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## Chapter 3

# Robert Frost

### Life and Works



Robert Frost (1874–1963) was born in San Francisco and spent his early childhood there. At the death of his father, when Frost was 11, the family moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts. After graduating from high school as valedictorian and class poet in 1892, Frost entered Dartmouth College but soon left to work at odd jobs and to write poetry. In 1897 he resumed his college education at Harvard University but left after two years' study there, having acquired an enduring dislike for academic convention.

For the next 12 years Frost eked out a minimal living by teaching and farming while continuing to write his poems. In 1912 he decided to venture everything on a literary career. Leaving New Hampshire, he sailed for England, where he hoped “to write poetry without further scandal to friends or family”. In London, he soon found a publisher, and his first book, *A Boy's Will* (1913), brought him to the attention of influential critics, among whom the American expatriate Ezra Pound praised Frost as an authentic poet.

Following the publication of a second volume of poems, *North of Boston* (1914), Frost returned home, determined to win recognition in his native land. To support himself he taught in colleges and lectured throughout much of the United States. His fame grew with the appearance of a succession of books: *Mountain Interval* (1916), *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes* (1923), *West-Running Brook* (1928), *A Further Range* (1936), *A Witness Tree* (1942), *Steeple Bush* (1947), and *In the Clearing* (1962). By the end of his life he had become a national bard; he received honorary degrees from over 40 colleges and universities and won four Pulitzer Prizes; the United States Senate passed a resolution honoring his birthday, and when he was 87, he read his poetry at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy.

Frost had rejected the revolutionary poetic principles of his contemporaries, choosing



instead the “old-fashioned way to be new”. He employed the plain speech of rural New Englanders and preferred the short, traditional forms of lyric and narrative. As a poet of nature he had obvious affinities with Romantic writers, notably William Wordsworth and Ralph Waldo Emerson. He saw nature as a storehouse of analogy and symbol, announcing “I’m always saying something that’s just the edge of something more”, but he had little faith in religious dogma or speculative thought. His concern with nature reflected deep moral uncertainties, and his poetry, for all its apparent simplicity, often probed mysteries of darkness and irrationality in the bleak and chaotic landscapes of an indifferent universe where men stand alone, unaided and perplexed.

### *Brief Comment*

Frost depicted New England life realistically through language and situations familiar to the common people. Though he is generally considered a regional poet whose subject matters mainly focus on the landscape and people of New England, he wrote many poems that investigated the basic themes of human life. He wrote about the daily life of ordinary people—farmers, shepherds, etc.; he wrote about small rural events—fence mending, apple picking, etc.; and he wrote about good and evil, and about all the matters of life and death.

Frost is a poet who can hardly be classified with the old or the new. Unlike most of his contemporaries in the early 20th century, Frost did not break with the older poetic tradition, nor did he make many experiments with verse form. Instead, he learned from tradition and made the colloquial New England speech into a poetic expression. So his poems are full of life, truth, and wisdom. Compared with his contemporaries, his poems are filled with more energy and loaded with more pleasure, while those of his contemporaries are often too obscure to be understood by the average reader.

Frost combined the traditional sonnet, rhyming couplets, and blank verse with a clear American local speech rhythm. In verse form, he took advantage of tradition and of the experiments of his contemporaries. He wrote in both metrical forms and free verse, and sometimes he wrote in a form that borrows freely from both—a form that might be called semi-free and semi-conventional. Thus his poems are careful, loving explorations of reality.

Frost wrote in a simple form with profound ideas. Most of his poems are short and direct on the informational level, with simple diction. However, it would be a mistake to imagine that Frost is easy to understand just because he is easy to read. As a matter of fact, Frost’s poems were very carefully constructed, yet he made them seem effortless to read by using colloquial language and familiar, conventional rhythms. The profound ideas are often delivered through plain language and simple form, for what Frost wanted is to take symbols from the limited human world and the pastoral landscape to refer to the great space beyond the rustic scene.

 *Selections*

**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<sup>1</sup>;  
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

*Notes*

1. wanted wear: not quite worn

*Appreciation*

This poem, as many of Frost's poems, begins with the observation of nature, as if the poet is a traveler sightseeing in nature. By the end, all the simple words condense into a serious, philosophical proposition: when anyone in life is confronted with making a choice, in order to possess something worthwhile, he has to give up something which seems as lovely and valuable as the chosen one. Then, whatever follows, he must accept the consequence of his

choice, for it is not possible for him to return to the beginning and have another chance to choose differently. Frost is asserting that nature is fair and honest to everyone. Thus all the varieties of human destiny result from each person's choice making.

This is a symbolic poem. The "yellow wood" may symbolize the sophisticated society, in which most people are likely to follow a profitable and easier way; each "road" symbolizes a possibility in life; the "traveler" is the embodiment of every individual in the human world; the road which is "grassy and wanted wear" refers to a solitary lifestyle; while "way leads on to way" implies the complicated circumstances of the human world. Through the poem, the poet presents to the reader his experience of taking a road.

The poem is regularly structured with four classic five-line stanzas, with "abaab" rhyme scheme and conversational rhythm.

### *For Study and Discussion*

1. Does the speaker think that he has made a wrong choice in taking the road "less traveled by"? Why or why not?
2. What personal choices does this poem remind you of?
3. Translate this poem into Chinese. Find some other Chinese versions of this poem and make a comparative study of them.

### **Stopping by Woods<sup>1</sup> on a Snowy Evening**

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His<sup>2</sup> house is in the village, though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow<sup>3</sup>.

My little horse must think it queer 5  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He<sup>4</sup> gives his harness bells a shake 10  
To ask<sup>5</sup> if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake<sup>6</sup>.





The woods are lovely, dark and deep,<sup>7</sup>  
But I have promises<sup>8</sup> to keep,  
And miles<sup>9</sup> to go before I sleep<sup>10</sup>,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

15

## Notes

1. Woods: This image frequently appears in Frost's poems, symbolizing the mystery of nature, death, or catastrophe.
2. His: It refers to the owner of the woods.
3. snow: This is another frequent image in Frost's poems. It usually symbolizes something of purity and loftiness.
4. He: It refers to my little horse.
5. To ask: The horse asks me (whether there is a mistake). Here the little horse is personified.
6. downy flake: soft and finely patterned snowflake
7. dark and deep: Alliteration is used here to enhance the mysterious atmosphere of woods in darkness. The woods, while covered by snow, appear lovely; but as a matter of fact, they are filled with mysteries.
8. promises: one's responsibility or duty in the world
9. miles: long distance, here referring to heavy duty in life
10. before I sleep: before I rest at night, before the end of my life

## Appreciation

This poem presents a picture of tranquility. The poet, as a solitary traveler, stops by the woods on a winter evening. Everything is covered with snow. The poet is enjoying a momentary relaxation on the onerous journey of life. The woods are lovely, but dark and deep. The poet is alone with nature in a peaceful scene; however, the scene of tranquility, though appearing in peace and harmony, is not without the temptation of death. The poet is attracted by the mystery of death for a while. Fortunately, his former promises remind him of his responsibility in the world and he is thus detached from the dark woods. The repetition of the last two lines indicates the poet's sense of responsibility or simply his helplessness in front of nature.

The poem is written in iambic tetrameter with four lines in each stanza, the rhyme scheme being "aaba, bbcb, ccde, dddd".

## For Study and Discussion

1. What kind of forest are the woods?
2. What does the word "sleep" imply in the poem?

3. The poem exemplifies Frost's ability to join the pastoral and philosophical modes in lyrics of unforgettable beauty. What imagery is used in the poem? What does Frost want to convey through the poem?
4. Snow is also a recurring imagery in Chinese poetry. Can you list some of these poems and analyze their symbolic meaning?

### Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,  
 Some say in ice.<sup>1</sup>  
 From what I've tasted of desire<sup>2</sup>  
 I hold with<sup>3</sup> those who favor fire<sup>4</sup>.  
 But if it had to perish<sup>5</sup> twice,  
 I think I know enough of hate<sup>6</sup>  
 To say that for destruction ice  
 Is also great  
 And would suffice<sup>7</sup>.

5

### Notes

1. Some say in ice: Some say the world will be destroyed by ice.
2. what I've tasted of desire: my understanding or knowledge about desire
3. hold with: approve of, agree with
4. those who favor fire: those people who believe the world will be destroyed in fire
5. perish: die, be destroyed
6. know enough of hate: know a lot about hatred between people
7. suffice: be enough, be adequate (to destroy the world)

### Appreciation

At the beginning of the 20th century, the world was involved in World War I. After the feverish fantasy of the initial period, when human faith became increasingly shaky, the intellectuals began to meditate on warfare and introspect the meanness in human nature. Some of them tried to predict the tragic ending of the human world: either in fire—the earth would be burned up by the sun, or in ice—the Ice Age would soon return to earth as some scientists had strongly suggested. Under these circumstances, Frost wrote this poem to express his opinion.

In this poem, Frost, of course not scientifically but humanistically, first reveals his identical view with those “who favor fire”, for he is inclined to believe that fire, as the symbol



of desire, is destructive. However, at the same time, Frost is worried about the power of “ice”, the symbol of hatred, which is believed to be as dangerous as “desire” in ruining the world.

### *For Study and Discussion*

1. How do you describe the speaker’s worldview in the poem? Is it pessimistic, realistic, or indifferent?
2. Do you think the extremes of fire and ice can exist in a person at the same time?
3. Do you think this is a poem that only could have been written in the 20th century? Why or why not?

### **Design**

I found a dimpled spider<sup>1</sup>, fat and white,  
 On a white heal-all<sup>2</sup>, holding up<sup>3</sup> a moth  
 Like a white piece of rigid<sup>4</sup> satin<sup>5</sup> cloth—  
 Assorted characters of death and blight<sup>6</sup>  
 Mixed ready to begin the morning right, 5  
 Like the ingredients of a witches’ broth—  
 A snow-drop spider,<sup>7</sup> 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<sup>8</sup> to that height,  
 Then steered<sup>9</sup> the white moth thither in the night?  
 What but design of darkness to appall<sup>10</sup>?—  
 If design govern in a thing so small<sup>11</sup>.

### *Notes*

1. a dimpled spider: a spider with a triumphant air
2. heal-all: a plant that is believed to cure every disease
3. holding up: holding in the spider’s mouth, catching
4. rigid: stiff, not easily bending or yielding
5. satin: a type of cloth that is shiny and smooth
6. characters of death and blight: the spider, moth, and flower

7. A snow-drop spider: The spider is as white as a snow-drop, a type of small white flower which appears in the early spring, often when snow is still on the ground.
8. the kindred spider: the spider which is closely related with the moth
9. steered: guided
10. appall: feel very shocked and upset
11. a thing so small: the matter of a spider's eating a moth

### *Appreciation*

While Frost devoted most of his writings to the beauty of New England, he did not fail to see the terror and tragedy in nature. "Design" is one of the few which generate a sense of horror.

As a naturalist poet, Frost was sometimes rather baffled by the ambiguous intentions of nature. Nature creates all the species in the universe. However, it behaves very indifferently when one of the species is being cruelly swallowed by the other. The three figures of this poem—spider, moth, and flower (heal-all), are all creations of nature, and they are all designed in the color white. Nevertheless, they are respectively the embodiment of evil (spider), the embodiment of victim (moth), and the embodiment of innocence (heal-all).

Frost was a lover of nature, but at the same time, he was agnostic about nature. He was able to feel the power of a somewhat dominant hand over this world. Yet, he also admitted that though the power is pervasively influential, it is inexplicable. This may result in the tragic implication that no one in this world is completely safe, that is, each may exist as the other's prey.

The rhyme scheme of the poem varies in different stanzas. The "abba" rhyme repeats itself once in the first stanza. In the second stanza, the rhyme scheme goes as "acaacc" just to show the uncertainty and sorrow of the scenes.

### *For Study and Discussion*

1. How does the form of the poem match the theme and title of the poem?
2. Why does the speaker emphasize the color of the spider, moth and flower so much?
3. What images in the poem hint at death?
4. At the end of the poem, do you think the speaker believes in "design"? Why or why not?