man struggling with the heavy stones leads the poet to believe that this man '**moves in darkness.**'
- The darkness that he is referring to here is a **metaphorical** darkness of the mind. His refusal to look beyond his instinctive need for a wall is at the root of this darkness.
- The man simply '**will not go behind his father's saying [...] He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."**'

2. Stylistic Features

- While it may not seem like it on a first reading, 'Mending Wall' is complex and is **open to multiple interpretations**.
- The poem is built around the meeting of both neighbours as they repair a wall together.
- This is something that they have done on many occasions. The wall then becomes a **metaphor** for some of the traditional, grand themes of literature.
- It is possible to apply three separate metaphorical associations to the wall: *firstly, the wall represents the human territorial need to segregate; secondly, the wall represents the dogged persistence of humankind in the face of enormous obstacles; and thirdly, the act of building the wall is a metaphor for the creative process itself.*

- If you choose to accept that the poem is criticising man's need to wall himself off from his fellow man, then the date of its composition is important.
- The poem was written in the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War. Perhaps one of the most obvious **symbols** of the divisions that threatened to plunge the world into World War Three was the Berlin Wall.
- In fact, when Frost visited the great enemy of the United States, the Soviet Union, he made a point of reading this poem. Bearing this in mind, it is possible to assume that Frost was passing comment on the foolhardy aggression of both superpowers as they scrambled for supremacy.
- The second, more subtle reading of the poem addresses the idea that **human beings continue to toil, regardless of the futility of their efforts.**
- In order to understand this reading, it is necessary to look closely at some of the **images** employed by Frost in the poem.
- The poet draws on Greek mythology to convey this complex **insight into the human condition**. The image of both speaker and neighbour pushing the heavy boulders up the hill, safe in the knowledge that they will have to repeat the same task at a later time, recalls the myth of Sisyphus.
- According to this Greek legend, Sisyphus was doomed for all eternity to push a heavy boulder up a hill. Before he could reach the top and complete his task, Sisyphus' boulder would roll back down again.

- In a similar fashion, the poet and his neighbour commit themselves to the task of repairing the wall even though they know that it is futile.
- By including this **allusion** to Greek Mythology, Frost widens the breadth and scope of the poem.
- As with so many of Frost's poems, 'Mending Wall' is open to further interpretation. The act of mending the wall can be likened to the artistic process itself. On a basic level, it is possible to see the similarities between the continual creation and destruction of the wall and the act of writing a work of literature.
- Every piece of art must first be created; however, once that act is completed, the ideas in the work of art challenge and even disrupt previously held beliefs.
- It is also possible to see that the acts of 'walk[ing] the line', building the wall and balancing each stone **evoke** the mysterious and arduous act of creating poetry.
- Interestingly, the process of building a wall is also directly applicable to Frost's poetic style. Frost was opposed to **free verse**. 'I had as soon write free verse,' he once declared, 'as play tennis without a net'.
- Richard Gray, writing about Frost's poetic style in American Poetry of the Twentieth Century, has pointed out that:

For [Frost] traditional metres were a necessary discipline, something against which he could play off the urgencies of his own speaking voice, the chance movements of his emotions, the catch and tilt of his breath.

- Frost preferred to use formal, traditional poetic forms. By maintaining and upholding the time-honoured customs of formal poetry, Frost, much like his neighbour, is traditional in his thinking.
- This poem is written in unrhymed 10 syllables, or **decasyllabic lines**. There are no **stanza breaks**, obvious **end rhymes**, or **rhyming patterns**, but many of the end words share an **assonance** with the words that went before (e.g. 'wall', 'hill', 'balls', 'wall' and 'well'; 'sun', 'thing', 'stone', 'mean', 'line' and 'again'; and 'game', 'them' and 'him').
- 'Mending Wall' also makes use of **internal rhymes**, and **slanted rhymes** to create a relaxed, lilting quality. **This makes the poem more accessible and appealing.**
- The **colloquial** style of the **monologue** allows the poet to enhance this relaxed **tone** of voice. The fact that the poem is written in **unrhymed iambic pentameter** also makes it seem more relaxed:

Some thing there is that does n't love a wall,

- This line contains five stressed feet; this is known as iambic pentameter. This is also the metre of normal, everyday speech.
- Other stylistic features employed by Frost in this poem include **inversion**, such as in the opening line.
- The poet also makes use of **amplification** to stress what he wants to say. The vocabulary is straightforward, relaxed and conversational. In fact, 'another' is the only word in the poem that exceeds two **syllables**.

3. Essay Writing

Once again, 'Mending Wall' is typical of Frost's poetic style. This makes it useful when it comes to writing essays. If you are thinking of using this poem in an essay,

you may wish to include some of the following points:

- The poem is open to metaphorical **interpretation**. This is typical of Frost's poetry.
- This is yet another poem by Frost that centres on manual labour. This fact alone allows you to form links with such poems as 'After Apple-Picking' or 'The Tuft of Flowers'. Of course, rather than just simply state that all three poems centre on manual labour, you should explore the importance of work in the poetry of Frost.
- As with so many of Frost's poems on the course, 'Mending Wall' is highly crafted. These traditional forms give the poem a stable platform that enables the poet to explore complex themes.

After Apple Picking

FROST

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough. 5
But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass 10
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell, 15
And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.
Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear. 20
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,

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It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound 25
Of load on load of apples coming in.
For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch, 30
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap 35
As of no worth.
One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his 40
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.

FROST

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Glossary

The title, 'After Apple-Picking', is very important. The poem takes place after a hard day's work harvesting apples. Frost describes the drowsy state of being that comes over the exhausted applepicker.

7 Essence of winter sleep – the scent of winter sleep. The smell of the apples reminds the speaker of the coming of winter and hibernation. In the past, apples used to be kept in a darkened room in order to preserve them. These apple stores were known for their sweet smell.

10 glass – ice.

11 drinking trough – a container from which animals drink water.

12 hoary – snow-white.

20 russet – auburn or reddish coloured.

22 ladder-round – the rung on the ladder on which he has been standing.

40 woodchuck – an indigenous North American squirrel-like animal, sometimes called a groundhog.

41 Long sleep – hibernation.

Commentary

1. Content

'After Apple-Picking' opens with a description of a scene in which apples have just been harvested:

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree

Toward heaven still,

And there's a barrel that I didn't fill

Beside it, and there may be two or three

Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.

- The speaker is tired and his day's work is done. As he grows drowsy in the failing light of an autumn evening, he is reminded of the strangeness of an image that first greeted him earlier in the morning.
- This strange sight was caused by lifting a sheet of ice and looking through it. He held the ice in his hand until it melted and he was forced to let it fall.
- He then tells us that even though he is very tired now, he first felt dreamy and sleepy when he looked through this sheet of ice.

- Early that morning, with a full day's work ahead of him, the speaker could already tell what form his dreams would take. In his dreams:

Magnified apples appear and disappear,

Stem end and blossom end,

And every fleck of russet showing clear.

- Remaining in the **present tense**, the poet describes events that have already taken place.
- This can be confusing for the reader. Relying on a **kinaesthetic** image, he describes the sensation of the ladder swaying as the boughs of the tree move.
- Then using a very **effective auditory image**, he tells us that he can hear the apples rumble as they fall into the cellar bin.
- In line 28, he reminds the reader that he is overtired. He has '*had too much / Of apple-picking*'.
- The '**great harvest**' is now stowed safely in the cellar. Some of the apples did not make the grade and they have been set aside for cider.
- Looking ahead to when his day's work is over, the speaker is sure that he will sleep. He goes on to say that in his overtired, restive sleep, he will dream of apple-picking.
- In a strange aside, he even wonders whether the '**woodchuck**' experiences something similar during its long sleep or hibernation.

- The poem ends with the speaker anticipating this long and deserved sleep at the end of his day's work.

2. Stylistic Features

- In an interview with The Atlantic Monthly in 1946, Robert Frost pointed out that:

There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is the **metaphor**, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, that provides me with the greatest pleasure.

- 'After Apple-Picking' is obviously about harvesting apples. However, with its ladders pointing '**Toward heaven**,' with its sense of profound weariness and its thoughtful exploration of the harvest and the coming of winter, the reader is led to believe that the poem must harbour a different meaning.
- As the poet looks back on the scene of his day's labour in the orchard, he begins to confront truths about the **human condition**.
- It does not matter if you, as a reader, have never actually worked at apple-picking; 'After Apple-Picking' can still appeal directly to you. The poet's depiction of the scene is carefully grounded in actual experience.

- **The issues that the poem raises (about life and death) are ones that everyone has to confront.** In his dreamy, half-awake state, the poet's mind is more **amenable** to exploring the '**strangeness**' that he perceives in the world.
- The sequence of tenses in the poem is confusing and, as a result, we are forced to question what is dreamed and what is real about the day's events.
- Obviously, the speaker is exhausted following his labour in the orchard, but he also tells us that he was well on his way to sleep before he even began picking the apples.
- This gives us a clue about the poem's hidden **metaphorical** meaning. The fact that the poet has been entering a deep sleep since that morning is essential to our understanding of the poem.
- Sleep has long been used by writers as a metaphor for death. This lends a deeper significance to the long sleep '**coming on**' at the end of the poem. The poet, in the autumn of his life, confronts the inevitability of the approaching winter.
- **Thus, it is possible to compare the acts of picking apples, of separating the good apples from the bad and of setting aside something to sustain one in the dark days of winter, to life itself. Of course this lends the poem a unique richness.**
- By looking through '**a pane of glass**', the poet has entered into an altered state of consciousness.
- In this state of mind, the apples become '**Magnified**' and his other senses are equally altered.

- Simply put, he begins to see things differently. In lines 28–9, the speaker tells us that he is '**overtired | Of the great harvest I myself desired.**'
- He feels jaded. Yet this tiredness seems to be more than just a physical exhaustion. It would seem that he has '**desired**' too much and this has taken its toll on him.
- **The apple is a symbol of worldly knowledge in the Bible.** The harvest, as we have said, can be read as a **metaphor** for life itself.
- However, the poet is purposely **ambiguous** about whether or not this harvest has been successful. Despite his best efforts, many of the apples have fallen by the wayside. Some are '**bruised**' or '**spiked with stubble**'. Obviously, these faults and imperfections '**trouble**' the poet's '**sleep**'.
- There are other possible readings that we can apply to 'After Apple-Picking'.
- Many critics have pointed out that the act of picking the apples can be compared to the artistic process itself.
- If you have read the poem 'Mending Wall,' you may have already considered this interpretation. The barrels of apples, in which good parts are separated from bad, can, of course, be likened to the act of writing a poem.
- In writing any poem, some lines are kept and some are set aside for use later. As a poet, Frost set himself a number of stylistic goals.
- He always tried to capture with precision the **sounds of New England speech which adds to appeal of the poem; because the cadences of New England English are very different to those of Hiberno-English.**

- He also tried to create poems that would be easily understood and **accessible** because they were **drawn from simple, natural phenomena** and incorporated in standard verse forms. 'After Apple-Picking' is no different in this respect.
- The poem is carefully constructed. Firstly, it is built around a number of **readily identifiable / accessible contrasts**.
- Summer is opposed to winter, work is contrasted with rest, toil leads to reward and, of course, sleep is set alongside wakefulness. Together with the use of **imagery** associated with the sensation of movement, or **kinaesthetic imagery**, this careful construction gives the poem a **tension** that it could otherwise be lacking.
- It is written mostly in **iambic pentameter** and, despite the fact that it recounts events that happened earlier in the day, it remains in the present tense.
- Both of these effects combine to create a carefree / **accessible tone** by allowing us to participate fully in the **narrative** as if it is happening before our eyes.
- In 'After Apple-Picking,' Frost appeals to all of the senses. In the mind's eye of the poet, the apples become '**Magnified**'. The dawn is presented to us in great visual detail.
- We can hear the sounds of the apples as they tumble into the barrels. When the poet makes an appeal to our sense of smell, we can sense the apples as they ripen in the cellar.
- Although not specifically mentioned, the taste of the apples is of course never far from the poem's narrative. The sense of touch is stimulated when the poet tells us that this fruit is something to '**Cherish in hand**'.

3. Essay Writing

'After Apple-Picking' is perhaps one of Frost's most challenging poems. However, you should not let this fact deter you from using the poem in an essay. You may want to mention the following points:

1. The poem is highly **evocative** in that in it Frost employs complex imagery that appeals to all the senses.
2. The way in which Frost uses language and sound in the poem is both very accessible and pleasing to the ear. It is worth noting that poem contains deeply **lyrical** moments. What makes these moments **so lyrical is the imaginative and beautiful** way in which Frost conveys his feelings about his impending death.
3. Like so many of the poems by Frost on the course After Apple Picking has a much deeper meaning than its title suggests. It is, in this sense, **deceptive**.

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth; 5

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same, 10

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back. 15

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference. 20

Glossary

In this poem, Frost forces us to interpret the choice that he faces on a symbolic level. The

fact that the poet intends us to react in this manner is obvious from the degree of importance he attaches to this choice in the last stanza.

I diverged – separated, went in different directions. This, of course, adds a certain degree of urgency to the poet's choice.

I yellow wood – the time of the year is autumn.

This time of year has often been associated with the approach of old age.

5 the undergrowth – the vegetation growing at the base of the trees.

8 wanted wear – the path had not been walked on recently.

12 trodden – walked on.

16 I shall be telling this with a sigh – by using the future tense here, the poet is implying that the journey has not yet ended.

17 ages hence – in a long time to come.

Commentary

1. Content

'The Road Not Taken,' which Frost claimed was inspired by his friend Edward Thomas, is perhaps one of the best-known poems in the English language. It opens with a very straightforward statement:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood

It is autumn and the speaker, standing at a fork in the road, is faced with a choice. He can take either road and there is nothing preventing him

from doing so. He would like to travel both roads but, of course, this is simply not possible. The speaker first stares down one road to **'where it bent in the undergrowth'**. Unwilling to commit to this road, he decides to assess the other path. In the second stanza, he tells us that this road is just as fair as the previous one. However, given that it is grassy, the poet infers that it is less travelled than the other path.

- In the final line of the second stanza, he admits that: **'the passing there | Had [in truth] worn them really about the same'**.
- In the third **stanza**, it becomes clear that the poet has committed himself to following one of the roads. He begins his journey in the morning:

**Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.**

- The final stanza looks forward to a time **'ages hence'** when he **'shall be telling [his story] with a sigh'**. His choice has been made and he has taken **'the [road] less traveled by'**. This life-altering choice **'has made all the difference'**.

2. Stylistic Features

- Many critics agree that: **'The Road Not Taken' is typical of Frost's tendency to write a poem that sounds noble, but is mischievous.** In Robert Frost: Selected Poems (London, 1973), Ian Hamilton says of this poem that:

the air of irretrievable error that hangs over the poem is a beguiling means of disguising its essential bleakness. To

Frost, it doesn't seem to matter much which road he took, or didn't take. It is that indifference which should have been the real subject of the poem.

- As previously mentioned, this poem was inspired by Frost's friend, the poet Edward Thomas. Thomas was forced to choose whether to enlist and fight in World War One or whether to follow Frost's advice and emigrate to America.
- He chose to fight in the trenches and was killed in action in 1917. Thomas's friendship and death had a great impact on Frost. Whatever the inspiration for 'The Road Not Taken' may have been, it is a **complex** and problematic poem.
- The poem is so perfectly written and its central **metaphor** is so **appealing** that many simply fail to read the poem attentively.
- **The title suggests that this poem is going to concern itself with the choice that the speaker failed to take. However, the opening of the poem presents us with a slightly different scenario. The poet actually focuses on the road that he did take.**
- **In the opening lines, the speaker finds himself in a readily identifiable and very human dilemma. We have all been faced with choices that are difficult to make.**
- **As the speaker considers both roads, image , metaphor and symbol blend into one another to produce a memorable representation of the notion of fate / choice / the impossibility of choice.**
- Remember that Frost felt that the **metaphor** was an essential feature of poetry. In an essay entitled 'Education by Poetry', Frost pointed out:

Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors, grace metaphors, and goes on to the profoundest thinking that we have. Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another. People say, 'Why don't you say what you mean?' We never do that, do we, being all of us too much poets. We like to talk in parables and in hints and in indirections – whether from diffidence or from some other instinct.

- The **image** of the crossroads has long been **symbolic** of fate and destiny. All human beings are, in one sense, free to choose. However, like the speaker, we can never really see the full implications of the choices that we make.
- When we examine the choice that confronts the poet, it becomes clear that there really is no great difference between the roads. Many readers like to interpret Frost's choice in this poem as being brave and groundbreaking.
- However, the speaker's own words dismiss this reading. He anticipates some future time when he will regret his choice or, at least, breathe a sigh when considering the action he has taken.
- Thus, even though one may read the poem as a brave affirmation of the merit of making original decisions in life, it can equally be read as a world-weary recognition of the fact that we must go on living with our choices.
- The poem's **form** is quite unusual. The vocabulary is relaxed, even casual. Frost employs **colloquialisms** ('perhaps the better claim', 'really about the same', 'I doubted if I should ever come back') to reinforce this effect.

- However, despite the casual **tone** adopted by the speaker, the poem is actually quite formal in its construction. 'The Road Not Taken' is written in tetrameter, with four feet in each line:

Two roads / di- verged / in a yel- / low wood

4 feet

And sor- / ry I could / not trav- / el both

4 feet

And be / one travel- / er long / I stood

4 feet

And looked / down one / as far / as I could

4 feet

To where / it bent / in the un- / der growth

4 feet

- The steady regularity of these four-beat lines creates a sense of peacefulness and thoughtfulness. While the lines all have the same number of feet, the metre is varied throughout.
- This wavering **rhythm** in the poem reflects the regretful condition of the speaker and his memory of his hesitancy. This creates a **dramatic** effect and makes the choice at the heart of the poem seem more important.

3. Essay Writing

'The Road Not Taken' is one of Frost's best-known and best-loved poems. This fact alone is worth mentioning in any essay that contains a reference to the poem. Other points you may want to mention include the following:

- The poem is highly structured. And this structure plays a significant role in evoking Frost's thematic intent.
- Once again, Frost presents us with a scene that is open to metaphorical interpretation.
- The poem appeals to our senses of sight and hearing. The melancholic, regretful tone, coupled with the beauty of the language, makes 'The Road Not Taken' a memorable poem.

Birches

When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay
As ice storms do. Often you must have seen them 5
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells 10
Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust—
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed 15
So low for long, they never right themselves:
You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun. 20
But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter of fact about the ice storm,
I should prefer to have some boy bend them

As he went out and in to fetch the cows—
 Some boy too far from town to learn baseball, 25
 Whose only play was what he found himself,
 Summer or winter, and could play alone.
 One by one he subdued his father's trees
 By riding them down over and over again
 Until he took the stiffness out of them, 30
 And not one but hung limp, not one was left
 For him to conquer. He learned all there was
 To learn about not launching out too soon
 And so not carrying the tree away
 Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise 35
 To the top branches, climbing carefully
 With the same pains you use to fill a cup
 Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
 Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
 Kicking his way down through the air to the ground. 40
 So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
 And so I dream of going back to be.
 It's when I'm weary of considerations,
 And life is too much like a pathless wood
 Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs 45
 Broken across it, and one eye is weeping

From a twig's having lashed across it open.
 I'd like to get away from earth awhile
 And then come back to it and begin over.
 May no fate willfully misunderstand me 50
 And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
 Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
 I don't know where it's likely to go better.
 I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
 And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk 55
 Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
 But dipped its top and set me down again.
 That would be good both going and coming back.
 One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

Glossary

The title, 'Birches', refers to a deciduous forest tree that has a smooth white bark.

5 Often you must have seen them – the use of the personal pronoun 'you' draws the reader into the poem. This single instance of the pronoun transforms the poem from a private consideration of the trees into a monologue aimed at the listener.

7 They click upon themselves – here, the poet is describing the noise that the trees make when they knock against one another.

9 crazes – cracks or shatters.

9 enamel – glossy surface.

10 crystal shells – the poet here is describing the melting ice on the trees.

11 avalanching – pouring down.

14 bracken – ferns.

31 limp – wilted or flaccid.

39 swish – whoosh or rustle.

44 life is too much like a pathless wood – here, the speaker describes the difficult nature of finding one's way in life.

Commentary

1. Content

'Birches', another popular and beloved poem by Frost, was first published in the Atlantic Monthly in August 1915. In the poem, Frost presents us with a vivid, personal depiction of nature as he describes a boy playfully swinging on trees. As he often does in his poetry, Frost presents an ambiguous view of the natural world and uses that as a starting point for questioning larger issues. As he describes a hypothetical boy climbing up birches and then riding them down to the ground, the speaker raises questions about the nature of human existence. The poem opens with the adult voice of the narrator telling us that when he sees:

[...] birches bend to left and right

Across the lines of straighter darker trees,

[He likes] to think some boy's been swinging them.

Initially, the poet believes that a boy has bent these trees. Obviously, the thought of the birches being bent down by someone swinging on them is drawn from personal memory. The speaker tells us that swinging on birches in the manner that he has described does not harm them. They bounce back into position. In the fourth line, he contradicts his initial assumption about how the trees have come to be bent. He points out that 'swinging doesn't bend them down to stay'. There is a slight change in the poem's direction in the fifth line, when Frost assumes that these trees must have been bent by an ice storm. In the next four lines, the poet gives us a beautiful description of the frozen birches. However, this beautiful, frozen state is short lived. In line 9, the sun 'cracks and crazes

their enamel' (i.e. the ice), which breaks and falls into the snow. The 'sun's warmth' makes the ice particles 'crystal shells'. In line 13, the poem's tone shifts again, when the poet is prompted to claim:

'You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.'

The weight of snow and ice on the trees causes them to bend as far as the 'withered bracken'. However, once the trees have been bent this far, they never really return to the shape they once held. The poet tells us that:

You may see their trunks arching in the woods

Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground

He feels that he would prefer if the trees had been bent by a young boy. He

reminds us that this is what he was thinking before the 'Truth' about the snow and ice interrupted his thoughts. The speaker then describes the type of boy that he imagines bending the birches. The boy in question lives far from the city and its distractions, such as 'baseball'. He 'subdue[s] his father's trees', riding them until he takes the 'stiffness out of them', leaving him, in lines 31-3, absolutely victorious over the trees: 'not one was left | For him to conquer'.

In the section of the poem encompassing lines 41-2, Frost allows a note of nostalgia to creep in:

So was I once myself a swinger of birches.

And so I dream of going back to be.

This longing for the more innocent days of childhood is contrasted with the pain of adulthood, which is described as a 'pathless wood'. It is important to realise that in this section of the poem, Frost begins to contrast the imaginary world with the real world. The idea of the boy climbing the birch has been wholly imaginary. In line 48, he develops this idea of escaping into an imaginary world, telling us that he would 'like to get away from earth awhile'. However, in lines 52–3 he stresses that he does not want to leave the real world:

[...] Earth's the right place for love:

I don't know where it's likely to go better.

In the concluding section of the poem, Frost unites all of these ideas in the image of the birch trees. Towards the end of the poem, the process of the imagination reaching beyond the limits of reality is compared to the act of climbing the birch tree. The swaying motion of the tree, which allows a person to reach its top only to return back to the ground, is in fact the way Frost would like his imagination to work. He would like his imagination to permit him only to reach 'heaven' and then to return him back to the real world. The poem's memorable concluding line tells us that: 'One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.'

2. Stylistic Features

Frost was very traditional in his thinking when it came to constructing his poems. 'Birches' is no different in this respect. The poem is written in blank verse in iambic pentameter.

When I / see birch- / es bend / to left / and right

5 feet, or 5 stresses = iambic pentameter

A- gainst / the lines / of straight- / er dark- / er trees

5 feet, or 5 accents = iambic pentameter

I like / to think / some boy's / been swing- / ing them

5 feet, or 5 stresses = iambic pentameter

This unrhymed, carefully metred type of poetry is perhaps the most commonly used in the English language. For example, it was the verse pattern used in most of Shakespeare's plays and many of Wordsworth's poems. Frost's obstinate use of traditional poetic forms not only reflects his personality, but also provides the poet with the necessary framework to deal with the complex themes in the poem.

A poem as richly textured as 'Birches' yields no shortage of interpretations. It invites the reader to look below the surface and build his or her own understanding. In 'Birches', as in many of Frost's poems, the limits forced on us by the real world are seen as a necessary part of being human. Frost believed that the borders of the world define a person and situate him or her in the real world. In many of Frost's poems, the thought of removing all of the barriers between oneself and the world at large is at best unwelcome and at worst frightening. It is for this reason that Frost pleads that 'no fate willfully misunderstand [him] | And half grant' what he hopes for and snatch him away. The removal of such barriers and limitations is a frightening thought for the poet, as it would leave him adrift. Throughout the poem, this idea of earthly limitation is explored. The imaginary young boy bends the tree, gravity pulls the speaker back to earth as he moves 'Toward heaven' and in line 38, water is held within the confines of a cup. A similar conclusion is reached by the critic Floyd C. Watkins. In an essay published in South Atlantic Quarterly, Watkins explains that in 'Birches', Frost:

[...] contemplates a moment when the soul may be completely absorbed into a union with the divine. But he is earthbound, limited, afraid. No sooner does he wish to get away from earth than he thinks of 'fate' rather than God. And what might be a

“Out, Out—”

FROST

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The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other 5
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said 10
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside them in her apron
To tell them “Supper.” At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant, 15
Leaped out at the boy’s hand, or seemed to leap—
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy’s first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand, 20
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man’s work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. “Don’t let him cut my hand off— 25
The doctor, when he comes. Don’t let him, sister!”
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright. 30

FROST

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No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

Glossary

The title, “Out, Out—”, is an allusion to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. See the critical commentaries to read the speech.

1 snarled – growled. ‘Snarled’ can also mean to be knotted or tangled. This helps us envision the blade of the saw more accurately.

6 Vermont – a state in the United States of America.

7 And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled – notice how the onomatopoeic effect precisely captures the sound of the saw.

12 when saved from work – there is a dreadful irony contained in these lines. A half-hour of free time would have saved the young boy’s life.

19 rueful – regretful, remorseful.

23 big boy | Doing a man’s work, though a child at heart – here, the poet highlights some of his own ambiguous feelings about life and death.

28 the dark of ether – ether is an anaesthetic. The mention of the word ‘dark’ also anticipates the boy’s death.

“Frost communicates rich insights into human experience // using language that is both accessible and appealing.”

Commentary

1. Content

- “Out, Out—” deals with the tragic death of a young boy who dies as a result of cutting his hand while using a saw. The poem opens with the sound of the saw as it ‘snarled and rattled in the yard | And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood’.
- The dust thrown up by the saw is “sweet-smelling” and, in the background, the sun is setting over the ‘Five mountain ranges’ of Vermont.
- The saw sets to its task with ease. The day’s work ‘[is] all but done’. The narrator interrupts the narrative to beseech them to give the boy a break from his work.
- This is the first hint in the poem that something dreadful is about to happen. His sister then arrives to tell the boy that his supper is ready.
- And as if to prove that it understood ‘what supper meant,’ the saw ‘seemed to leap’ out at the boy’s hand.
- The boy’s hand is taken by the saw and his only reaction is to offer a ‘rueful laugh’. However, owing to his age, the boy is fully aware of the seriousness of his situation.
- He is, after all, a ‘big boy | Doing a man’s work’. The arrival of the doctor, in line 28, brings with it the first hint that he may die. The doctor places the boy in the ‘dark of ether’.
- Slowly, the boy’s heartbeat becomes fainter and fainter until there is ‘nothing’ and he is dead. The others, ‘since they | Were not the one dead’, get on with the business of living their lives.

2. Stylistic Features

I Acquainted with – familiar with.

- One of the most important and effective features of “Out, Out—” is its title, which contains an allusion to one of the most famous soliloquies in all of English literature.
- It alludes to a passage in *Macbeth* in which Macbeth has just been told of his wife’s death. The key moment in this speech is arrived at when **Macbeth underscores the tragic brevity of human life:**

She should have died hereafter;
 There would have been a time for such a word.
 To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
 To the last syllable of recorded time;
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
 Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.

- In this sense, the title captures perfectly the full meaning of this poem. By means of this **allusion**, Frost not only reinforces the emotions contained in the poem, but also helps to define its **theme**. The theme of “Out, Out—” is, of course, the uncertainty and unpredictability of life.
- The opening of the poem attempts to capture the sound of the buzz saw. It rattles and snarls and is made to sound menacing. In order to draw us into the **narrative**, Frost appeals to all of the senses.
- We can feel the breeze as it draws across sticks of wood and the scent of the cut wood assails our sense of smell.
- Another **effective** feature of the poem is the manner in which the saw is **personified**. By giving the saw human attributes, Frost increases the emotional impact of the poem.
- The boy doesn’t drop the saw, it **‘leap[s] out at [his] hand’**. This makes the saw seem aggressive and the boy, in turn, is made to seem an innocent victim of this aggression.
- In a similar fashion, Frost makes use of **metonymy** (the use of something closely related in place of the thing actually meant) when he

Glossary

- describes the injured boy holding up his cut hand: **‘as if to keep | The life from spilling’**.
- Here, the poet literally means to keep the blood from spilling, but by substituting the word **‘life’** for blood, the poem gains in **clarity, force and emotional intensity**. This emotional intensity is mirrored in the poem’s construction. “Out, Out—” is a narrative in **blank verse**, contained in a continuous structure.
- There are no stanzas and no physical breaks in the poem. By not structuring the poem in a formal manner, Frost does not attempt to confine the emotional response of the reader.

- Finally, while the poem provokes an emotional response in its readers, its **tone** is at all times impersonal. The **narrator** simply relates the

The title, ‘Design’, alludes to the belief that the natural design of the world is proof that God exists.

anything that has an extremely negative effect.

1 dimpled – indented. The spider obviously has a small hollow on its body.

6 witches’ broth – these broths were said to be made from disgusting ingredients.

2 heal-all – a type of plant that was often used to produce medicines.

13 appall – literally to make pale, to shock or disgust.

4 blight – a disease caused by fungus. However, the word can also mean

truth of the boy’s accident and death in a straightforward manner. It is left to us to respond emotionally to the event described.

2. Essay Writing

1. This shocking poem is different from the other, gentler nature poems on the course. In this sense, you can use it to highlight Frost’s ability to move beyond simple nature poetry. The following points might provide you with some ideas when commenting on “Out, Out—” in an essay.
2. Once again, the poem is open to metaphorical readings. The shocking story of the boy’s death acts as a metaphor for the unpredictability and brevity of life.
3. The poem’s **effective** sound effects underscore its meaning. As you are by now well aware, this is typical of Frost’s poetic style.

Glossary

Spring Pools

These pools that, though in forests, still reflect
 The total sky almost without defect,
 And like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver,
 Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone,
 And yet not out by any brook or river, 5
 But up by roots to bring dark foliage on.

The trees that have it in their pent-up buds
 To darken nature and be summer woods—
 Let them think twice before they use their powers
 To blot out and drink up and sweep away 10
 These flowery waters and these watery flowers
 From snow that melted only yesterday.

Glossary

In 1928, Frost made a nostalgic return to England. In the same year, he also published the collection *West-Running Brook*, from which this poem is taken.

I reflect – this word is very important to our reading of this poem. 'Spring Pools' is a poem that asks us to think and

reflect. Of course, the pools also reflect the light.

2 defect – a flaw or imperfection.

5 brook – a small river.

6 foliage – undergrowth, green plants.

Commentary

1. Content

'Spring Pools' is a quiet, reflective poem that opens with a simple statement. We learn that even though the pools are subject to tree cover, they can still 'reflect | The total sky'. The narrator then goes on to point out that they will soon have disappeared. The pools will not vanish into a brook or river, but will be soaked up by the trees. The water from these pools will move up the roots of the trees and cause them to grow leaves, or 'dark foliage'. In the second stanza, the poet admonishes these trees, asking them to think twice before they 'use their powers' to trap the water from the pools in their 'pent-up buds'. The poet recognises that the water from the pools will help the trees become 'summer woods'. Nevertheless, he does not want this transformation to be at the expense of the water and the 'watery flowers' that depend on the spring pools for their existence.

2. Stylistic Features

This beautiful lyric poem is perfectly formed. Written in two six-line stanzas, each composed of one sentence, the poem presents a striking scene, only to undermine it with the threat of mutability and extinction. To begin with, the poem observes a peaceful scene of natural continuity. However, it soon becomes apparent that this natural cycle has loss at its heart. The pools will not evaporate, they will not simply disappear; rather, they will be taken up 'by roots to bring dark foliage on'. Here, nature and its trees are 'dark'. The dark power of nature to destroy and create is something that the poet can acknowledge, but can't name. However, he does recognise that these powers of destruction result in a fleeting or

ephemeral beauty. In simple terms, the poem can be read as a meditation on the natural process of destruction and renewal. All of nature is in a perpetual state of flux. Life implies death and this is an inescapable, if distasteful, truth about the natural world. However, 'Spring Pools' is also open to other possible readings. Many commentators have pointed out that the pools can be interpreted as metaphors for the reflective consciousness. Other critics view the poem as a veiled commentary on the artistic process itself. If you choose to read the poem in this way, you should notice that the speaker is brought to realise his own limitations. If the pools are metaphors for poetic inspiration, then the creative juices evaporate in front of the poet's eyes.

As with so many of Frost's poems, this poem is formal in its construction. In order to support the concentrated level of contemplation at the heart of 'Spring Pools', Frost had to rely on graceful and poised lines. These stable, well-written lines prevent the reader from becoming distracted and maintain the peaceful and thoughtful mood that is so essential to the poem. Notice, too, the predominance of broad vowel sounds and 'l' sounds that capture the effect of water perfectly.

3. Essay Writing

If you are considering writing about 'Spring Pools' in an essay, you might want to consider the following points.

- The poem is one of Frost's darker pieces. This allows you to contrast 'Spring Pools' with many of the other poems by Frost in this anthology.
- Once again, Frost's mastery of sound and poetic form is apparent in this poem. For example, you may want to consider the manner in which the poet captures the sound of the pools.
- The poem can be read as an extended metaphor for the creative process. This allows you to compare 'Spring Pools' with 'Mending Wall' and 'After Apple-Picking'.

Acquainted with the Night

I have been one acquainted with the night.

I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.

I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.

I have passed by the watchman on his beat

5

And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by; 10
And further still at an unearthly height
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

Commentary

1. Content

Unlike any of the other poems by Frost in this booklet, 'Acquainted with the Night' opens in the city. The poet tells us that he has known the city at night. He has walked in the rain further than the 'furthest city light'. In the second tercet, the speaker tells us that he has looked down the lonely, deserted city lanes. He has passed the 'watchman on his beat' and avoided making eye contact with him. In the third stanza, the speaker explains that he has been stopped in his tracks by the sound of a cry 'from another street'. However, the shout that he heard was not to

call him back or 'say good-by'. Meanwhile, a giant clock forms the backdrop to this cityscape. The scale of the clock is not human. The speaker ends the poem by reminding us that he has been 'acquainted with the night'.

2. Stylistic Features

This is one of Frost's better-known poems. In the poem, the speaker uses the lonely cityscape as a metaphor for his inner despair. The strict form of the lyric testifies to Frost's mastery of poetic forms. Like a sonnet, the poem contains 14 lines, but its rhyming scheme, terza rima, is a formal arrangement that implies continual progression. It is interesting to note that Dante also used this form in his famous poem *The Inferno*, in which he makes an imaginative journey into hell.

Frost could be using the same form as a veiled and complicated allusion to Dante's poem. The night has always had strong associations with darkness and evil. Furthermore, the slow, measured rhythm of this sonnet form matches the slow pace of the poet as he walks through the city. 'Acquainted with the Night' is an intense expression of loneliness. Vast modern cities, in which millions of people live in close proximity to one another, can be extremely lonely places. In order to convey this loneliness, the poet employs repetition (both of lines and words) and produces a haunting, chant-like effect. In addition to this repetition, the poem is dominated by broad vowel sounds, which create a lonely, echoing sound. Frost coined a term to describe the unique sound pattern of his poems. He liked to identify what he called his poems' tune, which is separate from the metre and rhythm. While it is impossible to say exactly what he meant by this term, it is obvious that he was referring to the sound of the poems. Following a reading he gave of 'Acquainted with the Night', he proclaimed that the poem was 'all for the tune. Tune is everything.' On another occasion, he asked his readers to 'listen for the

tune'. In any case, the sound effects used by Frost contribute to the ghostly, even surreal atmosphere that dominates the poem.

3. Essay Writing

It is worth considering 'Acquainted with the Night' for inclusion in an essay on Frost. The following points might help you to organise your thoughts if you choose to mention the poem.

- The poem is set in a city. This fact alone means that you can contrast 'Acquainted with the Night' with nearly all of the other poems by Frost in this anthology.
- The poem has a dark outlook.
- Yet again, the scene depicted can be read in a metaphorical light.

Design

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
 On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
 Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—
 Assorted characters of death and blight
 Mixed ready to begin the morning right, 5
 Like the ingredients of a witches' broth—
 A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
 And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
 The wayside blue and innocent heal-all? 10
 What brought the kindred spider to that height,
 Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
 What but design of darkness to appall?—
 If design govern in a thing so small.

Glossary

2 pail – bucket.

3 Abishag – she was a beautiful virgin who was brought to King David for the purpose of rejuvenating his ageing body and mind (1 Kings 1: 3–4). During this time, she became his closest friend.

4 Hollywood – this town has long been a symbol of superficiality. It is a place where

people are valued and judged by the image they present.

12 crone – a witch or hag.

17 Atones – makes amends for.

20 boughten – bought or purchased.

21 Provide, provide! – the repetition, together with the use of the exclamation mark at the end of the poem, emphasises the degree to which Frost is being cynical.

Commentary

1. Content

'Design' opens with a straightforward statement. The speaker tells us that he found a 'dimpled spider'. This 'fat and white' spider, situated on a flower, holds up a dead moth. This, along with the other 'Assorted characters of death and blight' trapped in the web, remind the speaker of a 'witches' broth'. In the second stanza, the poet suggests that the flower helped to camouflage the spider. '[B]eing white', it is the same colour as the spider and, for this reason, it is seen by the poet as aiding the spider to trap the moth. The tone towards the end of the poem is questioning. The poet acknowledges that there is a design to nature. However, this design has contributed to the death of the innocent moth. It 'steered [it] thither in the night' to its doom. The poet wonders what kind of design could produce such a dark and sinister plan:

What but design of darkness to appal?—

If design govern in a thing so small.

2. Stylistic Features

The starting point for the speaker's train of thought is what he sees as a remarkable coincidence: a white spider that has trapped a white moth by sitting on a white flower. This chance occurrence is even more unusual because the type of flower in question, a heal-all, is normally blue. In literature, the colour white has strong **symbolic** associations with purity and innocence. The language of the poem reinforces these symbolic associations through a number of subtle, carefully worked out **allusions**.

The spider is described as being fat and white. This, of course, could also be a description of a white, newborn child. The dead moth is likened to a 'rigid satin cloth'. This could be an allusion to a bridal dress, itself a symbol of purity. In addition to all of these, heal-alls are normally used in medicine to cure and heal. However, the poet quickly sweeps aside these positive associations in order to confront the speaker with the reality of the situation. By the end of the **octet**, the gruesome nature of the moth's death is made clear. While the scene that the poet has described contains elements of purity and innocence, it is also tainted by 'death' and 'blight'. The spider may resemble an innocent 'snow-drop' and the dead moth may look like a child's 'paper kite', but they are also the main ingredients in this awful and deadly 'witches' broth'. If the **octet** presents the scene, then the **sestet** questions what the poet has just witnessed. This is important to bear in mind when reading the poem. 'Design' has to be one of the most unusual **sonnets** in the English language. The poet borrows an Italian sonnet form, only to alter it completely. 'Design' reverses the expected order of **octave** and **sestet**. Rather than posing a problem in the octave and answering it in the sestet, as an Italian sonnet traditionally does, 'Design' describes an event in the octet and then questions it in the sestet. This reversal of the traditional order suggests that the poet has no answer to the issues raised in the poem.

In the second half of the sonnet, the speaker wonders how the unusual set of circumstances that have contributed to the moth's death came to be. The speaker purposely avoids apportioning blame to the spider. It is, after all, '**kindred**' to the flower. The **volta**, or change in the poem's direction, occurs in the closing **couplet**. Here, the poet offers us two possible conclusions that may be drawn from the circumstances that led to the moth's death. Firstly, the speaker suggests that the killing of the moth may have been the result of an evil force or presence at work in the universe. Cloaking itself in the white colour of virtue and purity, this evil presence destroys the innocent moth. The second explanation is perhaps even more troubling: in the closing line of the poem, the poet admits that there may be no purpose or order in the universe. Most monotheistic

FROST

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Commentary

1. Content

'Provide, Provide' opens with a direct statement of fact. The old witch that washes the steps was once the beautiful woman known as Abishag. In the Bible, this beautiful woman was presented as a gift to King David in order to make him young again. In the second stanza, the poet bridges the span of years and moves from the reference to the biblical beauty Abishag to modern day Hollywood starlets. These beautiful actresses, much like Abishag, will one day be cast aside in favour of younger, more attractive women.

In the third stanza, the speaker provides us with a way to avoid this grim reality:

Die early and avoid the fate.

Or if predestined to die late,

Make up your mind to die in state.

In the fourth stanza, we are given some additional advice. In a sweeping series of imaginative imperatives, the poet advises us to make the 'whole stock exchange our own' and 'If need be occupy a throne'. The fifth stanza changes tack slightly. Here, the speaker advises the reader that other people prepare for the future by 'simply being true'. In the sixth stanza, the poet returns to the notion of the once beautiful woman who is now bent with age. In order to avoid this fate, he suggests that one is better off never having been famous. Out of the spotlight, the end of

one's life is less harsh. In the final stanza, the speaker suggests that it would be better to buy friendship and thereby ensure a dignified end to your days.

2. Stylistic Features

'Provide, Provide', together with the poem 'Design', shows Frost confronting what he called the background of 'hugeness and confusion shading away [...] into black and utter chaos'. The poem, which first appeared in the collection *A Further Range*, is unlike any other poem by Frost on the Leaving Certificate course. It was, in fact, inspired by a charwomen's strike at Harvard University. According to the poet, 'Provide, Provide' was intended to be a satirical comment on President Roosevelt's welfare state. In fact, Frost liked to read the poem by adding the lines 'Or somebody else'll provide for you' at the end.

While the poem may be read as a political commentary on Roosevelt's attempts to introduce welfare for all, it is open to other readings. Firstly, the cynical tone of the speaker is simply not typical of Frost's poetry. Secondly, the poem does not contain the personal pronoun 'I'. This strongly suggests that Frost does not want to be identified with his speaker's pronouncements. The poem opens with a complex allusion to the biblical figure, Abishag. She was a beautiful virgin who was brought to King David for the purpose of rejuvenating his ageing body and mind. However, even this symbol of purity and innocence was reduced to the level of a hag and forced to wash the steps 'with pail and rag'. The main purpose of 'Provide, Provide' is to warn the reader to provide at any cost for the future. In order to reinforce this point, the speaker makes some strange demands on the reader. Speaking in the imperative, he demands that we become extremely wealthy or buy friendship. Failing this, the poem suggests that one is better off dead than facing old age on one's own. As we have said previously, this poem is unlike any other poem by

Frost on the course. It is dark, cynical and even mocking. This tone of voice is certainly not typical of Frost's overall style. However, the poem's strict control of form, which involves the speaker's ideas being put forward in a series of carefully structured tercets, is representative of Frost's style. Finally, given that so many of the poems by Frost on the syllabus are uplifting, the inclusion of this poem achieves a sense of balance on the course that might otherwise be lacking.

3. Essay Writing

This is the final poem by Frost in this anthology. If you are thinking of using it in an essay, you may want to include some of the following points.

- The poem is the only one on the course that doesn't contain the personal pronoun 'I'. This may be an indication that the poet does not support the views expressed in the poem.
- It is possible to contrast this poem with the more positive nature poems by Frost on the course.
- Yet again, it is a carefully structured, well-balanced poem.

Robert Frost (1874–1963) A Short Biography

Robert Frost's reputation as one of the best-known American poets came very late in his life. He was 40 when, as he put it himself, his poetry 'caught on' with the American public. However, once he had established himself in the hearts and minds of his readership, he became one of the best-loved poets writing in the English language. Frost was born in San Francisco on 26 March 1874. His father, William, named him after Robert

E. Lee, the famous Southern general in the American Civil War. Frost did not have an easy relationship with his father, who drank too much and was violent towards his wife and children.

Suffering from tuberculosis and continuing to drink heavily, Frost's father finally died in 1884. In his will, he stated that it was his wish to be buried in New England. Although William Frost had been an abusive father and husband, his wife and two children, Robert and Jeanie, respected his final wishes and headed east for the funeral. Lacking the funds to return to California, they settled in Salem, Massachusetts, where Mrs Frost was forced to resume her career as a schoolteacher in order to support her family. The move to New England had a profound effect on Robert. Previously, he had been a city boy with little interest in his studies, but he now became a keen student. Graduating from high school in 1891, he came top of his class alongside Elinor White, whom he married three years later. Over the next 20 years, he enrolled for brief periods at Dartmouth and Harvard Colleges. He now had four children and short spells as a teacher and a number of menial jobs failed to haul his growing family above the breadline. Frost became deeply depressed and even suicidal by what he saw as his tendency to mirror his own father's abusive and destructive behaviour. However, during this very difficult period in his life, he continued to write poetry. In 1894 he sold his first poem, 'My Butterfly', to the New York Independent. In 1900, his oldest son committed suicide and, in 1906, he himself came close to death after contracting pneumonia. Tragedy was to strike his family once again in 1907, when his fourth daughter died following a complete mental breakdown. This grief and suffering, combined with his failure in business, forced Frost to take refuge more and more in his poetry.

In 1912, aged almost 40 and with only a few poems published, Frost sold his farm and used an allowance that he was receiving from his grandfather to go to England in order to devote his life to poetry. The family settled on a farm in Buckinghamshire and Frost continued to write.

Ezra Pound, the expatriate American poet and one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century literature, helped him to get published. A *Boy's Will* appeared in 1913 and it was well received by critics. The collection was to prove typical of Frost's style in that it was **highly structured, yet incorporated the colloquial diction and rhythms of New England speech.**

The poem 'The Tuft of Flowers', which is on the Leaving Certificate course, first appeared in this anthology. **These early poems displayed a clear inclination towards nature, seclusion and contemplation; towards the attractiveness of straightforward fact, and towards a New England individuality that stresses the need for love and community.** Still living in England in 1914, Frost published *North of Boston*; this collection was made up mainly of **blank-verse monologues** and **dramatic narratives.**

Two poems on the course, 'Mending Wall' and 'After Apple-Picking', appeared in this collection. His literary career had finally taken off and the success of his first two publications persuaded him that he was making enough of a name for himself to return home. However, the success he was to enjoy for the rest of his life came far too late to erase the bitter memories of his earlier years. Returning to the US with his family in 1915, Frost bought a farm near Franconia, New Hampshire. He taught at Amherst College from 1916 to 1938 and, later, at Michigan University. In 1916, Frost was made a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In the same year, his third collection of verse, *Mountain Interval*, appeared; it contained the poems 'The Road Not Taken' and 'Birches', which are also on the syllabus. Like so many of Frost's poems, **these depict ordinary scenes that pave the way for far deeper explorations.** Although perceived as a nature poet, he did not idealise nature. His work addresses **not only its beauty, but also the desolation, bleakness and anxiety** that anyone living close to the land has to endure.

In 1920, he moved to South Shaftsbury, Vermont. Four years later, in 1934, his daughter Marjorie died and in 1938 he lost his wife. During these troubled times he continued to suffer from depression and self-doubt.

To a large extent, the speaker in many of Frost's poems is an alter ego: the kindly, calm person Frost would so dearly have loved to have been but knew that he was not. However, even though the narrative voice in his poems may sound homespun and folksy, **the poems themselves often tend to view the world as reflecting a design to 'frighten and appall.'**

Frost recited two of his poems at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961. In 1962, he travelled to the Soviet Union as a member of a goodwill group. In his later years, he received a remarkable number of literary and academic honours. At the time of his death, on 29 January 1963, Frost was regarded as the elder statesman of American literature. His poetry continues to be read and, despite being out of tune with nearly every other major poet of his day, Frost has succeeded in realising his life's ambition: to write 'a few poems it will be hard to get rid of'.

Frost Past Questions

"Frost communicates rich insights into human experience using language that is both accessible and appealing."

Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the poetry of Robert Frost on your course.

Robert Frost: an overview

Now that you have read a selection of Frost's poetry, you should take the time to look at the following general points. The purpose of these is not to tell you what to think, but rather to help you form your own opinions. When you have read these points, you may wish to take the time to reread Frost's poetry. You should notice that the general points made here can be used to form the backbone of your paragraphs when it comes to writing on poetry. From now on, try to think about Frost's poems not only in terms of what they say, but also in terms of how they say it. Open your mind to any reasonable interpretation of the poems; remember, your opinions are as valid as anything printed. However, you must be prepared to ground these opinions in fact. If you find this process difficult, that is entirely normal. However, the following points may help you to frame a response to Frost's poetry.

Evocative

- Frost was fascinated with the sound, and what he termed the 'noise', of words. In order to make these 'noises' more powerful, he placed them in tension with traditional rhythms and rhymes. What he succeeded in creating was, in effect, a poetry that fused everyday speech with formal poetic techniques.
- Leaves, trees, grass, woods, spring pools: all of these feature repeatedly in Frost's poetry and the notion of the cycle of nature is a theme to which he returns again and again. However, you need to be careful when reading Frost's poetry. Much of the seeming simplicity of his poetry masks a far greater level of complexity.
- Nearly all of Frost's poems on the course are open to metaphorical readings.

- Frost had a difficult life. While his poems tend to appear uplifting, especially on a first reading, it is possible to see an awareness of life's darker aspects in his work.
- The selection of poems by Frost on the course includes some beautiful poems that, in the words of the poet himself, provide 'a momentary stay against the confusion' of life.

This list of general points is, of course, in no way exhaustive; there are quite literally thousands of perfectly valid observations to be made about the poetry of Robert Frost and your opinion is as valid as any of the points mentioned here. Try to consult these points frequently, as they will help you when it comes to writing essays.

Essay Writing: Paragraph Building

Now that you have thought about how the poems by John Donne relate to one another, it is time to start thinking about how you will approach his poetry in an essay. As you organise your thoughts, try to do so in focused paragraphs. The following points will help you to achieve this:

- They tend to focus on one aspect of the poet's work.
- Generally speaking, the best paragraphs tend to have two or three relevant quotations that fit in with the grammatical logic of the paragraph's sentences.
- Rather than concentrating on what a poem says, the best paragraphs deal with what the poet has to say on a particular idea or topic.

- Strong paragraphs also deal with how the poet organises his/her ideas. This usually means that you give some time to discussing the poet's use of language. In the case of Robert Frost's poetry, this is particularly important.
- Finally, you must address the question asked. This means that your paragraphs must contain a personal aspect. While you do not want to overdo it, the easiest way to achieve this, is to include the personal pronoun 'I'.
- If you want to explore further any of the issues raised here, please consult the essay-writing technique section.

once you perfect this skill, you will notice a marked improvement in your ability to argue a point.

Using Quotations

Your paragraph is part of your argument, so consider the following points when using quotations in your paragraphs:

- Too many quotations can overpower your own argument or voice.
- Quotations should fit into your argument, not appear out of thin air. Try to avoid simply dropping the quote out of the blue.
- Avoid explaining a quote or saying the same thing twice by using a quote.
- Quotations should be grammatically consistent with the rest of your essay. If punctuation, pronouns, and verb tenses don't flow with your own words, paraphrase and reword the needed material, or make minor changes within the quotation, surrounding them with brackets []. If you want to leave out some words, you should use ellipses [...]. All quotations should be unobtrusive. This can be very difficult to perfect. However,