Robert Frost: The Man and his work

‘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.’

‘All poetry is a reproduction of the tones of actual speech.’

‘There are two types of realists: 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 fulfilment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words.’

Task: In pairs, discuss one of these statements. What sort of man you might expect Frost to be from these first impressions?

‘Mending Wall’
Published in 1914, in the anthology North of Boston

This is one of Frost’s best-loved and most anthologised poems. Its homely philosophical tone can belie the more complex issues of tension between neighbours. In 1962, he accompanied the US Secretary of the Interior on a visit to Moscow. A first encounter with Soviet children, studying English, did not encourage the poet. But a few days later he read ‘Mending Wall’ at a Moscow literary evening. ‘Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,’ the poem begins. The Russians may not have understood all the finer points, but the idea quickly spread that Frost’s choice of the poem was probably related to the wall partitioning Berlin which had recently been erected. On September 7th, the poet had a long talk with Russian Prime Minister Khrushchev. He described the Soviet leader as ‘no fathead’; as smart, big and ‘not a coward.’ He added: ‘He’s not afraid of us and we’re not afraid of him.’ Subsequently, Frost reported that Mr. Khrushchev had said the United States was ‘too liberal to fight.’ It was this remark that caused a considerable stir in Washington. Frost had also been present at the inauguration of President Kennedy.

Tasks:

• Read through the poem and underline any words, phrases or lines of the poem that you either don’t understand or want to know more about.

• Identify all the diction in the poem associated with the idea of a wall or boundary of some sort. Make a list below:

• Frost makes extensive use of references to the natural world. Circle all words in the poem and discuss with a partner what the effect is.
'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 makes 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.”

Frost’s use of blank verse helps create a conversational style, yet also helps create a sense of drama. There is a clear personal voice, establishing a speculative tone. The mystery of ‘something’ is developed in the sense of movement of the earth, contrasted with the prosaic actions of hunters.

The rhythm of the farming calendar imposes an order which is different to the hunters’ careless, selfish approach.

He establishes a sense of order imposed on earth by the farmers, unlike the hunters. Regular seasonal tasks are the subject of many of Frost’s other poems.

The use of metaphors establishes size and shape exactly; the ‘spell’ introduces a note of whimsy not perhaps understood by the stolid neighbour. Ties in with idea of a ‘game’; is the tone dismissive or jocular?

What is the effect of the two voices? How would you characterise the two neighbours?

Task: In pairs, discuss the effect of the rhetorical questions.

Note the contrast between his whimsical fantasy of the elves and the solidity of his neighbour and references to the land.

What are the wider political and philosophical implications raised here?

In this image of a man from pre-history, uncivilised, we are shown mental and physical limitations.

What is the point of this poem - the story Frost tells or the wider implications?
‘The Black Cottage’

Also published in North of Boston, 1914, this is a narrative poem in which nothing particular happens, but a chain of ideas is set off by observation of a situation. It deals with the sacrifices people made to develop a young country, as well as aspects of belief. Once again, the form is blank verse, creating a sense of the natural rhythms of speech.

Task: Before you begin reading, consider the connotations of the title, and find images online of the vernacular architecture of New England.

We chanced in passing by that afternoon
To catch it in a sort of special picture
Among tar-banded ancient cherry trees,
Set well back from the road in rank lodged grass,
The little cottage we were speaking of,
A front with just a door between two windows,
Fresh painted by the shower a velvet black.
We paused, the minister and I, to look.
He made as if to hold it at arm’s length
Or put the leaves aside that framed it in.
“Pretty,” he said. “Come in. No one will care.”
The path was a vague parting in the grass
That led us to a weathered window-sill.
We pressed our faces to the pane. “You see,” he said,
“Everything’s as she left it when she died.
Her sons won’t sell the house or the things in it.
They say they mean to come and summer here
Where they were boys. They haven’t come this year.
They live so far away - one is out west
It will be hard for them to keep their word.
Anyway they won’t have the place disturbed.”
A buttoned hair-cloth lounge spread scrolling arms
Under a crayon portrait on the wall
Done sadly from an old daguerreotype.
“That was the father as he went to war.
She always, when she talked about war,
Sooner or later came and leaned, half knelt
Against the lounge beside it, though I doubt
If such unlifelike lines kept power to stir
Anything in her after all the years.
He fell at Gettysburg or Fredericksburg,
I ought to know – it makes a difference which:
Fredericksburg wasn’t Gettysburg, of course.
But what I’m getting to is how forsaken
A little cottage this has always seemed;
Since she went more than ever, but before –
I don’t mean altogether by the lives
That had gone out of it, the father first,
Then the two sons, till she was left alone.
(Nothing could draw her after those two sons.
She valued the considerate neglect
She had at some cost taught them after years.)
I mean by the world’s having passed it by --
As we almost got by this afternoon.
It always seems to me a sort of mark
To measure **how far fifty years have brought us**.
Why not sit down if you are in no haste?
These doorsteps seldom have a visitor.
The warping boards pull out their own old nails
With none to tread and put them in their place.
She had her own idea of things, the old lady.
And she liked talk. She had seen Garrison
And Whittier, and had her story of them.
One wasn’t long in learning that she thought
**Whatever else the Civil War was for**
It wasn’t just to keep the States together,
**Nor just to free the slaves**, though it did both.
She wouldn’t have believed those ends enough
To have given outright for them all she gave.
Her giving somehow touched **the principle**
That all men are created free and equal.
And to hear her quaint phrases – so removed
From the world’s view to-day of all those things.
That’s a hard mystery of Jefferson’s.
What did he mean? Of course the easy way
Is to decide it simply isn’t true.
It may not be. I heard a fellow say so.
But never mind, the **Welshman** got it planted
Where it will trouble us a thousand years.
Each age will have to reconsider it.
You couldn’t tell her what the West was saying,
And what the South to her serene belief.
She had some art of hearing and yet not
Hearing the latter wisdom of the world.
White was the only race she ever knew.
Black she had scarcely seen, and yellow never.
But how could they be made so very unlike
By the same hand working in the same stuff?
She had supposed the war decided that.
What are you going to do with such a person?
Strange how **such innocence** gets its own way.
I shouldn’t be surprised if in this world
It were **the force that would at last prevail**.
Do you know but for her there was a time
When **to please younger members of the church**,  
Or rather say **non-members in the church**,  
Whom we all have to think of nowadays,  
I would have changed the Creed a very little?
Not that she ever had to ask me not to;  
It never got so far as that; but the bare thought  
Of her old tremulous bonnet in the pew,  
And of her half asleep was too much for me.  
Why, I might wake her up and startle her.
It was the words ‘descended into Hades’  
That seemed too pagan to our liberal youth.

How do these details about the house help us to understand the old woman?

Garrison and Whittier were slavery abolitionists.

How are the woman’s political and philosophical beliefs explored here?

Do they connect with basic ideas of the American Constitution?

What do you take to be the Minister’s view of her ideas?

How does he use vagueness to avoid dealing with difficult concepts?

How might a modern American audience respond to these ideas?

Thomas Jefferson was the third President of the United States, and of Welsh extraction.

Her experience of travel and different races and ethnic groups was limited, but she had absolute belief in God.

How does her ‘innocence’ strike the Minister?

Why does the poet fail to make any comment?

Is this an early example of ‘political correctness’?

Did the old lady view change for change’s sake?
You know they suffered from a general onslaught. And well, if they weren’t true why keep right on Saying them like the heathen? We could drop them. Only – there was the bonnet in the pew. Such a phrase couldn’t have meant much to her. But suppose she had missed it from the Creed As a child misses the unsaid Good-night, And falls asleep with heartache--how should I feel? I’m just as glad she made me keep hands off, For, dear me, why abandon a belief Merely because it ceases to be true. Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt It will turn true again, for so it goes. Most of the change we think we see in life Is due to truths being in and out of favour. As I sit here, and oftentimes, I wish I could be monarch of a desert land I could devote and dedicate forever To the truths we keep coming back and back to. So desert it would have to be, so walled By mountain ranges half in summer snow, No one would covet it or think it worth The pains of conquering to force change on. Scattered oases where men dwelt, but mostly Sand dunes held loosely in tamarisk Blown over and over themselves in idleness. Sand grains should sugar in the natal dew The babe born to the desert, the sand storm Retard mid-waste my cowering caravans-- “There are bees in this wall.” He struck the clapboards, Fierce heads looked out; small bodies pivoted. We rose to go. Sunset blazed on the windows.

The movement of the poem is subtle, starting with:

1. desolation and memories of the past,
2. developing into recognition of the importance of belief - no matter how out-dated
3. through changing patterns of thought and philosophy,
4. to the final truth of the natural world: bees, though fierce, are co-operative and productive.

Their success and continuance as a colony depends on mutual support, work and sacrifice. They have clear roles and responsibilities, as do the rulers of a nation, church and state. These ideas are filtered through the old lady, the minister and the reporting voice - Frost himself makes no direct comment.

Tasks:

1. Identify and number the different sections of the poem,
2. Compare the narrative methods of ‘Mending Wall’ and ‘The Black Cottage’, making close reference to language, imagery and verse form. Write one paragraph under timed conditions.
‘After Apple-Picking’

The poem is complex in form: though a rhyme scheme can be discerned in the opening lines, it is irregular (abbacdedecf ...) and soon gives way to smaller patterns with triplets and couplets forming and disappearing like the echoes of the dreams the poet foresees. As with ‘Mending Wall’, it is not simply a poem about a regular farming task, but takes a philosophical view on the meaning of life and work. It expresses both a physical and mental response to exhausting activity.

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.

Consider the Biblical implications of apples. Frost’s concept of ‘ulteriority’, that things can have many meanings, a type of physical metaphor, is key throughout the poem.

How does he create a sense of exhaustion, of work done? Circle key words or techniques.

Trace the way the theme of sleep and dreaming runs throughout the poem; note how they are linked with ideas of winter and death. Look also for metaphors of change such as ice/glass.

How does the real experience of picking apples merge into a dream-like state?

What effects are created by the use of sense impressions?

Note the use of active verb forms to suggest continuous actions. Repetition and exaggeration are also key methods.

Consider the idea that expectations of life unfulfilled can lead to disappointment.

Can the apples be compared to ideas for poems?

Can ideas be recycled, like the cider apples?

Is it just sleep or a mental retreat/hibernation from creativity the poet craves?

What is the effect of referring to the woodchuck?
‘The Road Not Taken’

First published in the anthology Mountain Interval in 1916, the poem may be seen either as a brave assertion of the value of choice, or a world weary acknowledgement of the need to live with the results of such choice. Fate versus free will forms a key paradox within the poem. There is a very clear rhyme scheme to each verse, with nine syllables in each line; the steadiness perhaps suggests the journey through the woods/life at a steady walking pace.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, 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 travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Consider the symbolism of the ‘yellow’ wood (autumn?). There is a sense of regret in this stanza - identify how this is created:

How is the beauty of the natural world exploited in the poem?

Consider also the idea of freshness of opportunity, the effect of the exclamation, and a tone of regret or acceptance.

Is this doubt, self-awareness or self-delusion?

Ironic, as Frost recognises his own need to embellish a story. The poem ends on a simple statement; what does it reveal, regret or pride?

Task: Bearing in mind Frost’s use of the natural world to make wider philosophical points about life, compare his methods in ‘After Apple Picking’ and ‘The Road Not Taken’. Make a list below, remembering to consider language, imagery and verse form.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘After Apple-Picking’</th>
<th>‘The Road Not Taken’</th>
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‘Birches’

Also printed in Mountain Interval, the poem is in Frost’s characteristic blank verse, which allows a homely, folksy tone. It uses the swinging motion of the trees to raise questions about opposite concepts: truth v imagination; Earth v Heaven; the concrete v the spiritual; control v abandonment; flight v return.

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

But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm,
I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows –
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.
One by one he subdued his father’s trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer. He learned all there was
To learn about not launching out too soon
And so not carrying the tree away
Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.
So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It’s when I’m weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood

Physical beauty conveyed through precise description. Rather vague but affectionate references to the child-generic rather than particular. Note the use of onomatopoeia, alliteration and consonance to explore the climatic conditions and effects on trees.

Compare description of ice with that in ‘After Apple Picking’. Follow references to earth and heaven throughout the poem.

Sensual, youthful image to tie in with the exuberance of youth developed in the description of the boy. Highlight key diction.

Reference to ‘truth’ is both homely, and brings poet back on track - compare with the minister in ‘The Black Cottage’.

The boy’s isolation brings a type of innocence, yet there is also an erotic charge in Frost’s choice of imagery in this section, as the boy approaches maturity.

This suggests a job seen through with care, but the active verbs and sounds also suggest vigour and force.

The poet brings himself back into our awareness. Consider his use of sense impressions for pleasure and pain, and references to path/ life.

Does he truly wish for escape/ death or just temporary respite?
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig’s having lashed across it open.
I’d like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate wilfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth’s the right place for love:
I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.
I’d like to go by climbing a birch tree –
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Towards heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

**Task:** In the space below, write a list of techniques to summarise the ways in which Frost uses the imagery of trees and woods to comment on changes in human life.

e.g. Use of consonance, ‘cracks, ‘crazes’, ‘crystal’, and ‘crust’ contributes to the textural and sensory qualities of the descriptions of the trees.

How does the poet bring together beauty, movement and satisfaction in these closing lines?
‘Out, Out-’

The title of the poem provides an instant clue to its contents. It is a quotation from the end of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, where Macbeth learns of his wife’s death:

‘Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more.’

(Act V Scene 5, lines 23-26)

Macbeth has come to regard life as brief and meaningless, signifying nothing, and easily taken away. The life of the young boy in the poem is certainly too short, and snatched away from him in a split second. Perhaps more than any other of Frost’s poems, ‘Out, Out-’ represents the harsh reality of life in the countryside. Life was hard for many American farm workers in the early twentieth century, as families struggled to make enough money to cope financially. Though there was beauty in the landscape, as we have seen in other Frost poems, there was danger and death close at hand. It is useful to compare the children in this poem with the boy swinging birches in the previous poem. The form is blank verse, creating a dramatic narrative. In contrast to the previous poems, this poem seems to provide a self-contained story.

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.

Note the extended metaphor for the saw: what effect is created?

Identify and consider the effect of the following techniques:

- sensory descriptions
- repetition
- personification.

There is cruel emphasis on timing, and how childhood will be changed forever because of this.

Look at the words actually spoken in the poem - how do they contribute to the overall drama of the scene?

Consider the use of ‘hand’ in working terms (lend a hand, hired hand etc...) and explore what this event means in such an agricultural society.
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.

**Task:** Explore the way in which Frost presents childhood or farming in this poem.
Identify the ways in which this theme related to any other poems set for study.
Create a revision sheet on the theme you have chosen.

‘The Sound of Trees’

This poem also comes from the 1916 anthology, *Mountain Interval*. In contrast to many of the other poems in this selection, which have decasyllabic (10 syllable) lines, this one has lines of seven syllables, giving a restless, unfinished tone, suited to the speaker’s feeling that one day he will make a reckless choice. The trees can be seen as a metaphor for the restlessness of the human heart, anchored to earth yet yearning to be free. It invites comparison with ‘Birches’ and also later poems from the 1936 anthology *A Further Range*.

I wonder about the trees.
Why do we wish to bear
Forever the noise of these
More than another noise
So close to our dwelling place?
We suffer them by the day
Till we lose all measure of pace,
And fixity in our joys,
And acquire a listening air.
They are that that talks of going
But never gets away;
And that talks no less for knowing,
As it grows wiser and older,
That now it means to stay.

My feet tug at the floor
And my head sways to my shoulder
Sometimes when I watch trees sway,
From the window or the door.
I shall set forth for somewhere,
I shall make the reckless choice
Some day when they are in voice
And tossing so as to scare
The white clouds over them on.
I shall have less to say,
But I shall be gone.

A conversational opening, musing on the link between human habitation and trees, despite the discomfort they may bring. Note the use of words such as bear and suffer: what effects do these create?

Note the use of sibilants to emphasise the sound of trees. How does personification work to create tree ‘characters’? How can they be compared to the speaker?

Physical reaction seems to mirror the internal conflict of a man torn between a settled life, and yet wishing to move on. The repeated use of shall suggests a definite purpose, not yet acted upon.

Do the last lines refer to death, or moving on to a new phase of life?

Compare this poem with ‘A Leaf-Treader’ for ideas about passing, going away.
‘To E.T.’

This poem was dedicated to Edward Thomas, a British poet and volunteer soldier who died during the First World War. Thomas had been encouraged in his work by Frost, and they shared a love of the countryside, writing about the rhythms of rural life, and using natural imagery to explore the human condition. The poem ‘Aspens’, by Thomas, gives a flavour of his work, and can clearly be compared with ‘Birches’. Further examples of Thomas’s work can be found at www.poemhunter.com.

Annotate this poem carefully, identifying key themes and techniques.

‘Aspens’

All day and night, save winter, every weather,
Above the inn, the smithy and the shop,
The aspens at the cross-roads talk together
Of rain, until their last leaves fall from the top.

Out of the blacksmith’s cavern comes the ringing
Of hammer, shoe and anvil; out of the inn
The clink, the hum, the roar, the random singing -
The sounds that for these fifty years have been.

The whisper of the aspens is not drowned,
And over lightless pane and footless road,
Empty as sky, with every other sound
No ceasing, calls their ghosts from their abode,

A silent smithy, a silent inn, nor fails
In the bare moonlight or the thick-furred gloom,
In the tempest or the night of nightingales,
To turn the cross-roads to a ghostly room.

And it would be the same were no house near.
Over all sorts of weather, men, and times,
Aspens must shake their leaves and men may hear
But need not listen, more than to my rhymes.

Whatever wind blows, while they and I have leaves
Which cannot other than an aspen be
That ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves,
Or so men think who like a different tree.

Edward Thomas
‘To E.T.’

‘To E.T.’ was published in 1923, after Thomas’s death during the Battle of Arras in April 1917, and well after the end of the First World War.

I slumbered with your poems on my breast
Spread open as I dropped them half-read through
Like dove wings on a figure on a tomb
To see, if in a dream they brought of you,

I might not have the chance I missed in life
Through some delay, and call you to your face
First soldier, and then poet, and then both,
Who died a soldier-poet of your race.

I meant, you meant, that nothing should remain
Unsaid between us, brother, and this remained –
And one thing more that was not then to say:
The Victory for what it lost and gained.

You went to meet the shell’s embrace of fire
On Vimy Ridge; and when you fell that day
The war seemed over more for you than me,
But now for me than you – the other way.

How ever, though, for even me who knew
The foe thrust back unsafe beyond the Rhine,
If I was not to speak of it to you
And see you pleased once more with words of mine?

The poem has typical decasyllabic lines, with second/ fourth line rhymes. The image suggests the tomb of a European medieval knight killed in battle - as Thomas had been. The dream suggests intimacy, while the style is more formal, elegiac, than we usually expect with Frost.

Thomas’ experiences on the Front Line were different to the older man’s, safe in the USA, but Frost sees war as a destroyer of opportunities, cutting off the ‘paths’ each might have taken through life. The ideas are couched in complex language and obscure statements, unlike the usual run of his poetry.

What is the effect of this in showing us a poet and man suffering the loss of friend and fellow poet?

Is the final line more typical of Frost than the rest of the poem, in its lack of formality?

Task: Using ‘Aspens’, identify any similarities in terms of themes, language, imagery and verse form between Thomas and Frost.

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<th>Frost</th>
<th>Thomas</th>
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‘Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening’

This is one of Frost’s best known poems, and though many readers love it for its tranquil images, some critics have seen it as more troubling, suggesting its underlying theme is suicide or a desire for death. The title seems appropriate for a snapshot, but it is far more complex than its initial simplicity might suggest. It was published in 1923 in the anthology New Hampshire.

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 layout of quatrains with 8 syllables to a line has quite a complex rhyme scheme: track how the third line of each stanza links with the next.

What is the effect of rhyme and repetition in the final stanza?

How is the sense of stillness and isolation created?

Research the term ‘dark night of the soul’ and explore how it could be applied to this poem. What is the role of the horse: is it merely an element of the natural world, or does he recall the poet to real life? Is this about old age, or pausing for time out of life’s duties?

Consider the final stanza - is it about the human attraction to beauty, danger and the unknown, or about the need to run away, to seek oblivion?
'Two Look at Two'

This poem is set in the familiar landscape of New Hampshire, published in the same anthology as 'Stopping by Woods'. The woodland, paths and walls act almost as a stage set, as a man and woman are forced to consider the importance of their relationship. It concludes with a kind of epiphany (a moment of sudden insight) when the true meaning of their relationship is made clear. You might find it helpful to sketch the scene, to place people and animals in correct correlation. Look also for the three great pausing points, to understand how the creatures help the young couple to their epiphany.

Love and forgetting might have carried them
A little further up the mountain side
With night so near, but not much further up.
They must have halted soon in any case
With thoughts of a path back, how rough it was
With rock and washout, and unsafe in darkness;
When they were halted by a tumbled wall
With barbed-wire binding. They stood facing this,
Spending what onward impulse they still had
In one last look the way they must not go,

On up the failing path, where, if a stone
Or earthslide moved at night, it moved itself;
No footstep moved it. ‘This is all,’ they sighed,
Good-night to woods.’ But not so; there was more.
A doe from round a spruce stood looking at them
Across the wall, as near the wall as they.
She saw them in their field, they her in hers.
The difficulty of seeing what stood still,
Like some up-ended boulder split in two,
Was in her clouded eyes; they saw no fear there.
She seemed to think that two thus they were safe.
Then, as if they were something that, though strange,
She could not trouble her mind with too long,
She sighed and passed unscared along the wall.
‘This, then, is all. What more is there to ask?’
But no, not yet. A snort to bid them wait.
A buck from round the spruce stood looking at them

Across the wall as near the wall as they.
This was an antlered buck of lusty nostril,
Not the same doe come back into her place.
He viewed them quizzically with jerks of head,
As if to ask, ‘Why don’t you make some motion? Or give some sign of life? Because you can’t.
I doubt if you’re as living as you look.’
Thus till he had them almost feeling dared
To stretch a proffering hand – and a spell-breaking.
Then he too passed unscared along the wall.

Blank verse provides a steady rhythm to the dramatic narrative. The young couple are isolated through love and distance.

How does Frost establish a sense of danger and the limits we may set ourselves?

How are other poems echoed in the symbols of wall and path?

Consider Adam and Eve parallels - and compare with ‘Stopping by Woods’.

What is the effect of the simile describing the couple through the doe’s eyes?

The question in quotation marks - introduces the second great pause.

Consider the following techniques and their effect:
- the emphasis on the mirror image
- how male/ female links are established and underscored
- the use of anthropomorphism.

The human hand being offered in friendship suggests the epiphany of understanding of the link between mankind and the natural world. However, their movement breaks the spell of the moment; they wait no more, certain they have experienced an unprecedented moment of being at one with nature.
Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from. 'This must be all.' It was all. Still they stood, A great wave from it going over them, As if the earth in one unlooked-for favour Had made them certain earth returned their love.

**Task:** In groups, compare the themes, language and imagery of this poem with either ‘Mending Wall’ or ‘The Road Not Taken’, focusing on how Frost explores mankind’s relationship with nature.

**‘Gathering Leaves’**

*Published in the anthology New Hampshire, this poem shows us a man nearing 50 years of age, still actively involved with the work of the seasons. It may be compared effectively with ‘After Apple Picking’ for its close focus on the physical aspects of a routine task, while also providing some philosophical comment on the meaning of life and work.*

Spades take up leaves No better than spoons, And bags full of leaves Are light as balloons.

I make a great noise Of rustling all day Like rabbit and deer Running away.

But the mountains I raise Elude my embrace, Flowing over my arms And into my face.

I may load and unload Again and again Till I fill the whole shed, And what have I then?

Next to nothing for weight, And since they grew duller From contact with earth, Next to nothing for color.

Next to nothing for use. But a crop is a crop, And who's to say where The harvest shall stop?

The quick movement of the lines with five syllables suggest the speed needed to perform the task - even if rather ineffectually. The simile provides a whimsical approach.

The present tense makes this active, but the creatures he compares himself to are shy and fleeting.

What is the effect created?

Natural images continue, but with a sense of desperation, perhaps symbolising the writer’s inability to grasp a meaning or opportunity?

The effort seems endless, with repetition to emphasise the nature of the task.

He questions the value of his harvest - literally the leaves - but perhaps also his ideas as a poet?

The final question suggests some element of hope - we can never know what might be useful, like the cider apples in ‘Apple Picking’.

**Task:** Compare this poem with either ‘After Apple Picking’ or ‘A Leaf-Treader’. How does Frost use manual labour to illustrate aspects of life and belief? Make notes and be prepared to share your ideas in class.
‘Desert Places’

Printed in A Further Range in 1936, this poem shows an older Frost battling his own demons after the suicide of Earnest Hemingway who feared he had nothing more to say as a writer. There is a sense of urgency, almost of danger, in the opening line which is in stark contrast to ‘Stopping by Woods’.

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it - it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less -
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars - on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

The speed and urgency suggests travel by car rather than the horse and buggy of ‘Stopping by Woods’. He does not stop, seeming rather forced to go on, to exist, rather than stepping back.

How is the sense of isolation created?

What is the effect of repetition in the 3rd stanza?

Normal fears are not for him: what is most frightening is lack of substance in himself; personal doubt; difficulty in relationships; lack of inspiration. In the final stanza, unstressed (or feminine) endings betray a lack of confidence, a weakness or lack of drive.

Task: Frost uses journeys as symbols in this poem. In pairs, find another poem in the selection which refers to the idea of a journey, and create a visual map to represent these two poetic journeys, with quotes to support your ideas.

‘A Leaf Treader’

Published in the anthology A Further Range in 1936, this poem shows us a man in his 60s, at a time when this would be considered much older than it is today. Once more, we see him confronting the seasonal chores of the countryside, but with growing awareness of his frailty. The lines are considerably longer than usual in his poems, particularly when compared to ‘Gathering Leaves’. This creates the sense of effort, the weakness of approaching old age, and a weariness in combat with the seasons. The themes of beauty and decay, destruction and survival, life and death, can be seen elsewhere in his work. It concludes with the speaker marshalling his life force to beat the march of time.

I have been treading on leaves all day until I am autumn-tired.
God knows all the color and form of leaves I have trodden on and mired.
Perhaps I have put forth too much strength and been too fierce from fear.
I have safely trodden underfoot the leaves of another year.

All summer long they were overhead, more lifted up than I.
To come to their final place in earth they had to pass me by.
All summer long I thought I heard them threatening under their breath.
And when they came it seemed with a will to carry me with them to death.

They spoke to the fugitive in my heart as if it were leaf to leaf.
They tapped at my eyelids and touched my lips with an invitation to grief.
But it was no reason I had to go because they had to go.
Now up, my knee, to keep on top of another year of snow.

Identify the following and their effect:
- verbs denoting effort
- variety in the natural world
- the process of decay and disintegration
- alliteration

Compare with ‘The Sound of Trees’ for the idea of restlessness.

Why does he speak to his limbs?

Why is the last reference to snow, not leaves?
‘Neither Out Far Nor In Deep’

Also printed in A Further Range, this poem is unusual for its formal, rigid rhyme scheme and end-stopped lines. It seems to be a reflection on the nature of humanity and our refusal to be limited, or perhaps how we are forced to face our physical limits while our spirits still crave for more. Ian Hamilton in Robert Frost: Selected Poems (p.21) describes the world of the poem thus:

‘A friendless realm… It is difficult to imagine anything more terminally desolate than that. And yet the strain, the edginess, the intelligence of the poem derive really from a whole-hearted resistance to the terminal - a yearning for the conditions to be otherwise.’

Frost’s biographer, Jeffrey Meyers, interprets the poem (Robert Frost, A Biography p. 215) in these terms:

‘It mocks Frost’s imperceptive critics, who turn their back on the reality of the land and look pointlessly at the sea all day. They cannot either look out far to see the whole design of his work, nor in deep to scrutinise the exact details… The manifest limitations of his dull-witted critics, he says, never prevented them from searching for meanings in his verse, and their stupidity was never a bar to any watch they keep.’

What is your interpretation of the poem? Annotate it with your ideas:

The people along the sand
All turn and look one way.
They turn their back on the land.
They look at the sea all day.

As long as it takes to pass
A ship keeps raising its hull;
The wetter ground like glass
Reflects a standing gull.

The land may vary more;
But wherever the truth may be -
The water comes ashore,
And the people look at the sea.

They cannot look out far.
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?

The poet appears as detached observer: as he has previously described animals, here he focuses on humans.

What is implied by turning one’s back?

Note the precision of the images and the sense of effort in the ship - humans in an alien environment.

Is the poet considering essential, unchanging truths, or the desire to understand the mysteries of nature?

Repetition (a form of syntactical parallelism) in the final stanza emphasises limits humans strive against.

What is the effect of closing with a question?
'There are Roughly Zones'

The poem is written in lines of roughly equal length, between 10 and 12 syllables, and there is a fairly regular rhyme scheme, but extra rhymes at lines 8 and 20 disrupt the pattern, specifically at the points where he is discussing the nature of humans to push the limits of the natural world, to disrupt, literally, the nature of things. This creates a sense of unease in the poem which mirrors the storm raging outside. The tone is in places down-to-earth, but the use of the tree as metaphor changes to something more positive, the symbol of man’s desire not to be limited.

We sit indoors and talk of the cold outside.  
And every gust that gathers strength and heaves  
Is a threat to the house. But the house has long been tried.  
We think of the tree. If it never again has leaves,  
We’ll know, we say, that this was the night it died.  
It is very far north, we admit, to have brought the peach.

What comes over a man, is it soul or mind -  
That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?  
You would say his ambition was to extend the reach  
Clear to the Arctic of every living kind.  
Why is his nature forever so hard to teach  
That though there is no fixed line between wrong and right,  
There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed?  
There is nothing much we can do for the tree tonight,  
But we can’t help feeling more than a little betrayed  
That the northwest wind should rise to such a height  
Just when the cold went down so many below.  
The tree has no leaves and may never have them again.  
We must wait till some months hence in the spring to know.  
But if it is destined never again to grow,  
It can blame this limitless trait in the hearts of men.

How are inner and outer states of being presented?  
Look at the way house and tree are connected to the speaker, and how alliteration and choice of verb build tension. A sense of responsibility for the peach tree is shown through use of parentheses.

Questions highlight the reflective nature of the poem, offset by the clear statement about ambition to change the rules. Restless humanity can cause disaster - here to the tree. This line suggests a fatalistic view of the tree’s chances, but notion of betrayal shows man will blame nature rather than himself.

Task: In this poem, Frost presents man’s desire to challenge nature and resist confinement. Can you think of any other poems which share these ideas? Make a list below:
Extension and revision tasks

These are designed to extend your understanding of the poems and Frost’s work and help you prepare for the exams.

Practice essay questions:

Here are three suggestions for ways to begin your essay writing exam preparation:

- **Write an essay plan response. (10-15 mins)**
  This should include a minimum of 4 paragraphs, each with 4 points of textual evidence.

- **Timed paragraph writing (10-15 mins)**
  Timed paragraph writing is a brilliant way to develop exam technique. Take any essay question and try writing a paragraph with at least 4 points of textual evidence.

- **Timed essay writing**
  Always begin with a plan at the beginning, and time yourself to make sure you only take as long as your exam board allows for each question.

Sample essay questions:

1. ‘The best Frost is the dark Frost.’ Through your reading of at least four of Frost’s poems, explore this view.

2. Read *The Death of the Hired Man* and compare the methods and ideas in that poem with two or more in the selection set for study.

3. Take at least three poems from different periods of Frost’s work, and explore any changes or similarities in style or subject matter. Can this be seen as development, or maturity?

Revision tasks

1. Create your own ‘Frostian’ poetry glossary, listing all the techniques (with definitions) that you associate with his poems.

2. Recall revision:
   - **Without looking at the collection**, brainstorm all the themes you can think of, and create your own thematic map, writing down the names of relevant poems if you can remember. Spend at least ten minutes doing this - don’t be tempted to look at your notes.
   - Now return to the collection and **using a different coloured pen**, add anything (themes, poems etc.) you forgot. These are the only themes and poems that you should revise - you’ve proved that remember the rest!

3. Find out about Frost’s career, including his live poetry readings. Why do you think he is America’s favourite poet?

Further help: