

*** Your school or college**

Symbols in Robert Frost's poetry

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INTRODUCTION

Robert Frost was born on March 26, 1874. His parents were Isabel Moodie and William Prescott Frost, Jr (Bio). His father was a drinker and a gambler, which upset the whole family. On June 25, 1876, Robert's sister Jeannie was born. In 1879, Frost entered kindergarten however, came home because of nervous stomach pain and did not return afterward. The next year, he tried going to the first grade, but dropped out again. The same thing happened the next year after that. He was home schooled.

In 1885 his father died. He died of tuberculosis on May 5, leaving his family with only \$8.00 after all his expenses were paid. After his death, the family moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts to live with their grandparents. While his younger sister was entering fourth grade, he got tested and entered third grade. The next year, the family moved to Salem Depot, New Hampshire, where his mom started teaching fifth through eighth grade.

Robert Frost is considered the quintessential New England poet, but he spent the first eleven years of his life in San Francisco. Only upon the death of Frost's father did the family go to live with relatives in Lawrence, Massachusetts. There, Frost excelled in high school and fell in love with his co-valedictorian at Lawrence High, Elinor White. They became engaged; Elinor went off to college at St. Lawrence in upstate New York while Frost entered Dartmouth. He was not happy there, however, and left after one semester. Back home, Frost worked as a reporter on a local newspaper and taught school (in part, to help his mother, a teacher with poor control over her students). Frost and Elinor married in 1896, the same year their son Elliott was born. In 1897, Frost matriculated at Harvard University, where he excelled in the Classics. However, the financial and emotional pressures of having a wife, infant, and another child on the way, forced Frost to withdraw after three semesters.

The Frosts moved to a rented farm near Methuen, Massachusetts, and began raising poultry. Tragedy struck in 1900 when three-year-old Elliott died. The family bought a farm in Derry, not far from Lawrence, and Frost settled in to farm, read, write, and raise a family. Three more children were born healthy before the Frosts lost another child in infancy in 1907. In 1906, Frost began teaching at the nearby Pinkerton Academy, where he proved an unconventional and popular instructor. In 1912, frustrated at his lack of success in the American poetry world, Frost moved his family to England. They remained there through 1915. In that time he met and befriended many of his British contemporaries, both of major and minor reputation, as well as the American ex-patriot wunderkind Ezra Pound. In 1913, Frost found a London publisher for his *A Boy's Will*, and *North of Boston* appeared in 1914. When the Frosts returned to New England in 1915, both books appeared in the United States—*North of Boston* to much acclaim. The move to England had proved successful. Frost was suddenly well known in American poetry circles. He would soon be well known everywhere.

Mountain Interval appeared in 1916. Frost began teaching at Amherst College in 1917, and then served as Poet-in-Residence at the University of Michigan. He would later return to Amherst, then to Michigan, then again to Amherst. He also taught at Harvard and Dartmouth but maintained the longest associations with Amherst and the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference at Middlebury College. His *Selected Poems* and *New Hampshire* were published in 1923. *New Hampshire* garnered Frost the first of his unmatched four Pulitzer Prizes for poetry. *West-Running Brook* was published in 1928, followed by Frost's *Collected Poems* in 1930 (Pulitzer #2), *A Further Range* in 1936 (Pulitzer #3), *A Witness Tree* in 1942 (Pulitzer

#4), *A Masque of Reason* in 1945, *Steeple Bush* and *A Masque of Mercy* in 1947, another *Complete Poems* in 1949, and *In the Clearing* in 1962.

Frost's crowning public moment was his recitation of "The Gift Outright" at John F. Kennedy's inauguration in January of 1960. He died on January 29, 1963.

POETRY

- *Twilight*, [Lawrence, MA], 1894, reprinted, University of Virginia, 1966.
- *A Boy's Will*, D. Nutt, 1913, Holt, 1915.
- *North of Boston*, D. Nutt, 1914, Holt, 1915, reprinted, Dodd, 1977.
- *Mountain Interval*, Holt, 1916.
- *New Hampshire*, Holt, 1923, reprinted, New Dresden Press, 1955.
- *Selected Poems*, Holt, 1923.
- *Several Short Poems*, Holt, 1924.
- *West-Running Brook*, Holt, 1928.
- *Selected Poems*, Holt, 1928.
- *The Lovely Shall Be Choosers*, Random House, 1929.
- *The Lone Striker*, Knopf, 1933.
- *Two Tramps in Mud-Time*, Holt, 1934.
- *The Gold Hesperidee*, Bibliophile Press, 1935.
- *Three Poems*, Baker Library Press, 1935.
- *A Further Range*, Holt, 1936.
- *From Snow to Snow*, Holt, 1936.
- *A Witness Tree*, Holt, 1942.
- *A Masque of Reason* (verse drama), Holt, 1942.
- *Steeple Bush*, Holt, 1947.
- *A Masque of Mercy* (verse drama), Holt, 1947.
- *Greece*, Black Rose Press, 1948.
- *Hard Not to Be King*, House of Books, 1951.
- *Aforesaid*, Holt, 1954.
- *The Gift Outright*, Holt, 1961.
- "Dedication" and "The Gift Outright" (poems read at the presidential inaugural, 1961; published with the inaugural address of J. F. Kennedy), Spiral Press, 1961.
- *In the Clearing*, Holt, 1962.
- *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, Dutton, 1978.
- *Early Poems*, Crown, 1981.
- *A Swinger of Birches: Poems of Robert Frost for Young People* (with audiocassette), Stemmer House, 1982.
- *Spring Pools*, Lime Rock Press, 1983.
- *Birches*, illustrated by Ed Young, Holt, 1988.
- *The Runaway* (juvenile poetry), illustrated by Glenna Lang, (Boston, MA), 1996.

He is also author of *And All We Call American*, 1958.

1 Themes and motifs in Frost's poetry

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.

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.

Frost places a great deal of importance on Nature in all of his collections. Because of the time he spent in New England, the majority of pastoral scenes that he describes are inspired by specific locations in New England. However, Frost does not limit himself to stereotypical pastoral themes such as sheep and shepherds. Instead, he focuses on the dramatic struggles that occur within the natural world, such as the conflict of the changing of seasons (as in "After Apple-Picking") and the destructive side of nature (as in "Once by the Pacific"). Frost also presents the natural world as one that inspires deep metaphysical thought in the individuals who are exposed to it (as in "Birches" and "The Sound of Trees"). For Frost, Nature is not simply a background for poetry, but rather a central character in his works.¹

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 them 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" 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.

¹ Caitlin Vincent, "The Poetry of Robert Frost", GradeSaver LCC, 2009.

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.”

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.

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.

2 Frost's symbolism

Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors, 'grace' metaphors, and goes on to the profoundest thinking that we have. Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another.... Unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere.

Robert Frost, "Education by Poetry"²

2.1 Natural symbolism

Frost is perhaps most famous for being a pastoral poet in terms of the subject of everyday life. Many of his most famous poems (such as "Mending Wall" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening") are inspired by the natural world, particularly his time spent as a poultry farmer in New Hampshire. Ironically, until his adulthood in New England, Frost was primarily a "city boy" who spent nearly all of his time in an urban environment. It is possibly because of his late introduction to the rural side of New England that Frost became so intrigued by the natural world.³

He uses free verse to tell of his love and respect for nature. He also utilizes natural symbolism in a lot of his writings. He has written about rural landscape and wildlife so much that people often refer to him as a nature poet. In the poem *Birches*, Frost utilizes natural symbolism to explain how heaven is the ideal realm of purity and light, a place in which we can aspire to. He also explains how the tension between earthly satisfactions and higher aspirations emerges from the recollection of a childhood game. The use of unrhymed iambic pentameter helps Frost illustrate his personal experiences of loneliness, love, and desire.

In *The birches* he describes the loneliness of his youth, writing that he was a boy on a farm too far from town to learn baseball whose only play was found in him. As a young boy, Frost's only amusement was to swing from the birches. His attempts to conquer loneliness were demonstrated through the vehicle of the birches. Frost goes on to describe perhaps the most valuable lesson he learned as a child trying to overcome loneliness, the lesson of practice makes perfect. Frost states He always kept his poise to the top of the branches climbing carefully with...pains...Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish kicking his way down through the air to the ground. He learned here that there are times in life when one will conquer a situation be done with it, and fly joyfully away knowing that one has conquered it. Frost also uses *Birches* to illustrate his experiences with love.

He has apparently been hurt by love before, stating, I'd like to get away from earth and then come back to it and begin over. May no fate willfully misunderstand me and half grant what I wish and snatch me away not to return. Apparently his heart has been broken by a lost love. He may think this is because he submitted vulnerably to her, but if he had a chance to do it again, he might not submit himself so much to the next thief. However, he definitely has the desire to achieve love. His desire to achieve is described when he states how he would like to achieve love. Frost states, I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree, and climb...toward heaven (the top or ultimate of his desire, be it love or something else) till the tree (or the world) could bear not more, but dipped its tip and set me down again. He is possibly stating that no matter

² J. Oster, "Frost's Poetry of Metaphor", Cambridge University Press, 2001.

³ Caitlin Vincent, "The Poetry of Robert Frost", GradeSaver LCC, 2009.

what life one pursues, one can use the world as a tree that one can climb to the top, but realize that at a certain point, the world will no longer be able to support one. Frost ends his poem stating his satisfaction with overcoming loneliness and love and benefiting from the desire to achieve by writing, one could do worse than become a swinger of birches. *Birches* was written beautifully in blank verse, even though each line is in iambic pentameter. The absence of rhyme scheme implies that a poet must compensate for this in other ways. Frost's does this wonderfully with the use of enjambment and imagery in his poem. This can be seen in his explanation of the appearance of the birches. Frost explains the appearance of the birches scientifically implying that natural phenomenon makes the branches bend and sway. Frost also lends sound to his description of the branches as "they click upon themselves as the breeze rises." Frost explains the branches are bent by the ice, but do not break. Frost again adds beautiful imagery comparing the bent branches "trailing their leaves on the ground" to "girls on hands and knees throwing their hair before them to dry in the sun."

2.2 Symbols

Trees delineate borders in Frost's poetry. The visible sign of the poet's preoccupation - the word is not too strong - is the recurrent image, particularly in his earlier work, of dark woods and trees.⁴ 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.

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 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

⁴ J.T. Ogilvie, "From Woods to Stars: A Pattern of Imagery in Robert Frost's Poetry." *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Winter 1959.

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.

Fire and ice. The nine-line, rhyming poem “Fire and Ice” displays Frost’s often-used themes of doom and destruction, accompanied by imagery of nature. The destruction of the earth will occur by either fire or ice, the poem says, and Frost provides possible symbolic meaning for both of those elements. The poem begins with: “Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say in ice”. This conjures up dark images of the earth either burning or freezing over. The theme of destruction is established early on here, Frost setting up two of the commonly-held beliefs of the way this will happen.

The fire image becomes symbolic in the third and fourth lines of the poem: “From what I’ve tasted of desire / I hold with those who favor fire”. Here, fire is associated with desire, a consuming, burning emotion. By pairing fire and desire, Frost suggests that desire can cause as much damage as fire can, and it may be one of the causes of the world’s end.

Some of the desires he is referring to are up for interpretation, but perhaps desire for power, money, or status could cause the downfall of people. Maybe have too many desires and not being content will lead to problems, as well. Likely, he means that these desires will lead to situations that humans cannot get out of, and they will bring upon the humans’ demise.

The rest of the poem describes the symbolism of ice: “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”. Ice is associated with hate, which, according to Frost, can be just as destructive as fire (or desire). Hate, certainly, can be a destructive force, and it seems to be suggested here that humans’ hate for one another can lead to the downfall of the earth.

What additionally catches many readers off guard about the ending lines of the poem is the tone created by Frost’s word choice, calling this destruction “great,” and saying that ice/hate “would suffice.” The tone Frost has in the poem is one of acceptance of the inevitability of this destruction, which he seems to suggest will occur due to either the desire or hate of humans.⁵

⁵ X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, „An Introduction to Poetry, Drama, and Writing“, Pearson, New York , 2007.

3 A Study on the Symbolic Poems of Robert Frost

3.1 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.*

The darkest evening, no moon, no stars, easy wind sway and flake were downy. A traveler rode on a horse and came up on the edge of the woods. He stopped to enjoy the view of the snow. The lake was frozen and there were no farmhouses nearby. The horse thought it queer and shook its harness bell. It seemed to wonder whether they lost their way. In only about ten short lines, the poet portrayed a succession of vivid figures. A picture of a traveler in the windy and snowy evening suddenly appears before the reader's eyes.

At first glance, the poem looks like common pastoral poetry. The poet apparently sang the praise of natural beauty. Actually this is not the case. Only by reading this poem carefully, the readers can discover the poet's intention. The poet did not intend to describe a simple scene. Then, what is his real intention? If the readers want to know its real meaning, then they must think about two problems first. One is why the traveler stopped; the other is why he went on later on. The poem states clearly that stopping was for the intention of enjoying the beautiful scenery and going on was that of keeping promises. Now, another problem arises, of what the promises indicated.

The last two lines of the poem, "And miles to go before I sleep. / And miles to go before I sleep" provide us clues. Here the key word is a "sleep". "Sleep" doesn't indicate seeking a temporary lodging for the night. It is a euphemism. "Sleep" here means the end of life --- eternal sleep. Therefore, the promises can be understood as the poet's unfinished aspiration, ambition, ideal, obligation, or duty. I think any of them are right. The action of stopping and going on reflected the poet's contradictory feeling and the final choice. On this windy and

snowy night, such beautiful landscape made the traveler hesitate, but once he was aware of his unfinished aspiration, he resolutely gave up his idea of enjoying the sight of the snow.

This action is also symbolic. It symbolizes that during a human's life, there are lots of important things to do. People should always remember their own responsibility and duty. And try their best to finish them in their life time instead of seeking for ease and comfort and frittering away the time. That is the real implication.

He stops by woods on this "darkest evening of the year" to watch them "fill up with snow," and lingers so long that his "little horse" shakes his harness bells "to ask if there is some mistake." The poet is put in mind of the "promises" he has to keep, of the miles he still must travel. We are not told, however, that the call of social responsibility proves stronger than the attraction of the woods, which are "lovely" as well as "dark and deep"; the poet and his horse have not moved on at the poem's end. The dichotomy of the poet's obligations both to the woods and to a world of "promises" - the latter filtering like a barely heard echo through the almost hypnotic state induced by the woods and falling snow - is what gives this poem its singular interest. The artfulness of "Stopping by Woods" consists in the way the two worlds are established and balanced. The poet is aware that the woods by which he is stopping belong to someone in the village; they are owned by the world of men. But at the same time they are his, the poet's woods, too, by virtue of what they mean to him in terms of emotion and private signification.

What appears to be "simple" is shown to be not really simple, what appears to be innocent not really innocent. The poet is fascinated and lulled by the empty wastes of white and black. The repetition of "sleep" in the final two lines suggests that he may succumb to the influences that are at work. There is no reason to suppose that these influences are benignant. It is, after all, "the darkest evening of the year," and the poet is alone "between the woods and frozen lake." His one bond with the security and warmth of the "outer" world, the "little horse" who wants to be about his errand, is an unsure one. The ascription of "lovely" to this scene of desolate woods, effacing snow, and black night complicates rather than alleviates the mood when we consider how pervasive the connotations of dangerous isolation and menacing death are.⁶

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 traveler 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.

⁶ J.T. Ogilvie, "From Woods to Stars: A Pattern of Imagery in Robert Frost's Poetry." South Atlantic Quarterly. Winter 1959.

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. '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.

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.⁷

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" stages its play of opposites at typically Frostian borders between night and day, storm and hearth, nature and culture, individual and group, freedom and responsibility. It works them, not "out" to resolution but in permanent suspension as complementary counters in *mens animi*, the feeling thought of active mind. The poem is made to make the mind just that. It unsettles certitude even in so small a matter as the disposition of accents in the opening line: "Whose woods these are I think I know." The monosyllabic tetrameter declares itself as it declares. Yet the "sound of sense" is uncertain. As an expression of doubtful guessing, "think" opposes "know," with its air of certitude. The line might be read to emphasize doubt (Whose woods these are I *think* I know) or confident knowledge (Whose woods these are I think I *know*). Once the issue is introduced, even scrupulously "neutral" reading points it up. The evidence for choosing emphasis is insufficient to the choice.

One of Frost's characteristic devices is to set up and undermine a case of the pathetic fallacy in such a way that both construction and collapse stay actively in play. In "Stopping by Woods," the undermining nearly precedes the setting up. "Must" gives the game away, as the speaker (exercising indeterminacy) interferes with the reality he observes, imposing his thoughts and feelings on it. "Darkest" contributes to the pattern. Is the evening, say, the winter solstice, literally darkest? Could it be, given the way that snow concentrates light? Or is "darkest" a judgment the speaker projects? In the next stanza, the speaker's "reading into"

⁷ R.A. Brower, "The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention", Oxford UP, New York, 1963.

nature intensifies to the point where harness bells "actually" speak. Then, *as if* to emphasize that such speaking is a human addition to a speechless scene, we *hear* that the only other sound is the "sweep" of light wind on softly falling snow. Those two categories of evidence, the self-consciously imposed and therefore suspect yet understandable human one, and the apparently indifferent yet comfortingly beautiful natural one, seem to produce the description of the woods as "lovely" and "dark and deep," a place of both (dangerous) attraction and (self-protective) threat. The oppositions are emphasized by Frost's intended punctuation—a comma after "lovely"; none after "dark," and the double doubleness of attraction and threat complicates the blunt "But" that begins the next line. Which woods, if any, is being rejected? How far does recalling that one has "promises to keep" go toward keeping them in fact?⁸

3.2 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.*

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

*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.*

*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.*

"The Road Not Taken" is an ironic commentary on the autonomy of choice in a world governed by instincts, unpredictable contingencies, and limited possibilities. It parodies and demurs from the biblical idea that God is the "way" that can and should be followed and the American idea that nature provides the path to spiritual enlightenment. The title refers doubly to bravado for choosing a road less traveled but also to regret for a road of lost possibility and the eliminations and changes produced by choice. "The Road Not Taken" reminds us of the consequences of the principle of selection in all aspects of life, namely that all choices in knowledge or in action exclude many others and lead to an ironic recognition of our

⁸ Guy Rotella, "Comparing Conceptions: Frost and Eddington, Heisenberg and Bohr." In "On Frost: The Best from American Literature", Ed. Edwin H. Cady and Louis J. Budd, Duke UP, Durham, 1991.

achievements. At the heart of the poem is the romantic mythology of flight from a fixed world of limited possibility into a wilderness of many possibilities combined with trials and choices through which the pilgrim progresses to divine perfection. The poem draws on "the culturally ancient and pervasive idea of nature as allegorical book, out of which to draw explicit lessons for the conduct of life.

The drama of the poem is of the persona making a choice between two roads. As evolved creatures, we should be able to make choices, but the poem suggests that our choices are irrational and aesthetic. The sense of meaning and morality derived from choice is not reconciled but, rather obliterated and canceled by a non-moral monism. Frost is trying to reconcile impulse with a conscience that needs goals and harbors deep regrets. The verb Frost uses is *taken*, which means something less conscious than *chosen*.

The basis of selection is individuation, variation, and "difference": taking the one "less traveled by." That he "could not travel both / And be one traveler" means not only that he will never be able to return but also that experience alters the traveler; he would not be the same by the time he came back. Frost is presenting an anti-myth in which origin, destination, and return are undermined by a non-progressive development. And the hero has only illusory choice. This psychological representation of the developmental principle of divergence strikes to the core of Darwinian theory. Species are made and survive when individuals diverge from others in a branching scheme, as the roads diverge for the speaker. The process of selection implies an unretracing process of change through which individual kinds are permanently altered by experience. Though the problem of making a choice at a crossroads is almost a commonplace, the drama of the poem conveys a larger mythology by including evolutionary metaphors and suggesting the passage of eons.⁹

The poem leaves one wondering how much "difference" is implied by all, given that the "roads" already exist, that possibilities are limited. Exhausted possibilities of human experience diminish great regret over "the road not taken" or bravado for "the road not taken" by everyone else. The poem does raise questions about whether there is any justice in the outcome of one's choices or anything other than aesthetics, being "fair," in our moral decisions. The speaker's impulse to individuation is mitigated by a moral dilemma of being unfair or cruel, in not stepping on leaves, "treading" enough to make them "black." It might also imply the speaker's recognition that individuation will mean treading on others.

The ironies of this poem have been often enough remarked. Not least among them is the contrast of the title with the better-remembered phrase of the poem's penultimate line: "the [road] less travelled by". Which road, after all, is the road "not taken"? Is it the one the speaker takes, which, according to his last description of it, is "less travelled" - that is to say, not taken by others? Or does the title refer to the supposedly better-traveled road that the speaker himself fails to take? Precisely who is not doing the taking? This initial ambiguity sets in play equivocations that extend throughout the poem. Of course, the broadest irony in the poem derives from the fact that the speaker merely asserts that the road he takes is "less travelled": the second and third stanzas make clear that "the passing there" had worn these two paths "really about the same" and that "both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black." Strong medial caesurae in the poem's first ten lines comically emphasize the "either - or" deliberations in which the speaker is engaged, and which have, apparently, no real consequence: nothing issues from them. Only in the last stanza is any noticeable difference between the two roads established, and that difference is established by fiat: the

⁹ Robert Faggen, "Robert Frost and the Challenge of Darwin", The University of Michigan, 1997.

speaker simply declares that the road he took was less travelled. There is nothing to decide between them.

Choices — even when they are undertaken so lightly as to seem unworthy of the name "choice" — are always more momentous, and very often more providential, than we suppose. There may be, one morning in a yellow wood, no difference between two roads, but "way leads on to way," as Frost's speaker says. It is only by setting out, by working our way well into the wood, that we begin to understand the meaning of the choices we make and the character of the self that is making them; in fact, only then can we properly understand our actions as choices. The speaker vacillates in the first three stanzas of "The Road Not Taken," but his vacillations, viewed in deeper perspective, seem, and in fact really are, "decisive." We are too much in the middle of things, Frost seems to be saying, ever to understand when we are truly "acting" and "deciding" and when we are merely reacting and temporizing. Our paths unfold themselves to us as we go. We realize our destination only when we arrive at it, though all along we were driven toward it by purposes we may rightly claim, in retrospect, as our own.¹⁰

¹⁰ Mark Richardson, "The Ordeal of Robert Frost: The Poet and His Poetics", The University of Illinois, 1997.

CONCLUSION

Language is a form of symbolism, which not only accepts ambiguity, but also employs it effectively to some extent. The words of words to suggest or to intimate, rather than to convey specific meaning, is an essential characteristic of poetry. Symbolism is one of the techniques of expression in poetry. What is a symbol? A symbol is a visible object or an action that suggests some further meanings in addition to itself.

A national flag is supposed to bestir our patriotic feeling. When a black cat crosses his path, a superstition man shivers, foreseeing bad luck. In literature, a symbol might be the word “flag” or the words “a black cat crosses his path”, or a description of flag or cat in a whole novel, story, play or poem. A flag or the crossing of a black cat may be called conventional symbols since they can have a conventional or customary effect on us. More often, however, symbols in literature have no conventional, long-established meaning, but particular meaning of their own. A symbol is a special kind of image, for it exceeds the usual image in the richness of its connotations.

There are many symbolic poems, but the masterpieces are only a few. Robert Frost is among the best poets. In his two poems “The Road Not Taken” and “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”, Robert wrote with boldness of conception and successfully used the symbolic medium. From these two poems, the readers can see his originality. These two poems have the same pattern. Both are composed of four stanzas. The subject matters are similar. The first three stanzas describe the beautiful scene in order to foreshadow the climax of the poem. The last stanza brings out the theme. After commenting on these two poems, people may wonder why the poet used the farmhouse, wood... as the background. It seems that the poet was addicted to writing rural scenery. It is not hard to know the reason if you know a little bit about Frost's life.

Robert was born in San Francisco and was taken to the New England farm country at the age of ten. It was the place where his poetry is identified. After a brief attendance at Dartmouth, where he disliked the academic attitude, he became a bobbin boy in a Massachusetts mill, and a short period at Harvard was followed by further work, making shoes, editing a country newspaper, teaching at school and finally farming. This background of craftsmanship and husbandry had its effect upon his poetry in more than the choice of subjects, for he demanded that his verse be as simple and honest as an axe and hoe. In 1924, 1931, 1937 and 1943, Robert was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

Why do people speak approvingly of these two poems? It does not lie in its graceful form and harmonious rhythm. It is the original symbol with deep thought. No wonder that Robert Frost has earned a place of distinction at home and abroad, as a major American poet.

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