

Selected Poetry

by Robert Frost

COMMON CORE

RL 1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain. **RL 4** Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. **RL 6** Analyze a case in which grasping point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., irony or understatement).

DID YOU KNOW?

Robert Frost . . .

- was unable to read a poem at John F. Kennedy's inauguration because of bright sunlight and so recited one from memory.
- won 44 honorary degrees from prestigious universities but never earned a college degree himself.

Meet the Author

Robert Frost 1874–1963

Robert Frost once remarked that his life's goal was to write "a few poems it will be hard to get rid of." Undoubtedly, he succeeded. Frost's best poems lodge themselves in the reader's imagination and refuse to go away. As a result, Frost is one of the most beloved American poets.

Awakening to Poetry Although Frost is associated with rural New England, he spent his first 11 years in San Francisco. Following his father's death in 1885, Frost's mother brought her two children east, eventually settling in the industrial city of Lawrence, Massachusetts. As a boy, Frost developed a passion for baseball and poetry. By the time he graduated from high school, he knew he would be a poet.

Aimless Years Frost's early manhood was nonetheless filled with change. He enrolled at both Dartmouth College and Harvard University but did not remain at either place, tiring of the routine of college life. For several years he drifted working as a mill hand, a school teacher, and a reporter. One stabilizing event in his life was his marriage in 1895 to Elinor White, his high school sweetheart.

Voice of New England In 1900, Frost abandoned the indoor life of teaching for the outdoor life of farming. During the day Frost worked his poultry farm, and at night he wrote. The 11 years Frost spent farming were some of his most creative. Inspired by the rugged New Hampshire countryside and its plain-spoken inhabitants, Frost wrote poems that probed the mysteries of nature and the human heart.

Literary Acclaim At the age of 38, Frost moved his family to England, where he could "write and be poor." Less than two months later, a London publisher accepted the manuscript of *A Boy's Will* (1913) for publication. By the time Frost returned to the United States in 1915, he was hailed as a leading American poet.

In 1924, Frost's collection *New Hampshire* won a Pulitzer Prize, the first of four that he would receive. His public success, however, was overshadowed by personal tragedy. Between 1934 and 1940, Frost lost a daughter, his wife, and a son; another daughter was institutionalized for mental illness. As a result, his later poems often convey a bleak outlook on life.

Author Online

Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HML11-936

● TEXT ANALYSIS: FROST'S STYLE

Some of Robert Frost's poems seem so simple, yet they move people deeply. Why? It certainly has something to do with his powerful choice of theme and subject matter, but it's also a matter of his unique **style**—the distinctive way in which he uses words and poetic devices. For one thing, he makes skillful use of traditional rhyme, meter, and stanza form. He also uses other elements in a distinctive way.

- **Diction**—word choice and syntax, or word order
- **Imagery**—the descriptive phrases that appeal to the senses
- **Mood**—the overall feeling or atmosphere that a writer creates for the reader (often created with imagery)

Notice these elements in the opening lines of “Out, Out—”:

*The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.*

As you read these poems by Frost, pay close attention to his diction and his use of imagery and mood.

● READING SKILL: RECOGNIZE AMBIGUITY

Many people approach poems like riddles; they are certain that the true meaning must lie in a single interpretation. This approach fails to take into account the **ambiguity** that lends richness and beauty to so many poems. Literature of the **modernist** movement often lends itself to more than one meaning; it is open to various, even opposing, interpretations, as in the opening lines of “Nothing Gold Can Stay.”

*Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.*

Are these lines referring to a golden hue of green, or are they making the point that nature's first green is precious, like gold? You don't have to choose between these meanings; skilled readers of poetry recognize ambiguity and live with it, even enjoy it, as they read and consider a poem. As you read, record different interpretations of lines from each poem.

<i>“Acquainted with the Night”</i>	<i>“Nothing Gold Can Stay”</i>	<i>“Out, Out—”</i>
	lines 1–2: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• golden shade of green• green is precious, like gold	

What does it mean to be ALONE?

Does solitude make you lonely? Or is it precious to you? It's a powerful idea, being alone. Some people can't get enough of it, and others have it in painful abundance. In any event, it offers opportunity for reflection. In “Acquainted with the Night,” Robert Frost explores one person's emotional reaction to being alone.

QUICKWRITE What images and feelings does the word *solitude* evoke in you? Write a short poem describing a moment alone.



Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

Acquainted with the Night

Robert Frost

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
5 I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

10 But not to call me back or say good-by; **A**
And further still at an unearthly height
One luminary¹ clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night. **B**

THEME

Why do some people become depressed? What does it mean to feel depressed about one's life? This is a question that poets, novelists, and playwrights have always thought about. For example, the recent movie *The Hours* (2002) explores Virginia Woolf's battle with depression. Can you think of any other films, novels, or plays that touch on this same theme?

Analyze Visuals ►

Notice the shadowy human figures in relation to other objects in the photograph. What mood is established by the **composition**, or arrangement of shapes? How do the figures appear in relation to each other? Explain.

A FROST'S STYLE

Reread lines 1–10. How does the poet's use of parallel structure and rhyme contribute to the poem's developing mood? Explain your answer.

B RECOGNIZE AMBIGUITY

Reread lines 11–14. Identify at least two possible meanings of “the time was neither wrong nor right.” What does this proclamation suggest about the “luminary clock”? Explain.

1. **luminary**: giving off light.



Nothing Gold Can Stay

Robert Frost

- Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
5 Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden¹ sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay. ©

1. **Eden:** the biblical Garden of Eden, from which Adam and Eve were expelled for disobeying God.



Haystacks and Barn (1909), George Wesley Bellows. Oil on canvas, 56.5 cm × 71.4 cm. © Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas/Bridgeman Art Library.

© FROST'S STYLE

What is the **mood** of this poem? Identify the **diction** or **imagery** that most strongly establishes this mood for you.

Text Analysis

1. **Clarify** What does the speaker of the first poem mean when he says he's been "acquainted with the night"?
2. **Summarize** What does the speaker of "Acquainted with the Night" see and hear on his walk?
3. **Interpret Analogies** In "Nothing Gold Can Stay," how is the fate of a leaf similar to that of the Garden of Eden?

“Out, Out—”

Robert Frost

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
5 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. **D**
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
10 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,
15 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! **E**
The boy’s first outcry was a rueful¹ laugh,
20 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—
25 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.²
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
30 And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs. **F**

1. **rueful**: expressing sorrow or regret.

2. **ether**: a liquid used as an anesthetic. Its fumes cause unconsciousness when deeply inhaled.

D FROST’S STYLE

Frost’s title is taken from a famous passage in Shakespeare—the words spoken by Macbeth upon news of his wife’s death. Vivid **images** in the original passage convey a **mood** of heavy gloom that can be traced from the classical dramas of ancient Greece to present-day horror and action movies. Reread lines 1–8. What kind of mood do Frost’s images convey? Why might he have chosen Macbeth’s grief-stricken words as his title?

E FROST’S STYLE

Reread lines 13–18. What does the **diction** in these lines suggest about the accidental meeting of the saw and the hand? Explain the **irony** in these lines.

F RECOGNIZE AMBIGUITY

Identify the ambiguity in the last two lines of the poem. What does their **understatement** and lack of sentiment suggest about the survivors and their attitude toward the boy’s death?

Comprehension

1. **Clarify** What is the setting, including the time of day, of “Out, Out—”?
2. **Summarize** What happens to the boy?

Text Analysis

3. **Identify Rhymes** Examine the pairs of rhyming words in “Nothing Gold Can Stay.” What ideas do the rhymes help Frost convey about the nature of beauty?
4. **Examine Theme** “Out, Out—” provides a portrait of **solitude** even among family. Identify words and phrases in which Frost suggests the solitude of these characters in the face of tragedy. What theme emerges about human relationships?
5. **Interpret Allusion** The title of “Out, Out—” is an **allusion**, or indirect reference to a well-known person, place, or literary work—in this case, a famous speech in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (Act Five, Scene 5). How does the following quotation from *Macbeth* color your sense of Frost’s poem?

... 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.

6. **Analyze Frost’s Style** Identify several lines in any one of the three poems where Frost’s **diction**, his use of **imagery**, and/or **mood** is particularly striking. Explain why you find it noteworthy and how Frost’s style helps deliver the poem’s message.
7. **Evaluate Ambiguity** Consult the chart in which you recorded different interpretations as you read. Identify the ambiguity that you found the most puzzling, contradictory, or profound. In your opinion, what does the ambiguity add to each poem? Explain.

Text Criticism

8. **Critical Interpretation** The critic and scholar Lionel Trilling hailed Frost for his “representation of the terrible actualities of life in a new way.” Apply this comment to the three Frost poems you have just read. What are the “terrible actualities of life” in each poem? What might be considered “new” or unusual about Frost’s portrayal of these realities? Explain.

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What does it mean to be **ALONE**?

In “Acquainted with the Night,” does the speaker seem to enjoy his solitude or long for companionship? Do you enjoy being alone? Explain.