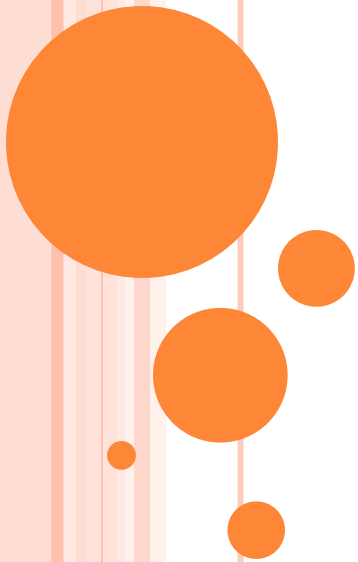


# ROBERT FROST (1874-1963)



"I never go down the shoreline [city in King  
County, Washington] to New York without  
watching the birches to see if they  
live up to what I say about them in  
the poem."

Robert Frost



Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant [American journalist and  
writer]

Describes – the way in which Robert Frost came  
to write "Birches"



"As for the poet, 'who never saw New  
England as clearly as when he was in Old  
England,' he could not tie down his  
creative moments.



It was about this time, early in 1914, while tramping the muddy yard at the Bungalow [West Midlands], that he suddenly; he says, wrote a new poem, not to be included in *North of Boston*.



This was the now so famous and beloved  
'Birches,' with its cold and crystal  
memories of another kind of wintry world."



in "Birches," even though Frost saw New England most clearly when he was in Old England, he re-viewed his wintry New England scene through **Thoreauvian eyes**"

- *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance* George Monteiro 100



Henry David Thoreau's description anticipates

Frost's handling of imagery-





- “I love Nature partly *because* she is not man, but a retreat from him. None of his institutions control or pervade her. There a different kind of right prevails. In her midst I can be glad with an entire gladness...



- If this world were all man, I could not stretch myself, I should lose all hope. He is constraint, she is freedom to me. He makes me wish for another world. She makes me content with this. . . .



○ Man, man is the devil,

The source of evil . .



- I have a room all to myself; it is nature. It is a place beyond the jurisdiction of human governments. . . .

- Henry David Thoreau







# BIOGRAPHY

- Robert Frost was born on March 26, 1874  
San Francisco
- **Parents** - William Prescott Frost Jr., and  
Isabelle Moodie.



# BIOGRAPHY

- father **died -tuberculosis** - Frost was eleven years old
- he moved with his mother and sister to Lawrence, Massachusetts.
- He **became interested** in reading and writing poetry during his high school years in Lawrence.





- Frost drifted through a string of occupations teacher, cobbler, and editor



- first published poem, “My Butterfly” November 8, 1894-
- in the New York newspaper *The Independent*.



- In 1895, Frost married Elinor Miriam
- She was a major inspiration for his poetry until her death in 1938
- The couple moved to England in 1912
- Frost met contemporary British poets and was influenced –
- Edward Thomas, Rupert Brooke, and Robert Graves

- While in England, Frost also established friendship with the poet Ezra Pound ----
- helped to promote and publish his work.



- By the time Frost returned to the United States in 1915
- published two full-length collections, *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*
- Established - reputation



- By the 1920s, he was the **most celebrated poet in America**, and with each new book—
- *New Hampshire*
- *A Further Range*
- *Steeple Bush*
- *In the Clearing* — his **fame and honours increased.**



- **Frost's personal life was filled with tragedy.**
- His wife Elinor died in 1938
- three of his children also died before him
- a son committed suicide.



- He also saw his sister and one of his daughters institutionalized for mental illness.
- Frost - suffered from bouts of depression.





## FROST AS A POET

- His **popularity is unmatched** in the annals of American poetry
- by the end of his life he had **achieved the iconic status of living legend**
- initially **published in England** before it was published in America.



## FROST AS A POET

- wrote about **familiar subjects**- recognizable people - and daily activities.
- **influenced by the emotions** and events of everyday life
- highly regarded for his **realistic depictions** of rural life
- command of **American colloquial speech**



- Settings - rural life in New England in the early twentieth century
- He used them to examine complex social and philosophical themes
- His works are associated with the life and landscape of New England.

○



- Frost is a modern poet with regard to his command on colloquial speech and
- psychological complexity of his portraits
- his work is infused with layers of ambiguity and irony.



- significant because of the amount of **autobiographical material** it contains
- Frost was not a happy man
- he suffered from serious bouts of **depression and anxiety** throughout his life



- never convinced that his poetry was truly worthwhile
- obsessive desire to receive a Nobel Prize
- 



- He suffered through the **untimely deaths** of his father, mother, and sister, as well as four of his six children and his beloved wife
- **contributed to the melancholic mentality** that appears in much of Frost's work.



- Received four Pulitzer Prizes for Poetry.
- became one of America's rare "public literary figures, almost an artistic institution."
- awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in 1960 for his poetical works.





# THEMES

## Nature

- Frost places a great deal of importance on Nature in all of his collections.



# THEMES

- presents the **natural world** as one that **inspires deep metaphysical thought** in the individuals who are exposed to it
- "*Birches*" and "*The Sound of Trees*"



## THEMES

- For Frost, **Nature** is not simply a background for poetry, but rather a **central character** in his works



## THEMES

- Birches consists of a series of beautiful pictures of **nature and of man-**
- The swinging of the birches tossed by the ice storms, and looked on at by a boy, in the early hours of the day, till
- .... 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.



- It is a striking picture of **nature and of man** – an imagery that combines both fact and fancy



- The second picture in the poem – the trees with “their trunks arching in the woods” –
- It is compared to “...girls on hands and knees that throw their hair  
Before them over their heads to dry in  
the sun”.



# Communication

- Communication, or the lack thereof, appears as a significant theme
- Frost presents it as the **only possible escape** from isolation and despair.



# Communication

- each character speaks clearly to the reader, but neither is able to understand the other
- Frost explores this theme in “*Acquainted with the Night*” and “*Home Burial*”





# Everyday Life

- Frost is very interested in the **activities of everyday life** - it is this side of humanity that is the most "real" to him.



# Everyday Life

- emphasis on everyday life allows him to communicate with his readers more clearly
- they can empathize with the struggles and emotions that are expressed in his poems and come to a greater understanding of "Truth" themselves



## Isolation of the Individual

- The majority of the characters in Frost's poems are isolated in one way or another
- Frost suggests that this isolation can be avoided by interactions with other members of society



## Duty

- Duty is a very important value in the rural communities of New England-
- Frost employs it as one of the primary themes of his poetry.



- Frost describes **conflicts between desire and duty** –
- in order to support his family, **a farmer must acknowledge his responsibilities** rather than **indulge in his personal desires.**



- This conflict is particularly clear in "*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*,"
- the narrator expresses his wish to stay in the woods and watch the snow continue to fall.



- he is unable to deny his obligation to his family and his community
- he cannot remain in the woods because of his "promises to keep," and so he continues on his way



# Rationality versus Imagination

- It is similar to the theme of duty, the two cannot exist simultaneously
- The **adults in Frost's poetry** generally maintain their rationality as a burden of duty





## Rationality versus Imagination

- In "Birches," the narrator wishes that he could climb a birch tree as he did in his childhood and leave the rational world behind, if only for a moment.



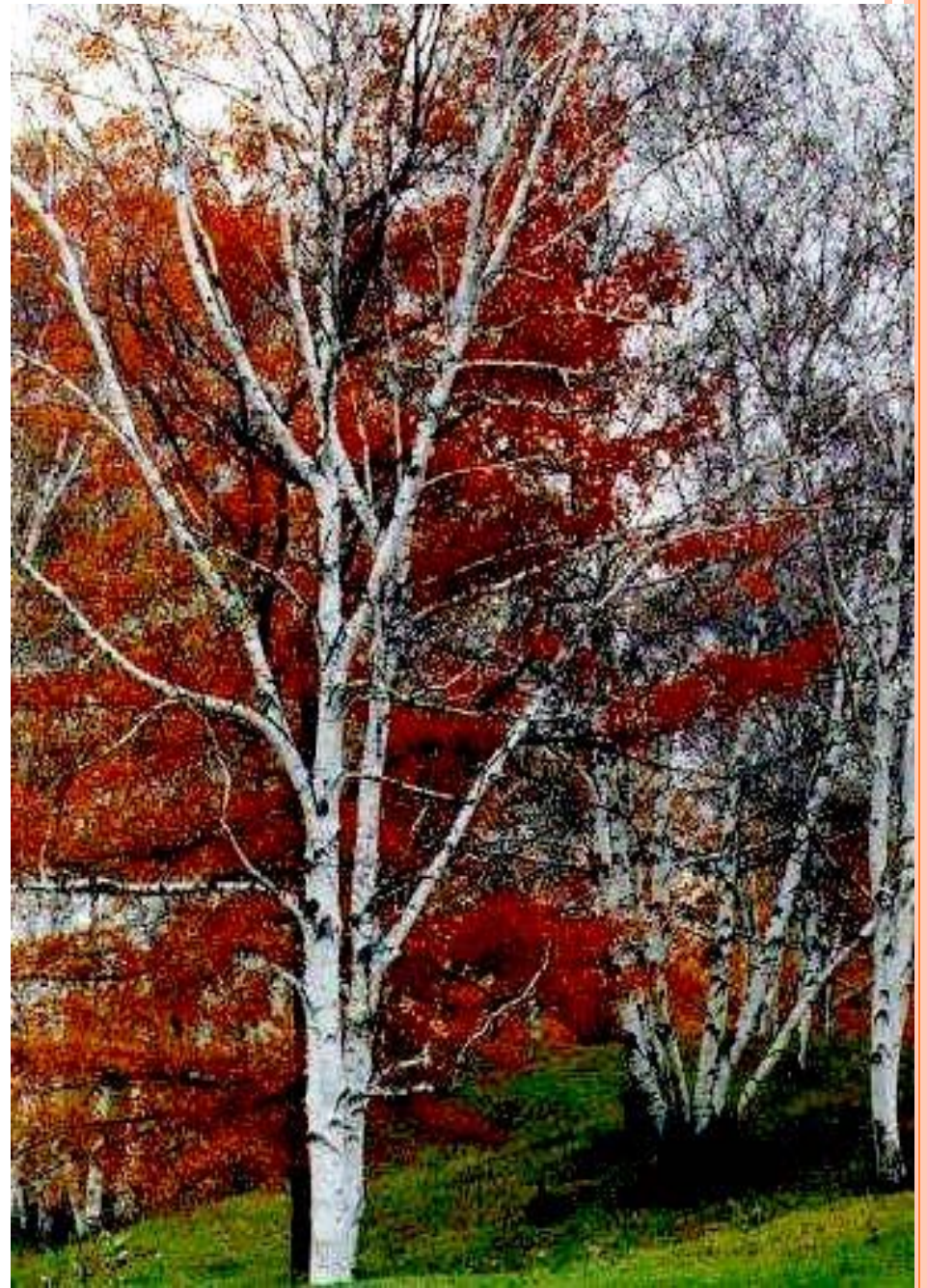
- This ability to escape rationality and indulge in the liberation of imagination is limited to the years of childhood.



- After reaching **adulthood**, the traditions of New England life **require strict rationality** and an **acceptance of responsibility**.



# BIRCHES





- The silver birch  
with its  
characteristic white  
bark



- Birches-
- poet is imagining a life – surrounded by harshness- wants to move from life-



- *Birches* - longing of the author- to  
escape from the harness of the reality
- *ode to the West wind* – he wants to  
escape from the maladies



# THEMES

- **Swinging birch tree –  
a transcendent escape**





The movement into transcendence

is a **movement into a realm of radical**

**imaginative freedom** – immense possibilities



The poem moves from **naturalistic description to a fanciful explanation** of why the birches are bowed

to a **philosophical exploration of a person's existence in the world.**



# Binary opposites:

- Earth V.S. Heaven
- Boy V.S. Man
- Reality V.S. Transcendence



- The tension between **what has actually happened**
- and **what the poet would like to have happened**
- **between the real world** and the **world of the imagination** –
- Tension runs - throughout poetry - philosophical dimension



Transcendental phase of redemptive  
consciousness of a person –

a game that one plays alone in life.



The **upward swinging** of the boy becomes an **emblem for imagination's** swing away from the **tangled, dark wood**; a swing away from the "straighter, darker trees";

a **swing into the absolute freedom of isolation**, the severing (break) of all "considerations."



- The **downward movement** of **redemptive imagination** to earth
- is a **movement into community, engagement, love....**
- the games that two play together:



○ I'd like to get away from earth awhile  
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. 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,  
*Toward* 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.





- One really has no choice but to be a swinger of birches.

When **transcendence** of a person is about  
to be complete —

a game that one plays alone in life.



- then, at that moment,, the blessed pull of the earth is felt again
- The **downward movement** of **redemptive imagination** to earth
- 
- the games that two play together



○ “That would be good both going and coming back”



- C. Day Lewis-
- “the upward and downward movement of the rhythm fully reflects the going up and coming down of the swinger of birches...”



- Mr. Bower also thinks that the poem has a perfect rhythmic form:
- “ The life of the poem, ever fresh, runs through the unbroken span of the verse, which will not be stopped until the end, and which carries the voice through a series of upward and downward swings, re-enacting the movement of thought”



- The **anguish of existence** and the **burning problems confronting man** make him sigh for a brief respite
- The **poet longs to be a swinger of the birches** once again, because he is “weary of considerations, and life is too much like a pathless wood”



- Thus he says “ I’d like to get away from earth awhile and then come to it and begin over”.



- But his weariness is not a lasting mood –
- His nostalgia longing for a get-away from the excessive cares of life is **only a brief one.**





- He immediately adds – no fate should misunderstand his words and snatch him away from the surface of the earth never to return, for ...
- Earth's the right place for love, I don't know where it's likely to go better.



- The poem concludes on a note of affirmation a **tone of robust optimism**.
- The poet is **strengthened in his faith** in goodness of life, in the feeling that **“all is well with the world”** as long as there is the capacity to love.



- According to C Day Lewis –
- “This is a poem in which observation and reminiscence, realism and fancy, the light tone and the serious are perfectly blended”



Aug 2014

“In three words I  
can sum up  
everything I've  
learned about life:  
it goes on.” ~Robert Frost

InspirationBoost.com



○ “That would be good both going and coming back”

