

# Module C: Representation and Texts

"ALL POETRY IS A REPRODUCTION OF THE TONES OF ACTUAL SPEECH."

## ROBERT FROST

"Sometimes I have my doubts of words altogether, and I ask myself what is the place of them.

They are worse than nothing unless they do something; unless they amount to deeds, as in ultimatums or battle-cries. They must be flat and final like the show-down in poker, from which there is no appeal. My definition of poetry (if I were forced to give one) would be this: words that become deeds."

*"There are two types of artists: the one who offers a good deal of dirt with his potato to show that it is a real one, and the one who is satisfied with the potato brushed clean. I'm inclined to be the second kind. To me, the thing that art does for life is to clean it, to strip it to form"*

"A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a home-sickness or a love-sickness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words."

## Romanticism

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Frost was born in San Francisco (26 Mar. 1874 - 29 Jan. 1963), where he spent his first eleven years. After the death of his father, a journalist, he moved with his mother and sister to eastern Massachusetts near his paternal grandparents. He wrote his first poems while a student at Lawrence High School, from which he graduated as co-valedictorian with the woman he was to marry, Elinor Miriam White. He entered Dartmouth College in the fall of 1892 but stayed for less than a term, returning home to teach school and to work at various jobs, including factory-hand and newspaperman. In 1894 he sold his first poem, 'My Butterfly: An Elegy', to a New York magazine, *The Independent*. That same year, unable to persuade Elinor to marry him (she wanted to finish college first), he headed south on a reckless journey into Virginia's Dismal Swamp. After emerging unscathed he came home to Lawrence where he and Elinor were married in December 1895.

Both husband and wife taught school for a time, then in 1897 Frost entered Harvard College as a special student, remaining there just short of two years. He performed well at Harvard, but his health was uncertain and he rejoined his wife in Lawrence, where she was about to bear a second child. In October of 1900 he settled with his family on a farm just over the Massachusetts line in New Hampshire, purchased for him by his grandfather. There, over the next nine years, he wrote many of the poems that would make up his first published volumes. But his attempt at poultry farming was none too successful, and by 1906 he had begun teaching English at Pinkerton Academy, a secondary school in New Hampshire. That same year two of his most accomplished early poems, 'The Tuft of Flowers' and 'The Trial by Existence', were published. Meanwhile he and Elinor produced six children, two of whom died in infancy. After a year spent teaching at the State Normal School in Plymouth, New Hampshire, he sold the Derry farm and in the fall of 1912 sailed with his family from Boston to Glasgow, then settled outside London in Beaconsfield.

Within two months of his arrival in England, Frost placed his first book of poems, *A Boy's Will* (1913) with a small London publisher, David Nutt. He also made acquaintances in the literary world, such as the poet F. S. Flint, who introduced him to Ezra Pound, who in turn reviewed both *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*, which followed it the next year. He became friends with members of the Georgian school of poets--particularly with Wilfred Gibson and Lascelles Abercrombie--and in 1914, on their urgings, he moved to Gloucestershire to be nearer them and to experience English country living. The most important friend he made in England was Edward Thomas, whom Frost encouraged to write poetry and who wrote sharply intelligent reviews of Frost's first two books. While many reviewers were content to speak of the American poet's 'simplicity' and artlessness, Thomas recognized the originality and success of Frost's experiments with the cadences of vernacular speech--with what Frost called 'the sound of sense'. His best early poems, such as 'Mowin,' 'Mending Wall,' and 'Home Burial,' were composed under the assumption that, in Frost's formulation from one of his letters, '*the ear does it*. The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader.' The best part of a poet's work, he insisted, was to be found in the sentence-sounds poems made, as of people talking. Like Wordsworth (as Edward Thomas pointed out in one of his reviews of *North of Boston*), Frost boldly employed 'ordinary' words and cadences ('I have sunk to a diction even Wordsworth kept above', he said in another letter) yet contrived to throw over them--in Wordsworth's formulation from his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*--'a certain colouring of imagination'.

England's entry into the First World War hastened Frost's return to America early in 1915. By the time he landed in New York City, his American publisher, Henry Holt, had brought out *North of Boston* (Holt would continue to publish Frost throughout his life). He was fêted by editors and critics in the literary worlds of both New York and Boston, and he continued shrewdly to publicize himself, providing anthologists and interviewers with a vocabulary to describe his poetic aims. A third volume of verse, *Mountain Interval*, published in 1916 but still drawing on poems he had written in England and before, showed no falling off from his previous standard. In fact such poems as 'The Road Not Taken,' 'An Old Man's Winter Night,' 'The Oven Bird,' 'Birches,' 'Putting in the Seed,' and 'Out, Out--' were among the best he had written or was to write. Like the somewhat late-coming and even drab oven bird of his poem, Frost knew in 'singing not to sing,' and a century after the ecstatic flights of romantic poets like Keats and Shelley, Frost's bird remained earthbound (the oven bird, in fact, builds its nests on the ground) and, like the poet who created him, sang about the things of this world.

Soon after he re-established himself in America, Frost purchased a farm in Franconia, New Hampshire (he would purchase a number of farms over the course of his life) and then, at the behest of President Alexander Meiklejohn, joined the faculty of Amherst College in Massachusetts. Frost was later to teach at the University of Michigan and at Dartmouth College, but his relationship to Amherst (sometimes a troubled one) was the most significant educational alliance he formed. Meanwhile he had begun the practice of reading his poems aloud-- rather, 'saying' them, as he liked to put it public gatherings. These occasions, which continued throughout his life, were often intensive ones in which he would read, comment on, and reflect largely about his poems and about the world in general. Particularly at colleges and universities he commanded the ears and often hearts of generations of students, and he received so many honorary degrees from the academy that he eventually had the hoods made into a quilt.

Frost won the first of four Pulitzer Prizes in 1924 for his fourth book, *New Hampshire*, and followed it with *West-Running Brook* (1928) and *A Further Range* (1936), which also won a Pulitzer. Yet the latter volume occasioned, from critics on the left, the first really harsh criticism Frost's poetry had received. One of those critics, Rolfe Humphries, complained in *New Masses* (his review was titled 'A Further Shrinking') that Frost no longer showed either a dramatic or a sympathetic attitude toward his New England characters; that in setting himself against systematic political and social reforms (especially, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal), he had become querulous and sarcastic, all too personally present in his quarrel with the way things were going. It is true that, for one reason or another, Frost no longer wrote poems like the dramatic monologues and dialogues in *North Of Boston*, and that poems from *A Further Range*, such as 'Two Tramps in Mud Time' or 'Provide, Provide', were argumentative and at times didactic in their thrust. But he had become expert at composing poems that had affinities with light verse and that consisted of a pointed, witty treatment of issues and ideas. Such a treatment purchased its surface brilliance at the cost of deeper sympathies and explorations.

Those deeper concerns were to make themselves felt once again, however, in what was to be Frost's last truly significant book of verse, *A Witness Tree* (1942). During the 1930s, as he became ever more honoured and revered, Frost endured a terrible series of family disasters. In 1934 his youngest and best-loved child, Marjorie, died a slow death from the puerperal fever contracted after giving birth to her first child; in 1938 his wife Elinor died suddenly of a heart attack, then, when he seemed to be pulling things together once more, his son Carol committed suicide in 1940. Another daughter, Irma, suffered--as did Frost's sister Jeannie--from mental disorders and was finally institutionalized. A number of poems in *A Witness Tree* undoubtedly derived their dark tone from the family tragedies suffered over the decade; but at any rate lyrics such as 'The Silken Tent', 'I Could Give All to Time', 'Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same', and 'The Most of It' stand in the top rank of Frost's work (he himself thought that some of his best poetry was contained in this book). In words from his prose essay 'The Figure a Poem Makes', they exhibit both 'how a poem can have wildness and at the same time a subject that shall be fulfilled.'

Except for the publishing of a major poem, 'Directive', in his 1947 volume, *Steeple Bush*, Frost's poetry after the Second World War was mainly occasional, a relaxation from earlier intensities. He made a triumphant return to England in 1957 to receive honorary degrees from Oxford and Cambridge; he expended his efforts to have Pound released from St Elizabeth's Hospital; and under the Kennedy administration he made a somewhat less-than-satisfactory visit to Russia, in which he attempted, in conversation with Premier Khrushchev, to mediate between the superpowers. His last reading was given to a large audience in Boston in December 1962; the following day he went into hospital for a prostate operation and suffered a severe heart attack while convalescing, then a series of embolisms, one of which killed him in January of 1963.

Frost once wrote about Edwin Arlington Robinson that 'his life was a revel in the felicities of language', and surely the claim could be made, even more appropriately, of Frost himself. While standing apart from the modernist work of his famous contemporaries--Eliot, Pound, Stevens--his own poetry, in its complication of tone and its delicate balancing of gravity and wit ('I am never more serious than when joking,' he said more than once), asks for constant vigilance on the reader's part: a listening ear for the special postures of speech and the dramatic effects of silences. Like the works of his great predecessor, Emerson, Frost's poetry has never been sufficiently appreciated in England, the country which gave him his start. This neglect may be in part a reaction to the rather promiscuous admiration he inspired from so many different sorts of American readers (and non-readers), many of

whom would have no time for Eliot or Stevens. But if, for some Americans, the homely nature of Frost's materials--cows, apples, and snow-covered woods—predisposes them to like his poetry, such readers are no more narrow than the 'cosmopolitan' ones who accept mythical allusions in Eliot or Pound but disdain stone walls as a fit vehicle for serious poetry. Frost's own formulation to an American friend in 1914 is helpful in thinking about his achievement: he told the friend, Sidney Cox, that the true poet's pleasure lay in making 'his own words as he goes' rather than depending upon words whose meanings were fixed: 'We write of things we see and we write in accents we hear. Thus we gather both our material and our technique with the imagination from life; and our technique becomes as much material as material itself.' It was this principle that Pound saluted in Frost when, in his review of *North of Boston*, he remarked conclusively: 'I know more of farm life than I did before I had read his poems. That means I know more of "Life".'

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## LITERARY STYLE

Robert Frost's choice literary style is romanticism. Romanticism has to do with celebration of the individual, experiments in form, symbolism, and introspection. It also expresses faith in the individual and freedom in rules and restraints (Holman 682).

Many of these aspects in romanticism can be seen in "The Road Not Taken." For instance, Frost used symbolism in this poem. The roads were not meant to be just roads but actual choices or paths in life. Also, Frost used introspection in himself and wanted others to use it. This poem makes you think which path you yourself would take and it expressed to some that he had to make that choice too.

Critics have much to say on his style of writing. John Lynen says that Frost manages to write about nature "without exploiting the emotional effects which, however fine they are in Wordsworth and the other Romantics, seem rather shopworn in more recent poets" (Greiner 145). This is saying that while he uses some emotion, that is not what his writings are all about. His writings are more about meanings, symbolism, and individualism than about pure emotion. Lynen also suggests that Frost journeys through a landscape as a "mysterious instruction of the soul" ( Greiner145). Lynen states that his poems suggest an ethical purpose which hints that a revelation from nature will come to the poet (Greiner 145). This brings me to another point, while Frost is a Romantic, he includes much of nature in his writings.

Since he was a countryman, living on a farm for many years, it is only natural that he would use nature in his poetry. In "The Road Not Taken," he uses a natural setting which happened to be the woods. Guimond says that Frost, "assumed the lone individual could question and work out his or her own relationships to God and existence-preferably in a natural setting" (1147). In "The Road Not Taken," he uses the woods as a place where an important decision must be made. This shows how important nature is to him which explains why he uses nature in so many poems.

## Romanticism

A movement in art and literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in revolt against the Neoclassicism of the previous centuries...The German poet Friedrich Schlegel, who is given credit for first using the term *romantic* to describe literature, defined it as "literature depicting emotional matter in an imaginative form." This is as accurate a general definition as can be accomplished, although Victor Hugo's phrase "liberalism in literature" is also apt. Imagination, emotion, and freedom are certainly the focal points of romanticism. Any list of particular characteristics of the literature of romanticism includes subjectivity and an emphasis on individualism; spontaneity; freedom from rules; solitary life rather than life in society; the beliefs that imagination is superior to reason and devotion to beauty; love of and worship of nature; and fascination with the past, especially the myths and mysticism of the middle ages.

English poets: William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats

American poets: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allen Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman

The word *romantic (ism)* has a complex and interesting history. In the Middle Ages 'romance' denoted the new vernacular languages derived from Latin - in contradistinction to Latin itself, which was the language of learning. *Enromancier*, *romancar*, *romanz* meant to compose or translate books in the vernacular. The work produced was then called *romanz*, *roman*, *romanzo* and *romance*. A *roman* or *romant* came to be known as an imaginative work and a 'courtly romance'. The terms also signified a 'popular book'. There are early suggestions that it was something new, different, divergent. By the 17<sup>th</sup> c. in Britain and France, 'romance' has acquired the derogatory connotations of fanciful, bizarre, exaggerated, chimerical. In France a distinction was made between *romanesque* (also derogatory) and *romantique* (which meant 'tender', 'gentle', 'sentimental' and 'sad'). It was used in the English form in these latter senses in the 18<sup>th</sup> c. In Germany the word *romantisch* was used in the 17<sup>th</sup> c. in the French sense of *romanesque*, and then, increasingly from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> c., in the English sense of 'gentle', 'melancholy'.

Many hold to the theory that it was in Britain that the romantic movement really started. At any rate, quite early in the 18<sup>th</sup> c. one can discern a definite shift in sensibility and feeling, particularly in relation to the natural order and Nature. This, of course, is hindsight. When we read Keats, Coleridge and Wordsworth, for instance, we gradually become aware that many of their sentiments and responses are foreshadowed by what has been described as a 'pre-romantic sensibility'.

The Romantic movement, which originated in Germany but quickly spread to England, France, and beyond, reached America around the year 1820, some 20 years after William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge had revolutionized English poetry by publishing *Lyrical Ballads*. In America as in Europe, fresh new vision electrified artistic and intellectual circles. Yet there was an important difference: Romanticism in America coincided with the period of national expansion and the discovery of a distinctive American voice. The solidification of a national identity and the surging idealism and passion of Romanticism nurtured the masterpieces of "the American Renaissance."

Romantic ideas centered around art as inspiration, the spiritual and aesthetic dimension of nature, and metaphors of organic growth. Art, rather than science, Romantics argued, could best express universal truth. The Romantics underscored the importance of expressive art for the individual and society. In his essay "The Poet" (1844), Ralph Waldo Emerson, perhaps the most influential writer of the Romantic era, asserts:

For all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression.

The development of the self became a major theme; self-awareness a primary method. If, according to Romantic theory, self and nature were one, self-awareness was not a selfish dead end but a mode of knowledge opening up the universe. If one's self were one with all humanity, then the individual had a moral duty to reform social inequalities and relieve human suffering. The idea of "self" -- which suggested selfishness to earlier generations -- was redefined. New compound words with positive meanings emerged: "self-realization," "self-expression," "self-reliance."

As the unique, subjective self became important, so did the realm of psychology. Exceptional artistic effects and techniques were developed to evoke heightened psychological states. The "sublime" -- an effect of beauty in grandeur (for example, a view from a mountaintop) -- produced feelings of awe, reverence, vastness, and a power beyond human comprehension.

Romanticism was affirmative and appropriate for most American poets and creative essayists. America's vast mountains, deserts, and tropics embodied the sublime. The Romantic spirit seemed particularly suited to American democracy: It stressed individualism, affirmed the value of the common person, and looked to the inspired imagination for its aesthetic and ethical values. Certainly the New England Transcendentalists -- Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and their associates -- were inspired to a new optimistic affirmation by the Romantic movement. In New England, Romanticism fell upon fertile soil.

**Neoclassicism** - The dominant literary movement in England during the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth century, which sought to revive the artistic ideals of classical Greece and Rome. Neoclassicism was characterized by emotional restraint, order, logic, technical precision, balance, elegance of diction, an emphasis of form over content, clarity, dignity, and decorum. Its appeals were to the intellect rather than to the emotions, and it prized wit over imagination. As a result, satire and didactic literature flourished, as did the essay, the parody, and the burlesque. In poetry, the heroic couplet was the most popular verse form. Writers: John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Joseph Addison, and Samuel Johnson.

### **Romantic Qualities:**

- Emphasis on Nature as a source of value and meaning
- Emphasis on feeling or sensibility rather than reason
- Primitivism, Praise of the peasant or common people
- Individualism
- Mysticism
- Sympathetic interest in the past (often Gothic)
- Elemental images

## **Distinguishing features of Romantic concerns:**

### **Raymond Williams, Culture and Society, 1780-1950 (Penguin, 1961).**

- (a) “a major change was taking place in the nature of the relationship between a writer and his readers”
- (b) “a different habitual attitude towards the ‘public’ was establishing itself”
- (c) “the production of art was coming to be regarded as one of a number of specialized kinds of production”
- (d) “a theory of the ‘superior reality’ of art, as the seat of imaginative truth, was receiving increasing emphasis”
- (e) “the idea of the independent creative writer, the autonomous genius, was becoming a kind of rule”

### **Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (Norton, 1957)**

- (a) “the romanticist is not against science. He is merely trying to limit the applicability of its findings”
- (b) “By giving us as exotic a past as possible, the romanticist gives us a past which, because it is inapplicable to the present, we can inhabit as a way not of learning a lesson but of enlarging our experience”
- (c) “The whole conscious concern with objectivity as a problem, as something to be achieved, is in fact specifically romantic”

### **Earl Wasserman, “The English Romantics: The Grounds of Knowledge,” Studies in Romanticism 4 (1964): 17-34**

- (a) “what Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats chose to confront more centrally and to a degree unprecedented in English literature is a nagging problem in their literary culture: How do subject and object meet in a meaningful relationship?”

#### Methods and Myths of Union:

--shock; surprise

--intense moments of feeling

--“spots of time” or “epiphanies” --“glimpses,” or suggestions of something operating behind observed phenomena --transfigurations of the physical world

--sympathy; identification

--romantic union; especially male-female (Romantics assume male as subject)

--the privileged insights of children, savages, madmen, or idiots

--marginal figures: the Wandering Jew; Cain; Faust; Prometheus

--desire unfulfilled; guilt (existential vs. actual guilt)

--women as objects of desire; as the ethereal; the destroyer?

## ***AFTER APPLE-PICKING***

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.  
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  
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,  
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 dear.  
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,  
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  
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,  
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  
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  
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,  
Or just some human sleep.

## ***Fire and Ice***

Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favour fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.

## ***Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening***

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

## *Mending Wall*

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it  
And spills the upper boulder in the sun,  
And make gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing:  
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,  
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.  
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!"  
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  
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  
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.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

## **'OUT, OUT--'**

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  
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  
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,  
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  
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  
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.  
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.

# Mending Wall

## Summary

A stone wall separates the speaker's property from his neighbor's. In spring, the two meet to walk the wall and jointly make repairs. The speaker sees no reason for the wall to be kept--there are no cows to be contained, just apple and pine trees. He does not believe in walls for the sake of walls. The neighbor resorts to an old adage: "Good fences make good neighbors." The speaker remains unconvinced and mischievously presses the neighbor to look beyond the old-fashioned folly of such reasoning. His neighbor will not be swayed. The speaker envisions his neighbor as a holdover from a justifiably outmoded era, a living example of a dark-age mentality. But the neighbor simply repeats the adage.

## Form

Blank verse is the baseline meter of this poem, but few of the lines march along in blank verse's characteristic lock-step iambs, five abreast. Frost maintains five stressed syllables per line, but he varies the feet extensively to sustain the natural speech-like quality of the verse. There are no stanza breaks, obvious end-rhymes, or rhyming patterns, but many of the end-words share an assonance (e.g., *wall, hill, balls, wall, and well; sun, thing, stone, mean, line, and again; or game, them, and him* twice). Internal rhymes, too, are subtle, slanted, and conceivably coincidental. The vocabulary is all of a piece--no fancy words, all short (only one word, *another*, is of three syllables), all conversational--and this is perhaps why the words resonate so consummately with each other in sound and feel.

## Commentary

I have a friend who, as a young girl, had to memorize this poem as punishment for some now-forgotten misbehavior. Forced memorization is never pleasant; still, this is a fine poem for recital. "Mending Wall" is sonorous, homey, wry--arch, even--yet serene; it is steeped in levels of meaning implied by its well-wrought metaphoric suggestions. These implications inspire numerous interpretations and make definitive readings suspect. Here are but a few things to think about as you reread the poem.

The image at the heart of "Mending Wall" is arresting: two men meeting on terms of civility and neighborliness to build a barrier between them. They do so out of tradition, out of habit. Yet the very earth conspires against them and makes their task Sisyphean. Sisyphus, you may recall, is the figure in Greek mythology condemned perpetually to push a boulder up a hill, only to have the boulder roll down again. These men push boulders back on top of the wall; yet just as inevitably, whether at the hand of hunters or sprites, or the frost and thaw of nature's invisible hand, the boulders tumble down again. Still, the neighbors persist. The poem, thus, seems to meditate conventionally on three grand themes: barrier-building (segregation, in the broadest sense of the word), the doomed nature of this enterprise, and our persistence in this activity regardless.

But, as we so often see when we look closely at Frost's best poems, what begins in folksy straightforwardness ends in complex ambiguity. The speaker would have us believe that there are two types of people: those who stubbornly insist on building superfluous walls (with clichés as their justification) and those who would dispense with this practice--wall-builders and wall-breakers. But are these impulses so easily separable? And what does the poem really say about the necessity of boundaries?

The speaker may scorn his neighbor's obstinate wall-building, may observe the activity with humorous detachment, but he himself goes to the wall at all times of the year to mend the damage done by hunters; it is the speaker who contacts the neighbor at wall-mending time to set the annual appointment. Which person, then, is the real wall-builder? The speaker says

he sees no need for a wall here, but this implies that there may be a need for a wall elsewhere - "where there are cows," for example. Yet the speaker must derive *something*, some use, some satisfaction, out of the exercise of wall-building, or why would he initiate it here? There is something in him that does love a wall, or at least the act of making a wall.

This wall-building act seems ancient, for it is described in ritual terms. It involves "spells" to counteract the "elves," and the neighbor appears a Stone-Age savage while he hoists and transports a boulder. Well, wall-building *is* ancient and enduring--the building of the first walls, both literal and figurative, marked the very foundation of society. Unless you are an absolute anarchist and do not mind livestock munching your lettuce, you probably recognize the need for literal boundaries. Figuratively, rules and laws are walls; justice is the process of wall-mending. The ritual of wall maintenance highlights the dual and complementary nature of human society: The rights of the individual (property boundaries, proper boundaries) are affirmed through the affirmation of other individuals' rights. And it demonstrates another benefit of community; for this communal act, this civic "game," offers a good excuse for the speaker to interact with his neighbor. Wall-building is social, both in the sense of "societal" and "sociable." What seems an act of anti-social self-confinement can, thus, ironically, be interpreted as a great social gesture. Perhaps the speaker *does* believe that good fences make good neighbors-- for again, it is *he* who initiates the wall-mending.

Of course, a little bit of mutual trust, communication, and goodwill would seem to achieve the same purpose between well-disposed neighbors--at least where there are no cows. And the poem says it twice: "something there is that does not love a wall." There is some intent and value in wall-breaking, and there is some powerful tendency toward this destruction. Can it be simply that wall-breaking creates the conditions that facilitate wall-building? Are the groundswells a call to community- building--nature's nudge toward concerted action? Or are they benevolent forces urging the demolition of traditional, small-minded boundaries? The poem does not resolve this question, and the narrator, who speaks for the groundswells but acts as a fence-builder, remains a contradiction.

Many of Frost's poems can be reasonably interpreted as commenting on the creative process; "Mending Wall" is no exception. On the basic level, we can find here a discussion of the construction-disruption duality of creativity. Creation is a positive act--a mending or a building. Even the most destructive-seeming creativity results in a change, the building of some new state of being: If you tear down an edifice, you create a new view for the folks living in the house across the way. Yet creation is also disruptive: If nothing else, it disrupts the status quo. Stated another way, disruption is creative: It is the impetus that leads directly, mysteriously (as with the groundswells), to creation. Does the stone wall embody this duality? In any case, there is something about "walking the line"--and building it, mending it, balancing each stone with equal parts skill and spell--that evokes the mysterious and laborious act of making poetry.

On a level more specific to the author, the question of boundaries and their worth is directly applicable to Frost's poetry. Barriers confine, but for some people they also encourage freedom and productivity by offering challenging frameworks within which to work. On principle, Frost did not write free verse. His creative process involved engaging poetic form (the rules, tradition, and boundaries--the walls--of the poetic world) and making it distinctly his own. By maintaining the tradition of formal poetry in unique ways, he was simultaneously a mender and breaker of walls.

## MORE

The conflict in "Mending Wall" develops as the speaker reveals more and more of himself while portraying a native Yankee and responding to the regional spirit he embodies. The opposition between observer and observed--and the tension produced by the observer's

awareness of the difference--is crucial to the poem. Ultimately, the very knowledge of this opposition becomes itself a kind of barrier behind which the persona, for all his dislike of walls, finds himself confined.

But at the beginning, the Yankee farmer is not present, and the persona introduces himself in a reflective, offhanded way, musing about walls:

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.

Clearly, he is a casual sort. He broaches no difficult subjects, nor does he insist on talking about himself; yet Frost is at his best in a sentence like this. Through the language and rhythm of the lines we gain a faint but unmistakable sense of the poem's conflict. Like the "frozen-ground-swell," it gathers strength while lying buried beneath the denotative surface of the poem. From the start, we suspect that the speaker has more sympathy than he admits for whatever it is "that doesn't love a wall."

Frost establishes at the outset his speaker's discursive indirection. He combines the indefinite pronoun "something" with the loose expletive construction "there is" to evoke a ruminative vagueness even before raising the central subject of walls. A more straightforward character (like the Yankee farmer) might condense this opening line to three direct words: "Something dislikes walls." But Frost employs informal, indulgently convoluted language to provide a linguistic texture for the dramatic conflict that develops later in the poem. By using syntactical inversion ("something there is . . .") to introduce a rambling, undisciplined series of relative clauses and compound verb phrases ("that doesn't love . . . that sends . . . and spills . . . and makes . . ."), he evinces his persona's unorthodox, unrestrained imagination. Not only does this speaker believe in a strange force, a seemingly intelligent, natural or supernatural "something" that "sends the frozen-ground-swell" to ravage the wall, but his speech is also charged with a deep sensitivity to it. The three active verbs ("sends," "spills," "makes") that impel the second, third, and fourth lines forward are completed by direct objects that suggest his close observation of the destructive process. He appreciates the subterranean dynamics of the frost, he knows how spilled boulders look in the bright winter light, and he seems so familiar with the gaps that we suspect he has walked through more than a few (evidently with a companion).

The first line of "Mending Wall" is also notable because it functions effectively as a counterpoint to the farmer's "good fences" apothegm, which appears once in the middle of the poem and then again in the final line. The farmer is summed up by his adage, fittingly his only utterance; his reiteration of it is an appropriate ending to the poem because it completes a cyclical pattern to which the speaker has no rejoinder and from which he cannot escape. Beyond expressing an attitude toward walls, it evokes the farmer's personality through its simplicity and balanced directness. The basic subject-verb-object syntax of the five-word maxim is reinforced by the repeated adjective and by the symmetrical balance and rhythmic similarity of subject ("Good fences") and object ("good neighbors") on either side of the monosyllabic verb "make." The persona's initial observation, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," with its hesitations and indefinite circumlocutions, conveys not only a contrasting opinion, but also a different way of thinking from the tight-lipped Yankee's. Significantly, though the speaker's observation is reiterated later in the poem, it is not a self-contained statement. Unlike the farmer's encapsulated wisdom, it is a protest, a complaint leading into a series of tenuously linked explanations, digressions, and ruminations.

Throughout the first half of the poem the speaker contemplates the deterioration and repair of walls, strengthening our awareness of his two central traits; his whimsical imagination and his

fine sensitivity to detail. He digresses to describe hunters who actively tear walls apart in search of rabbits. Then he returns to his own interest in a more mysterious, unseen, unheard, destructive power. With relaxed, conversational irrelevance, he launches in a discussion of the rebuilding ritual, objective physical description to a light touch of fantasy--"We have to use a spell to make them balance"--which is likely to be noticed only because of the suggestive hints made earlier to the strange force responsible for the gaps.

Frost's control of tone during this desultory ramble is responsible for the speaker's ability to hold our attention and pique our interest. Even on successive readings, we are surprised by the implications of a given line or phrase, and we find ourselves gauging how much of a smile or frown accompanies each sentence. The imagined spell of line 18 dissolves in the jocularity of line 19: "Stay where you are until our backs are turned!" Yet, just as quickly, the concrete, sensory images in the following line remind us of the real effort such work requires: "We wear our fingers rough with handling them."

Having touched on the seriousness of wall building, however, the speaker indulges in another irreverent speculation:

Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more.

The unceremonious sentence fragment and the deprecatory offhandedness of "just another kind" and "comes to little more" are unsuited to the earnestness of the preceding line; yet by now we are accustomed to incongruities, and we suspect that behind his capriciousness there is something on the speaker's mind. The allusion to an "outdoor game" evokes rivalry and competition, not only in wall repair, but also in wall destruction. This persona shows great appreciation of playfulness and recognizes many kinds of sport. If the wall builders participate in one "kind of outdoor game together," then they surely play another game against the wall destroyers: the hunters and those mysterious underground forces that wait strategically until the workers' backs are turned before spilling any more boulders. Hints of opposition and competitiveness soon gain strength in lines that effect a marvelous blend of natural fact and fanciful fabrication:

He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.

This telling passage indicates how far the persona's imagination can carry him. It is true that the acidity of pine duff would prevent apple seeds from taking root, but simple aboricultural observation leads to a fantastic--and deeply revealing--personification. Although the speaker seems merely facetious, his imagery betrays antagonism as he ridicules the farmer, implying that he is too foolish and stubborn to see the incongruity of a rapacious invasion of apples (which are edible) seeking to devour pine cones (which are *not*). While attacking his neighbor's lack of open-minded amiability, the speaker is the one who exhibits antisocial tendencies. He is quick to think the worst, presuming that the farmer's concern with the wall is motivated by base selfishness, despite the latter's expressed interest in being "good neighbors." Furthermore, it is not the farmer but the speaker who initiates the mending-wall ritual. Thus these lines heighten a still undefined tension and reveal surprising complexities while preparing us for the Yankee farmer's blunt precept: "Good fences make good neighbors." Such a forceful line crystallizes the poem's dramatic conflict by standing in salient opposition to everything the persona has said and, indeed, to his mode of speech. It is a remarkable and memorable line, not because of its inherent truth or quotability, but because of Frost's effective anticipatory presentation of an extraordinarily imaginative antagonism to "good fences."

Just as the twenty-five lines preceding the farmer's aphorism contribute to its impact, so do the sixteen succeeding lines that lead up to its reiteration. But once the conflict of farmer and observer has been made overt, the last section of the poem develops a contentiousness that further elucidates the differences between the two characters and reveals how little sociability there is between them. As the poem draws to its close with a chimerical vision of the farmer as "an old stone savage" the term "neighbor" seems increasingly ironic. The farmer looms not as an associate or coworker, but as an alien being whom the speaker observes, criticizes, and reflects upon while maintaining his distance and objectivity.

The two men--farmer and observer, insider and outsider--are separated by deep differences in perception, differences that the speaker does not fully appreciate. He thinks they are building a wall, but to his neighbor it is merely fence mending. A more significant contrast is suggested by the Yankee farmer's reliance on shibboleth (a form of mental enclosure). Confident in his beliefs, he relies on traditional wisdom to suppress inquisitive or speculative tendencies. He concerns himself not with the whys and wherefores of walls but with the simple, practical fact (to *him* a fact) of their efficacy. His unwillingness to explain or debate his position implies that he feels there is nothing to be gained through communicating or exchanging ideas. If fences are good, then, conversely, too much closeness between neighbors must be undesirable. Indeed, there is no evidence that his "neighborly" relations with the speaker extend much beyond the laconic yearly ritual described in the poem. Satisfied to confine himself behind his personal wall of self-assumed taciturnity, he never converses with the speaker. He only repeats the aphorism he learned from his father, as if to keep from something original (or as if incapable of saying something original).

The persona, for his part, does not equate thinking with to adages; instead of accepting parental or neighborly authorities, he seems willing to "go behind" anyone's sayings, including his own. Even his tendentious investigation of whatever it is "that doesn't love a wall" is inconclusive, shifting as it does from the mysterious instability of walls to the foibles of the barrier-loving neighbor before finally dissipating in bitter complaints. But conclusiveness can hardly be the major concern of a speaker so given to equivocations (ll. 21-22, 36-38), digressions (ll. 5-9), questions (ll. 30-34), suppositions (ll. 28-29, 32-35, 41-42), and outright fantasies (ll. 18-19, 25-26, 39-40).

After ranging from careful description to seemingly frivolous speculation, from shrewdness to willful illusiveness, and from subtle irony to urgent sincerity, the persona grows diffident toward the end of the poem about his own perceptions. He is particularly uncertain about how he should respond to his neighbor. Though wanting to "put a notion" in his head, he goes no further than conjecture: "I wonder / If I could." His claim that "Spring is the mischief in me" recalls the mischievous force "that doesn't love a wall," yet he does not try to make gaps in the farmer's mental fortifications. He indulges only in speculative, figmental "mischief," contemplating the crucial question he dares not ask: "Why do they make good neighbors?" He even undercuts his strongest comment with a qualifier: "He moves in darkness as it *seems to me*" (my emphasis).

Ironically (and there is much irony in this poem), although the speaker complains about his neighbor's unfriendliness, his own susceptibility to subjective vision and his willingness to let his imagination run away with him predispose him also to prejudicial attitudes. He sees the wall and its symbolism virtually overwhelms him. By contrast, the farmer, who surely knows that "fence" is a misnomer for the country-style stone wall they are working on, sees no sinister implications in it and evidently uses the slightly imprecise adage to show his desire not "to give offense." It was a brilliant touch by Frost to use wordplay in exposing his persona's central misjudgment. For wordplay is the mark of the poet, and it is a poet's sensibility that so delightfully plays this speaker false. It is only in the imagination that the

fence gives offence, and it is only this visionary speaker who insists a wall cannot be innocent, cannot be the benign fence of the farmer's precept.

Ultimately, the persona's imaginative and indecisive disposition renders him incapable of challenging the Yankee's confident maxim. But Frost has shrewdly made him both unable and unwilling to settle on an argument that might demonstrate what it is to want a wall down. The allusion to elves, though meaningful to the persona, would never appeal to the hidebound farmer; it is such a hopeless suggestion that it leads to a kind of surrender: "I'd rather / He said it for himself." Yet this concession only reaffirms the personality displayed earlier. The speaker's sensitivity to what he sees may excite his desire for action, but he is neither capable nor desirous of didactic argument. Though the Yankee farmer says little in the poem, we may not notice that the persona actually has less to say to break down those walls he finds so detestable. He can only imagine saying something, for he is an observer and a commentator, not a reformer or a philosopher.

In the closing lines of "Mending Wall" the Yankee farmer may seem to get the last word and leave his antagonist circumscribed--indeed, walled in--by an alien philosophy. But truly, the speaker has mended the walls of his own personality, and instead of combating an opponent, attempting moral or philosophical sallies, and worrying about victory or defeat, he has again taken an observer's approach to his neighbor. At the end he presents a highly imaginative and appropriately climactic response to the Yankee, envisioning him as a shadowy "old-stone savage." As he completes this portrait, he brings his own drama to its denouement. His deep feelings about walls have led him to challenge what he takes neighbor's antithetical position; but after recognizing the futility of debate, he returns to his original contemplative outlook.

This study of Frost's treatment of his persona in "Mending Wall" should be sufficient to establish that the poem is not primarily an expression of moral views on neighborliness. Contrary to the burden of critical opinion, it is less about neighborliness than it is about modes of thought, about language, perhaps even about poetry itself. To the speaker, the farmer is antipathetic because he seems so antipoetic: he distrusts the flow of words, ideas, and feelings. Lacking a playful imagination and the willingness to "go behind" a saying or a concept, he seems cut off from the poetic. But we must not forget that the failure of communication in the poem is mutual. And in truth, Frost's persona is the less communicative and the more hostile of the two. His portrait of an intractable neighbor involves feverish speculation that makes us doubt the reliability of his point of view. On the surface of it, at least, the Yankee's brief adage bespeaks more amiability than do the speaker's speculations and suspicious conjectures. Yet Frost offers no answers in "Mending Wall," no clues about who is right or wrong. He does not moralize: he demonstrates. And what he demonstrates is a conflict that commands our attention because in its origin and development it exhibits the power of imagination in flight.

# After Apple Picking

## Summary

After a long day's work, the speaker is tired of apple picking. He has felt drowsy and dreamy since the morning when he looked through a sheet of ice lifted from the surface of a water trough. Now he feels tired, feels sleep coming on, but wonders whether it is a normal, end-of-the-day sleep or something deeper.

## Form

This is a rhyming poem that follows no preordained rhyme scheme. "After Apple-Picking" is basically iambic, and mostly in pentameter, but line-length variants abound. Line 1, for example, is long by any standard. Line 32 is very short: one foot. The poem's shorter lines of di-, tri-, and tetrameter serve to syncopate and sharpen the steady, potentially droning rhythm of pentameter. They keep the reader on her toes, awake, while the speaker drifts off into oblivion.

## Commentary

First, a comment on form. Throughout the poem, both rhyme and line-length are manipulated and varied with subtlety. The mystery of the rhymes--when will they come and how abruptly--keeps words and sounds active and hovering over several lines. We find the greatest separation between rhyming end-words at the poem's conclusion. *Sleep* comes seven lines after its partner, *heap*, and in the interim, *sleep* has popped up three times in the middle of lines. Sleep is, in fact, all over the poem; the word appears six times. But the way it is delivered here, the last rhyme is masterful. *Heap* first rhymes internally with *sleep*, then again internally with *sleep*, and then again, and only pairs up with the end-word *sleep* in the poem's last line. At this point, we've nearly forgotten *heap*. *Sleep* seems to rhyme with itself, with its repetition, like a sleepy mantra or a sleep-inducing counting of sheep. The poem arrives at final *sleep* not through a wham-bang rhyming couplet but more "sleepily."

"There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority." This is Robert Frost in 1946, in an essay for *The Atlantic Monthly*. "After Apple-Picking" is about picking apples, but with its ladders pointing "[t]oward heaven still," with its great weariness, and with its rumination on the harvest, the coming of winter, and inhuman sleep, the reader feels certain that the poem harbors some "ulteriority."

"Final sleep" is certainly one interpretation of the "long sleep" that the poet contrasts with human sleep. The sleep of the woodchuck is the sleep of winter, and winter, in the metaphoric language of seasons, has strong associations with death. Hints of winter are abundant: The scent of apples is "the essence of winter sleep"; the water in the trough froze into a "pane of glass"; the grass is "hoary" (i.e., frosty, or Frosty). Yet is the impending death destructive or creative? The harvest of apples can be read as a harvest of any human effort--study, laying bricks, writing poetry, etc.--and this poem looks at the end of the harvest.

The sequence and tenses of the poem are a bit confusing and lead one to wonder what is dreamed, what is real, and where the sleep begins. It's understandable that the speaker should be tired at the end of a day's apple picking. But the poem says that the speaker was well on his way to sleep before he dropped the sheet of ice, and this presumably occurred in the morning. The speaker has tried and failed to "rub the strangeness" from his sight. Is this a strangeness induced by exhaustion or indicative of the fact that he is dreaming already? Has he, in fact, been dreaming since he looked through the "pane of glass" and entered a through-the-looking-glass world of "magnified apples" and the "rumbling sound / Of load on load of apples

coming in"? Or is the sheet of ice simply a dizzying lens whose effect endures? If, in fact, the speaker was well on his way to sleep in the morning, does this lend a greater, more ominous weight to the long sleep "coming on" at the poem's end?

The overall tone of the poem might not support such a reading, however; nothing else about it is particularly ominous--and Frost can do ominous when he wants to. How we ultimately interpret the tone of the poem has much to do with how we interpret the harvest. Has it been a failure? Certainly there is a sense of incompleteness--"a barrel that I didn't fill." The speaker's inner resources give out before the outer resources are entirely collected. On the other hand, the poet speaks only of "two or three apples" remaining, and these only "may" be left over. Do we detect satisfaction, then? The speaker has done all that was within his power; what's left is the result of minor, inevitable human imperfection. Is this, then, a poem about the rare skill of knowing when to quit honorably? This interpretation seems reasonable.

Yet if the speaker maintains his honor, why will his sleep be troubled? There were "ten thousand thousand"--that is to say, countless--fruit to touch, and none could be fumbled or it was lost. Did the speaker fumble many? Did he leave more than he claims he did? Or are the troubled dreams a nightmare magnification and not a reflection of the real harvest?

Lines 28-29 are important: "I am overtired / Of the great harvest I myself desired." If there has been failure or too great a strain on the speaker, it is because the speaker has desired too great a harvest. He saw an impossible quantity of fruit as a possibility. Or he saw a merely incredible quantity of fruit as possibility and nearly achieved it (at the cost of physical and mental exhaustion).

When we read "After Apple-Picking" metaphorically, we may want to look at it as a poem about the effort of writing poetry. The cider-apple heap then makes a nice metaphor for saved and recycled bits of poetry, and the long sleep sounds like creative (permanent?) hibernation. This is one possible metaphoric substitution among many; it seems plausible enough (though nowise definitive or exclusive). However, our search for "ulteriority" may benefit from respecting, not replacing, the figure of the apples. Apple picking, in Western civilization, has its own built-in metaphorical and allegorical universe, and we should especially remember this when we read a poet whose work frequently revisits Eden and the Fall (c.f. "Nothing Gold Can Stay," "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same," "It is Almost the Year Two Thousand," "The Oven Bird"). When the poet speaks of "the great harvest I myself desired," consider also what apples represent in Genesis: knowledge and some great, punishable claim to godliness--creation and understanding, perhaps. This sends us scurrying back to lines 1 and 2, where the apple-picking ladder sticks through the tree "Toward heaven still." What has this harvest been, then, with its infinite fruits too many for one person to touch? What happens when such apples strike the earth--are they really of no worth? And looked at in this new light, what does it mean to be "done with apple-picking now"?

All of these questions are enough to make one forswear metaphor and limit oneself to a strict diet of literalness. But that isn't nearly as much fun.

# FIRE AND ICE

## Summary

The speaker considers the age-old question of whether the world will end in fire or in ice. This is similar to another age-old question: whether it would be preferable to freeze to death or burn to death. The speaker determines that either option would achieve its purpose sufficiently well.

## Form

"Fire and Ice" follows an invented form, irregularly interweaving three rhymes and two line lengths into a poem of nine lines. Each line ends either with an *-ire*, *-ice*, or *-ate* rhyme. Each line contains either four or eight syllables. Each line can be read naturally as iambic, although this is not strictly necessary for several lines. Frost employs strong enjambment in line 7 to great effect.

## Commentary

An extremely compact little lyric, "Fire and Ice" combines humor, fury, detachment, forthrightness, and reserve in an airtight package. Not a syllable is wasted. The aim is aphorism--the slaying of the elusive Truth-beast with one unerring stroke. But for Frost, as usual, the truth remains ambiguous and the question goes unanswered; to settle for aphorism would be to oversimplify.

We can attribute part of the poem's effect to the contrast between the simple, clipped precision of its vocabulary and the vague gravity of its subject. The real triumph of "Fire and Ice," however, is in its form. Try writing the poem out in prose lines. Nearly all poems suffer considerably in this exercise, but this poem simply dies:

*Some say the world will end in fire. Some say in ice. From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire. But if it had to perish twice, I think I know enough of  
hate to say that, for destruction, ice is also great and would suffice.*

The language remains simple, but the devastating, soaring anticlimax of the final two lines is lost. Those lines draw their soft-kill power from form: from their rhymes; from the juxtaposition of their short, punchy length with that of the preceding lines (and their resonance with the length of the second line); and from the strong enjambment in line 7, which builds up the tension needed for the perfect letdown.

It is one thing to pull off an offhand remark about the end of days; it is another to make it poetry. Frost masterfully accomplishes both in a single composition.

## **STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING**

Throughout the poem—brief in actual time, but with the deceptive length of dream—we are being drawn into silence and sleep, yet always with the slightest contrary pull of having to go on. The very tentative tone of the opening line lets us into the mood without our quite sensing where it will lead, just as the ordinariness of 'though' at the end of the second line assures us that we are in this world. But by repeating the 'o' sound, 'though' also starts the series of rhymes that will soon get the better of traveller and reader. The impression of aloneness in the first two lines prepares for concentration on seeing the strange process not of snow falling, but of woods 'filling up.' The intimacy of

My little horse must think it queer

reminds us again of the everyday man and his life back home, but 'queer' leads to an even lonelier scene, a kind of northern nowhere connected with the strangeness of the winter solstice,

The darkest evening of the year.

In this second stanza the unbroken curve of rhythm adds to the sense of moving imperceptibly into a spell-world, as we dimly note the linking of the rhymes with the first stanza. The pattern is catching on to the reader, pulling him into its drowsy current.

The lone spaciousness and quiet of the third stanza is heightened by the 'shake' of bells, but 'to ask,' humorously taking the horse's point of view, tells us that the driver is awake and sane. The sounds he now attends to so closely are very like silence, images of regular movement and softness of touch. The transition to the world of sleep, almost reached in the next stanza—goes by diminution of consonantal sounds, from 'gives . . . shake . . . ask . . . mistake (gutturals easily roughened to fit the alert movement of the horse) to the sibilant 'sound's the sweep / Of easy wind . . . 'Sweep,' by virtue of the morpheme '-eep,' is closely associated with other words used for 'hushed, diminishing' actions: seep, sleep, peep, weep, creep. The quietness, concentration, and rocking motion of the last two lines of stanza three prepare perfectly for the hypnosis of the fourth. ( Compare similar effects in 'After Apple-Picking.') 'Lonely' recalls the tender alluringness of 'easy' and 'down'; 'dark' and 'deep' the strangeness of the time and the mystery of the slowly filling woods. The closing lines combine most beautifully the contrary pulls of the poem, with the repetitions, the settling down on one sleepy rhyme running against what is being said, and with the speaker echoing his prose sensible self in 'I have promises' and 'miles to go' while he almost seems to be nodding off.

'There is nothing more composing than composition,' Frost has said, and 'Stopping by Woods' shows both the process and the effect as the poet-traveler composes himself for sleep. The metaphorical implication is well hidden, with no hint offered like

a call to come in  
To the dark and lament.

The dark nowhere of the woods, the seen and heard movement of things, and the lullaby of inner speech are an invitation to sleep—and winter sleep is again close to easeful death. ('Dark' and 'deep' are typical Romantic adjectives.) All of these poetic suggestions are in the purest sense symbolic: we cannot say in other terms what they are 'of,' though we feel their power. There are critics who have gone much further in defining what Frost 'meant'; but perhaps sleep is mystery enough. Frost's poem is symbolic in the manner of Keats's 'To Autumn,' where the over-meaning is equally vivid and equally unnameable. In contrast to 'The Oven Bird' and 'Come In,' the question of putting the mystery in words is not raised; indeed the invitation has been expressed more by song than speech. The rejection though outspoken is as instinctive as the felt attraction to the alluring darkness. From this and similar

lyrics, Frost might be described as a poet of rejected invitations to voyage in the 'definitely imagined regions' that Keats and Yeats more readily enter.

### Summary

On the surface, this poem is simplicity itself. The speaker is stopping by some woods on a snowy evening. He or she takes in the lovely scene in near-silence, is tempted to stay longer, but acknowledges the pull of obligations and the considerable distance yet to be traveled before he or she can rest for the night.

### Form

The poem consists of four (almost) identically constructed stanzas. Each line is iambic, with four stressed syllables:

Within the four lines of each stanza, the first, second, and fourth lines rhyme. The third line does not, but it sets up the rhymes for the next stanza. For example, in the third stanza, *queer*, *near*, and *year* all rhyme, but *lake* rhymes with *shake*, *mistake*, and *flake* in the following stanza.

The notable exception to this pattern comes in the final stanza, where the third line rhymes with the previous two and is repeated as the fourth line.

Do not be fooled by the simple words and the easiness of the rhymes; this is a very difficult form to achieve in English without debilitating a poem's content with forced rhymes.

### Commentary

This is a poem to be marveled at and taken for granted. Like a big stone, like a body of water, like a strong economy, however it was forged it seems that, once made, it has always been there. Frost claimed that he wrote it in a single nighttime sitting; it just came to him. Perhaps one hot, sustained burst is the only way to cast such a complete object, in which form and content, shape and meaning, are alloyed inextricably. One is tempted to read it, nod quietly in recognition of its splendor and multivalent meaning, and just move on. But one must write essays. Or study guides.

Like the woods it describes, the poem is lovely but entices us with dark depths--of interpretation, in this case. It stands alone and beautiful, the account of a man stopping by woods on a snowy evening, but gives us a come-hither look that begs us to load it with a full inventory of possible meanings. We protest, we make apologies, we point to the dangers of reading poetry in this way, but unlike the speaker of the poem, we cannot resist.

The last two lines are the true culprits. They make a strong claim to be the most celebrated instance of repetition in English poetry. The first "And miles to go before I sleep" stays within the boundaries of literalness set forth by the rest of the poem. We may suspect, as we have up to this point, that the poem implies more than it says outright, but we can't insist on it; the poem has gone by so fast, and seemed so straightforward. Then comes the second "And miles to go before I sleep," like a soft yet penetrating gong; it can be neither ignored nor forgotten. The sound it makes is "Ahhh." And we must read the verses again and again and offer trenchant remarks and explain the "Ahhh" in words far inferior to the poem. For the last "miles to go" now seems like life; the last "sleep" now seems like death.

The basic conflict in the poem, resolved in the last stanza, is between an attraction toward the woods and the pull of responsibility outside of the woods. What do woods represent? Something good? Something bad? Woods are sometimes a symbol for wildness, madness, the pre-rational, the looming irrational. But these woods do not seem particularly wild. They are someone's woods, someone's in particular--the owner lives in the village. But

that owner is in the village on this, the darkest evening of the year--so would any sensible person be. That is where the division seems to lie, between the village (or "society," "civilization," "duty," "sensibility," "responsibility") and the woods (that which is beyond the borders of the village and all it represents). If the woods are not particularly wicked, they still possess the seed of the irrational; and they are, at night, dark--with all the varied connotations of darkness.

Part of what is irrational about the woods is their attraction. They are restful, seductive, lovely, dark, and deep--like deep sleep, like oblivion. Snow falls in downy flakes, like a blanket to lie under and be covered by. And here is where many readers hear dark undertones to this lyric. To rest too long while snow falls could be to lose one's way, to lose the path, to freeze and die. Does this poem express a death wish, considered and then discarded? Do the woods sing a siren's song? To be lulled to sleep could be truly dangerous. Is allowing oneself to be lulled akin to giving up the struggle of prudence and self-preservation? Or does the poem merely describe the temptation to sit and watch beauty while responsibilities are forgotten--to succumb to a mood for a while?

The woods sit on the edge of civilization; one way or another, they draw the speaker away from it (and its promises, its good sense). "Society" would condemn stopping here in the dark, in the snow--it is ill advised. The speaker ascribes society's reproach to the horse, which may seem, at first, a bit odd. But the horse is a domesticated part of the civilized order of things; it is the nearest thing to society's agent at this place and time. And having the horse reprove the speaker (even if only in the speaker's imagination) helps highlight several uniquely human features of the speaker's dilemma. One is the regard for beauty (often flying in the face of practical concern or the survival instinct); another is the attraction to danger, the unknown, the dark mystery; and the third--perhaps related but distinct--is the possibility of the death wish, of suicide.

Not that we must return too often to that darkest interpretation of the poem. Beauty alone is a sufficient siren; a sufficient protection against her seduction is an unwillingness to give up on society despite the responsibilities it imposes. The line "And miles to go before I sleep" need not imply burden alone; perhaps the ride home will be lovely, too. Indeed, the line could be read as referring to Frost's career as a poet, and at this time he had plenty of good poems left in him.