

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Youth and the Loss of Innocence

Youth appears prominently in Frost's poetry, particularly in connection with innocence and its loss. *A Boy's Will* deals with this **theme** explicitly, tracing the development of a solitary youth as he explores and questions the world around him. Frost's later work depicts youth as an idealized, edenic state full of possibility and opportunity. But as his poetic **tone** became increasingly jaded and didactic, he imagines youth as a time of unchecked freedom that is taken for granted and then lost. The theme of lost innocence becomes particularly poignant for Frost after the horrors of World War I and World War II, in which he witnessed the physical and psychic wounding of entire generations of young people. Later poems, including "Birches" (1916), "Acquainted with the Night" (1928), and "Desert Places" (1936), explore the realities of aging and loss, contrasting adult experiences with the carefree pleasures of youth.

Self-Knowledge Through Nature

Nature figures prominently in Frost's poetry, and his poems usually include a moment of interaction or encounter between a human **speaker** and a natural subject or phenomenon. These encounters culminate in profound realizations or revelations, which have significant consequences for the speakers. Actively engaging with nature—whether through manual labor or exploration—has a variety of results, including self-knowledge, deeper understanding of the human condition, and increased insight into the metaphysical world. Frost's earlier work focuses on the act of discovery and demonstrates how being engaged with nature leads to growth and knowledge. For instance, a day of harvesting fruit leads to a new understanding of life's final sleep, or death, in "After Apple-Picking" (1915). Mid-career, however, Frost used encounters in nature to comment on the human condition. In his later works, experiencing nature provided access to the universal, the supernatural, and the divine, even as the poems themselves became increasingly focused on aging and mortality.

Throughout Frost's work, speakers learn about themselves by exploring nature, but nature always stays indifferent to the human world. In other words, people learn from nature because nature allows people to gain knowledge about themselves and because nature requires people to reach for new insights, but nature itself does not provide

answers. Frost believed in the capacity of humans to achieve feats of understanding in natural settings, but he also believed that nature was unconcerned with either human achievement or human misery. Indeed, in Frost's work, nature could be both generous and malicious. The speaker of "Design" (1936), for example, wonders about the "design of darkness" (13) that has led a spider to kill a moth over the course of a night. While humans might learn about themselves through nature, nature and its ways remain mysterious.

Community vs. Isolation

Frost marveled at the contrast between the human capacity to connect with one another and to experience feelings of profound isolation. In several Frost poems, solitary individuals wander through a natural setting and encounter another individual, an object, or an animal. These encounters stimulate moments of revelation in which the speaker realizes her or his connection to others or, conversely, the ways that she or he feels isolated from the community. Earlier poems feature speakers who actively choose solitude and isolation in order to learn more about themselves, but these speakers ultimately discover a firm connection to the world around them, as in "The Tufts of Flowers" (1915) and "Mending Wall" (1915). Longer dramatic poems explore how people isolate themselves even within social contexts. Later poems return the focus to solitude, exploring how encounters and community only heighten loneliness and isolation. This deeply pessimistic, almost misanthropic perspective sneaks into the most cheerful of late Frost poems, including "Acquainted with the Night" and "Desert Places."

Motifs

Manual Labor

Labor functions as a tool for self-analysis and discovery in Frost's poetry. Work allows his speakers to understand themselves and the world around them. Traditionally, pastoral and romantic poets emphasized a passive relationship with nature, wherein people would achieve understanding and knowledge by observing and meditating, not by directly interacting with the natural world. In contrast, Frost's speakers work, labor, and act—mending fences, as in "Mending Wall"; harvesting fruit, as in "After Apple-Picking"; or cutting hay, as in "Mowing" (1915). Even children work, although the hard labor of the little boy in "Out, Out—" (1920) leads to his death. The boy's death implies

that while work was necessary for adults, children should be exempted from difficult labor until they have attained the required maturity with which to handle both the physical and the mental stress that goes along with rural life. Frost implies that a connection with the earth and with one's self can only be achieved by actively communing with the natural world through work.

New England

Long considered the quintessential regional poet, Frost uses New England as a recurring setting throughout his work. Although he spent his early life in California, Frost moved to the East Coast in his early teens and spent the majority of his adult life in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. The region's landscape, history, culture, and attitudes fill his poetry, and he emphasizes local color and natural elements of the forests, orchards, fields, and small towns. His speakers wander through dense woods and snowstorms, pick apples, and climb mountains. *North of Boston*, the title of Frost's second collection of poetry, firmly established him as the chronicler of small-town, rural life in New England. Frost found inspiration in his day-to-day experiences, basing "Mending Wall," for instance, on a fence near his farm in Derry, New Hampshire, and "The Oven Bird" (1920) on birds indigenous to the nearby woods.

The Sound of Sense

Frost coined the phrase the *sound of sense* to emphasize the **poetic diction**, or word choice, used throughout his work. According to letters he wrote in 1913 and 1914, the sound of sense should be positive, as well as proactive, and should resemble everyday speech. To achieve the sound of sense, Frost chose words for tone and sound, in addition to considering each word's meaning. Many poems replicate content through rhyme, **meter**, and **alliteration**. For instance, "Mowing" captures the back-and-forth sound of a scythe swinging, while "Out, Out—" imitates the jerky, noisy roar of a buzz saw. Believing that poetry should be recited, rather than read, Frost not only paid attention to the sound of his poems but also went on speaking tours throughout the United States, where he would read, comment, and discuss his work. Storytelling has a long history in the United States, particularly in New England, and Frost wanted to tap into this history to emphasize poetry as an oral art.

Symbols

Trees

Trees delineate borders in Frost's poetry. They not only mark boundaries on earth, such as that between a pasture and a forest, but also boundaries between earth and heaven. In some poems, such as "After Apple-Picking" and "Birches," trees are the link between earth, or humanity, and the sky, or the divine. Trees function as boundary spaces, where moments of connection or revelation become possible. Humans can observe and think critically about humanity and the divine under the shade of these trees or standing nearby, inside the trees' boundary space. Forests and edges of forests function similarly as boundary spaces, as in "Into My Own" (1915) or "Desert Places." Finally, trees acts as boundaries or borders between different areas or types of experiences. When Frost's speakers and subjects are near the edge of a forest, wandering in a forest, or climbing a tree, they exist in liminal spaces, halfway between the earth and the sky, which allow the speakers to engage with nature and experience moments of revelation.

Birds and Birdsong

In Frost's poetry, birds represent nature, and their songs represent nature's attitudes toward humanity. Birds provide a voice for the natural world to communicate with humans. But their songs communicate only nature's indifference toward the human world, as in "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" (1923) and "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" (1942). Their beautiful melodies belie an absence of feeling for humanity and our situations. Nevertheless, as a part of nature, birds have a right to their song, even if it annoys or distresses human listeners. In "A Minor Bird" (1928), the speaker eventually realizes that all songs must continue to exist, whether those songs are found in nature, as with birds, or in culture, as with poems. Frost also uses birds and birdsong to symbolize poetry, and birds become a medium through which to comment on the efficacy of poetry as a tool of emotional expression, as in "The Oven Bird" (1920).

Solitary Travelers

Solitary travelers appear frequently in Frost's poems, and their attitudes toward their journeys and their surroundings highlight poetic and historical themes, including the figure of the wanderer and the changing social landscape of New England in the twentieth century. As in **romanticism**, a literary movement active in England from roughly 1750 to 1830, Frost's poetry demonstrates great respect for the social outcast, or wanderer, who exists on the fringes of a community. Like the romanticized notion of the solitary traveler, the poet was also separated from the community, which allowed him to view social interactions, as well as the natural world, with a sense of wonder, fear, and admiration. Able to engage with his surroundings using fresh eyes, the solitary traveler simultaneously exists as a part of the landscape and as an observer of the landscape. Found in "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" (1923), "Into My Own," "Acquainted with the Night," and "The Road Not Taken" (1920), among other poems, the solitary traveler demonstrates the historical and regional context of Frost's poetry. In the early twentieth century, the development of transportation and industry created the social type of the wandering "tramp," who lived a transient lifestyle, looking for work in a rapidly developing industrial society. Like Frost's speakers and subjects, these people lived on the outskirts of the community, largely away from the warmth and complexity of human interaction.