Robert Frost

by Peter Cash



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Robert Frost [1874 – 1963]

by
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BOOKS TO READ
ed. Ian Hamilton*, Robert Frost: Selected Poems* (Penguin, 1973)
ed. Adrian Barlow, *Robert Frost: Selected Poems* (Oxford, 1998)
Jay Parini, *Robert Frost: A Life* (Heinemann, 1999).

FURTHER READING
John Clare: *Selected Poems* (Penguin, 1990)
Edward Thomas: *Selected Poems* (Faber, 1964)
D. H. Lawrence: *Selected Poetry* (Routledge, 1990)
Ted Hughes: *New Selected Poems* 1957-1994 (Faber, 1995)

SCOPE OF TOPIC
Robert Frost is the poet of rural America. In some poems, he sets out to demonstrate the close inter-relationship between man and nature/between the human and the non-human worlds; in **Two Look at Two**, two walkers (a man and a woman) encounter two deer (a buck and a doe) and see themselves replicated in a mirror-image; without hesitation, they conclude that 'earth returned their love'. In these poems, he studies the natural world and finds in its various activities metaphors for common human experiences.

In other poems, Frost writes in the tradition of the English nature-poets – such as John Clare and D. H. Lawrence – who maintain, on the contrary, that man is an alien creature in a non-human world. In **Desert Places** and **The Most of It**, Frost finds in the natural world metaphors for this alienation, this sense of existential loneliness: in other words, he maintains that earth does not return man's love.

NOTES
In **Mowing**, written in 1913, Frost finds in his mowing of a field a metaphor for the human experience of living and dying. In the octave of this sonnet, he explains that, as he is mowing the grass, his scythe sounds as if it is whispering a message to him: 'What was it it whispered?' In the sestet, he sets about answering this question. The answer is a sinister one:

> Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live and is full of misery. He cometh up and is cut down, like a flower.

Literally, Frost's 'long scythe' is an implement which has cut down 'the feeble-pointed spikes of flowers'; metaphorically, it represents the sweeping movement of time which cuts down all men like flowers of the field. In the octave, Frost's literal description is of a farmer mowing; in the sestet, his metaphorical reflection is upon the power of the Grim Reaper himself.

Consequently, Frost's penultimate reference to 'the sweetest dream that labour knows' is a reference to Death itself; in this phrase, he finds a form of metonymy not for a fortnight-for-two in New England, but for a possible after-life. He is referring euphemistically to that time when golden lads need no longer fear 'the heat of the sun'/when farmers can rest forever from their labours.

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In **Mending Wall**, from 1914, Frost finds in the literal business of 'mending wall' a metaphor for the annual maintenance of good relations with his neighbour. The first line of iambic pentameter –

> Something there is that doesn't love a wall

– announces that there is at work a mysterious force which is hostile to such good-neighbourliness; 'something' which cannot be properly explained – perhaps 'the frozen-ground-swell under it', perhaps not – is literally undermining the wall that runs between the two farms, metaphorically undermining the relationship between the two farmers. As a result, Frost and his neighbour – meeting up on their rounds 'at spring mending-time' – recognise the need for constant vigilance. They make only grudging progress:

> We keep the wall between us as we go.
> To each the boulders that have fallen to each.

Arriving at a spot where – because 'he is all pine and I am apple orchard' – there could not possibly be a territorial dispute, Frost struggles to understand his neighbour's insistence that the wall there still be maintained to the same standard:

> He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbours.'

Given his idealism, Frost cannot help feeling that this assiduous maintenance of the barrier between their estates is anti-social; in his view, their re-building programme contravenes the very spirit of good-neighbourliness in which men ought to live and is likely 'to give offence'. If anything, 'elves' are busy dismantling the wall because they want to bring men together/promote the brotherhood of man. Unfortunately, Frost's neighbour adopts a different attitude to estate-management. In his opinion, a New Englishman's home is his castle: lest he become engaged in boundary disputes, its ramparts must be diligently fortified.

In Frost's view, this attitude belongs to a Stone Age ('like an old-stone savage armed') or a Dark Age ('he moves in darkness' of 'the shade of trees'). For this reason, the strength of the poem lies in Frost's readiness to allow his neighbour the last word. The neighbour's stubborn reiteration of his father's saying ('Good fences make good neighbours') gives an ultimate prominence to the shadier side of human psychology. 'Good fences make good neighbours' because they literally leave no room for dispute between men whose basic insecurity would otherwise cause them to fall out with each other; it is in this sense that 'mending wall' turns into a metaphor for keeping one's relationships in good repair.

In **After Apple-Picking**, also 1914, Frost finds in the literal business of apple-picking an apt metaphor for seizing one's many opportunities in life; in the course of the poem, apple-picking [= opportunity-seizing] becomes an extended metaphor for the living of life itself. In short, **After Apple-Picking** is a metaphysical conceit: literally/physically, Frost has been picking apples in an orchard; metaphorically, he has been living a life in which countless opportunities have presented themselves to him. These apple-opportunities are too numerous to mention and cannot all be taken: beside his 'long two-pointed ladder' (which, significantly, is pointing 'toward heaven') is 'a barrel that I didn't fill'; upon some bough remain 'two or three apples that I didn't pick'. It is not at all fanciful to imagine that these unpicked apples on the tree of life represent the 'russet' chances which he was not able to seize; put another way, they are 'roads not taken'.

It is essential to recognise the point-of-view in time from which this poem is being written. Significantly, it is ***after*** apple-picking that Frost is composing this poem:

> But I am done with apple-picking now.

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The truculent accents of this iambic pentameter suggest not only that Frost has had enough of picking apples for one day; its resigned tone hints also that he has had enough of having to 'pick' apple after apple for his barrel: that is, make life-choices. He has wearied of an activity which was once an exciting adventure to him:

> For I have had too much
> Of apple-picking: I am over-tired
> Of the great harvest I myself desired.

And why has it become so wearisome? Because he cannot stop thinking about those apples which he inevitably had to reject/those opportunities which he was necessarily obliged to turn down. He has grown 'tired' with the anxiety of wondering what would have happened if he had picked differently:

> One can see what will trouble
> This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.

After he has died, he can well envisage 'what will trouble' his 'sleep' of death: namely, the nagging suspicions that, if he had picked differently, he would have enjoyed a fuller harvest/ lived a richer life. In that sleep of death, he can see the spectres of missed opportunities all coming back to haunt him. The poem ends on a whimsical note: if 'the woodchuck' were around, then Frost would ask him whether the sleep into which a weary creature falls after apple-picking [= after life] is 'like his long sleep' [= hibernation] or 'just some human sleep' as Frost is ready to imagine.

The Road Not Taken (1916) is an extended metaphor: in this poem, Frost finds in a divergent woodland-path another metaphor for alternative life-choices and extends it throughout four five-line stanzas. No poem better illustrates the claim that Frost's affinity for the land endows him with his wise outlook, for in this instance he portrays himself as having a wisdom before the event. He casts himself as a young man travelling not only through 'a yellow wood', but also through life itself. He recalls that at the crucial moment there was nothing much to choose between the two roads; in the final analysis, they looked 'about the same' and 'equally lay' ahead of him. It seems that he can afford a measure of indifference, even complacency ... But the exclamation-mark at the end of this line –

> Oh, I kept the first for another day!

– is ironic at the expense of any naïve expectation that he might one day return to explore the road not taken; even as he chose, he recognised 'how way leads on to way' and 'doubted if [he] should ever come back'; even then, he suspected that there would be no going back. Frost therefore predicts that in due course ('ages hence') he will find himself telling this allegorical story 'with a sigh' at his wishful thought: that he could always come back and try the less scenic route .... He is counting on his subsequent experience to confirm that there is a point of no return: that his rejection of one road for the other 'has made all the difference' to his life/that, in choosing one option, he inevitably and irrevocably closed off others for which there was never 'another day'.

In **The Sound of Trees**, also 1916, Frost finds in the literal 'sound of trees' a metaphor for his own native restlessness. Frost – 'I wonder about the trees' – begins by wondering why it is that Americans such as himself 'wish' to surround their houses with trees: after all, trees make an incessant 'noise'/cause a constant disturbance. Of his fellow Americans, he asks a rhetorical question: why are we content to listen to this noise ('more than another noise') when it is quite literally unsettling? He asks them: why do we put up with trees ('suffer them') when – on a daily basis – their audible movements in the wind disrupt our concentration, make us unable to settle to anything [= cost us 'a fixity in our joys'] and turn

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us into nervous listeners ('acquire a listening air')? According to Frost, the answer is that the talking trees give us an object-lesson:

> "They are that that talks of going
> But never gets away."

In this personification, the trees succeed in doing what adventurous men fail to do: in spite of their continual restlessness, 'they' – being rooted to the spot – 'stay'. Frost's clumsy metonym ('They are that that ….') explains that 'they' hereby set an example: by being restless, but staying put, they exemplify an equilibrium and imply a sense of security. Although they 'talk of going', the trees 'never get away'. This is more than can be said for the average American who struggles to follow their stable example and remain in one 'dwelling place'; by contrast, such Americans are born wanderers who, unlike trees, feel rootless and unable to enjoy the 'fixity' of home. To an archetypal American, 'the sound of trees' [= 'outer weather'] is not unlike the call of the wild; it strikes a chord in him and comes to express his psychological condition [= 'inner weather'] as he journeys from East to West. Insatiably curious and enterprising, Frost's American cannot subdue an inner compulsion to explore the land, not least because to do so would be unnaturally to reject 'the gift outright' (poem of 1963) which his fore-fathers were given.

Frost – 'My feet tug at the floor' – relates that there have been times when he has watched 'trees sway from the window or the door' and has himself experienced a nervousness/an itchiness in his feet/a wanderlust. He recognises within himself an ultimately uncontrollable urge to roam. He accepts that he, unlike the trees rooted to the earth outside his door, will one day 'set forth for somewhere': because his destination on setting out is unknown to him, because his road is not yet taken, he realises that he will be making 'a reckless choice'. Nevertheless, he will actually respond to 'the sound of trees' and 'get away'; although he will make less noise, 'have less to say' than the rustling trees, he will make the inevitable decision to leave home and be on his way ('be gone') come what may. Being an American, he is inspired by a pioneering spirit: that is, by the irresistible spirit of the young frontiersman who cannot curb his desire to 'go West' (Horace Deeley, 1851) and seek his fortune.

Despite its title, **Birches** (also from 1916) is not a poem about birches; to be precise, it is a poem in which Frost finds in the boyhood pastime of swinging on a birch-tree a way of imagining what it must be like to come back from the dead. In short, he finds in the literal activity of swinging on a birch-branch an unlikely metaphor for the process of resurrection! In this poem, Frost's strategy is to reminisce after the fashion of the Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850). When Frost sees

> birches bend to left and right
> Across the lines of straighter darker trees,

it pleases him 'to think some boy's been swinging them', for he then proceeds to recall that 'there was a boy' in New England who once derived enormous physical pleasure/ took great physical satisfaction from meeting the athletic challenge presented by the birches on 'a sunny winter morning'. This was

> Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
> Whose only play was what he found himself,

who 'one by one ... subdued his father's trees' and who – he must admit – bears an uncanny resemblance to his young self:

> So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
> And so I dream of going back to be.

He would like again to be 'a swinger of birches': not in the literal sense so that he might play

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that game again, but in the metaphorical sense so that he might – as on a flexible and supple birch-branch – be raised up/raised from the dead. Frost confesses that there are times ('when I'm weary of considerations') when he would 'like to get away from earth awhile'; at these times, it amuses him to imagine how he might 'get away' but still get back again. At such times, Frost entertains this ruse by which he might be able to counteract the threat of sensory oblivion; in his fantasy, he would 'like to go by climbing a birch tree' because he would then be climbing '***toward*** heaven till' – at the critical moment – this nice, pliant tree would dip its top and set him 'down again' on an exhilarating morning. Here, the iambic pentameter –

> But dipped its top and set me down again

– is spectacularly functional in the description of this imagined phenomenon. By means of its slowing tempo, Frost's line measures the very degrees by which he is set 'down again': in particular, those last three syllables enact the last three dips to the forest-floor of the branch on which he is perched. The final iamb [= the adverb 'again'] captures perfectly its careful, gradual movement; rhythmically, it defines the moment of touch-down, the point at which he comes finally to rest. Frost's conclusion – 'One could do worse than be a swinger of birches' – suppresses a dark irony in that man in actual fact does much '*worse* than be a swinger of birches': he goes to heaven, but does not – so far as Frost can tell – get back. For this reason, **Birches** ('Earth's the right place for love') is a sacrilegious text, for it cannot see how a heavenly existence can be 'better' than an earthly one and expends its imaginative energy trying to elude a 'fate' worse than life.

Frost's most famous poem is **Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening** (1923). Literally, the poem is a description of a journey on horse-back which Frost undertakes 'on a snowy evening'; his journey takes him onto a neighbouring estate where he halts suddenly; he stops in the middle of nowhere for a purpose which is not immediately apparent. Literally, he has stopped in order 'to watch' his neighbour's woods 'fill up with snow'; metaphorically, though, he has stopped in this enchanting location to consider the possibility that he might end his life there and then.

His 'little horse' thinks that this unexpected stop in an isolated spot is 'queer' because it can have no notion of his ulterior motive; it cannot understand that he is 'stopping by' these snowy woods on 'the darkest evening of the year' (21st December) in order to contemplate an 'easy'/'downy' way out this world. Literally, the 'lovely, dark and deep' woods look like an ideal place to die; metaphorically, they present him with an idyllic vision of death. In short, Frost is expressing a Romantic death-wish; like Keats, he wishes 'to cease upon the midnight with no pain': in this case, to expire of exposure. These dark woods on this dark evening offer him a perfect opportunity to die a painless, peaceful death.

Only at the last moment does he jerk the reins and urge his horse to walk on. This literal walking-on is a metaphor for his decision to resist the soft temptation of the woods and settle instead for a return to his family:

> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.

As it is 21st December, he has an over-riding duty 'to go' and play Father Christmas to his children. This being so, the rhythm of the repeated line enacts not only the trotting-on of the horse, but also the heroic determination of the poet to carry on living in an imperfect world. Literally, he has 'miles to go' [= distance] before he reaches his own farmhouse and can 'sleep' in his bed; metaphorically, he has 'miles to go' [= time] before his journey through life ends and he can embrace the oblivious 'sleep' of death. Less well known is **Come In** (1942) in which he once more stops by woods and entertains similar thoughts.

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The probable setting for **Gathering Leaves** (also 1923) is an orchard in the New England fall. It is entirely characteristic of Frost's poetry that 'gathering leaves' in this orchard should become an occasion for a self-conscious questioning of his motives for doing so: after all, his spade is an inefficient implement (no better suited to his task than a tablespoon) and the fruits of his labours ('bags full of leaves … light as balloons') are inconsiderable. Frost depicts himself scooping up armfuls of leaves and then wondering why on earth he devotes himself to this exercise with such intensity. In the second quatrain, he implies that the noise he makes –

> I make a great noise
> Rustling all day

– is of no greater consequence than frightened 'rabbit and deer running away'. In effect, this 'rustling' noise is not at all unlike the 'clomping' noise that the old man's feet make in **An Old Man's Winter Night** (1916); like the old man in that poem, the leaf-gatherer in this poem, equally frightened of the existential void, finds in a sustained activity something to give him the impression that he exists. Simply keeping busy – even if the copious amounts of leaves overflow his arms – gives him a sense of purpose; indeed, it is 'the mountains' [of leaves] that he moves which enlarge his sense of importance.

When he has finished 'gathering leaves' and has filled 'the whole shed', Frost reflects upon his day's work: 'And what have I then?' Rhetorically, he asks himself what he has accomplished. Three times he gives the same answer: 'Next to nothing'. Even though he gathered leaves 'again and again', his achievement has been negligible. Why, then, has he bothered? What, he asks himself, was the point?

Isn't such an occupation futile? Not altogether. As Frost presents it, 'gathering leaves' is a displacement activity: that is, it displaces the existential anxiety which would otherwise fill the emptiness of time. To this extent, 'a crop is a crop'; under the cosmic circumstances, any crop is better than no crop. It is in this context that we should read the rhetorical question which ends the poem:

> And who's to say where
> The harvest shall stop?

Who, Frost asks, can assay/quantify the value of such work? In effect, 'gathering leaves' is a form of therapeutic activity. This being so, who is 'to say' what rewards a leaf-gatherer reaps (if 'reaps' is the right verb)? Who can gauge what existential satisfactions – eg. peace of mind – he may ultimately 'harvest' [= derive] from gathering in his 'harvest' of leaves? In the final line, Frost, displaying a gentle wit, puns on the noun 'harvest': from his literal 'harvest' of leaves, he imagines himself as gaining a metaphorical 'harvest' of moral/spiritual benefits.

Two Look at Two, also 1923, is another Wordsworthian poem in that it sets out to demonstrate that there is 'a spirit that .... rolls through all things' both human and non-human: that there is an organic relationship between the human and natural worlds. The situation for this poem is that two walkers, who happen to be in 'love', are halfway up a mountainside when their progress is 'halted' by both the onset of dusk ('with night so near') and 'a tumbled wall'. At this juncture, the lovers encounter not one deer –

> A doe from round a spruce stood looking at them
> Across the wall, as near the wall as they

– but two ('an antlered buck of lustry nostril') in whom they see themselves clearly reflected. By his precise descriptions of both doe and buck, Frost seeks to present a mirror-image of the loving couple: 'She saw them in their field, they her in hers'. By drawing us into this situation, Frost wants to show us that there pre-exists in Nature (between buck and doe) a paradigm for the loving relationship between man and woman.

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Frost's precise use of language ('they her in hers') is calculated to show that the natural world enjoys an autonomous existence, entirely independent of the human world, but not unlike it. It is significant that the doe is entirely unafraid of the two humans: 'they saw no fear there'/ 'unscared'. When the close encounter is over, it can be summarised:

> Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.

The mathematical balance – both in the poem's title and in this clause – is designed to suggest that man and animal are equivalent forces, sharing a world in which one's experience (in this case, of 'love') can be confirmed/verified/vindicated by the other; this 2-2 draw points to an equality between the different species that invites mutual respect. In 'a great wave' of understanding, these Wordsworthian ramblers 'see into the life of things' (*Tintern Abbey*, 1798); without looking for it, they gain an insight ('certain earth returned their love') into the harmony between human and non-human kind of which they had never before been aware.

Tree at My Window (1928) takes the shape of a direct and personal address to a familiar and much-loved tree. Throughout the poem, Frost is to be heard in private conversation with this tree which has grown outside his bedroom window; he writes as if they have grown up together with the result that he and this 'window tree' share each other's most intimate secrets:

> But let there never be curtain drawn
> Between you and me.

He is talking to a close friend from whom he cannot bear to be parted. Given the proximity of the tree to his window, they may be imagined as having a confidential *tete a tete*.

Robert Frost is expert at finding in his natural surroundings metaphors for common human experiences. In the third quatrain, he takes advantage of the tree's intimate closeness to his bedroom window in order to draw a comparison between the windswept tree and a sleepless/restive night. He finds in the tree ('taken and tossed') an image for his own emotional and mental turmoil on nights when he too was 'taken and swept'. He recognises in the blown tree a kindred spirit:

> Your head so much concerned with outer,
> Mine with inner, weather.

Its tossings and turnings in the outside world form a poetic parallel with the tossings and turnings of his own mind. In this way, the buffeted tree becomes an emblem of psychological disturbance; it comes to represent the turbulent 'weather' of the poet's mind.

In **A Leaf-Treader**, published in 1936, Frost expresses two attitudes to the inevitability of death, contrasting them sharply by means of his rhythm. At the beginning, he writes with an air of resignation, for, ultimately, there is nothing that man can do about the forces of decay to which he – originally, a dancing flower of the field – is subject. Indeed, Frost finds in his very title an epithet/a metonym for mortal man: 'a leaf-treader'. To begin with, his sixteen-syllable line is highly effective in conveying the tiredness of a man in the autumn of his life. The implication of this weary line –

> I have been treading on leaves all day until I am autumn-tired

– is that a man metaphorically spends 'all day' preparing the ground for his own interment. For the moment, he is simply thankful that he has been able 'safely' to tread underfoot 'the leaves of another year': ie. has managed 'safely' to see off death for another year. Metaphorically, 'after leaf-treading' is simply another encoding of 'after apple-picking'. 'All summer long', Frost has

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listened to the wind-blown leaves 'threatening' him with the same fate as awaits them; at times, it has 'seemed' as if these leaves had 'a will to carry [him] with them to death'.

If not quite the same poem, **In Hardwood Groves** (1913) expresses the same idea. In both poems, Frost's point is that human beings are no different from leaves in that they too are subject to the law of gravity and – 'autumn-tired' – 'must go down into the dark decayed': that is, be buried and rot. For this reason, he imagines that the leaves treat him as 'a fugitive' from death and engage him in conversation, not man to man, but 'leaf to leaf'. Given the grim logic of this argument, it comes as a sudden surprise when the poem concludes with a powerful resolution to resist the irresistible forces of decay and death. For the time being, Frost declines the 'invitation to grief'. By contrast, the sixteen syllables of his last line –

Now up, my knee, to keep on top of another year of snow

– acquire a fresh energy which conveys the heroic determination of a mortal man ('a leaf-treader') who, having successfully trodden down another autumn of leaf-falls, will now turn his attention to another winter of snow-falls lest it finally claim him. The renewed liveliness of the rhythm expresses his refusal to genuflect to the forces of arthritic and sclerotic disintegration; its iambic beat ('Now up, my knee') enacts his sprightly intention to go on keeping 'on top of' the seasonal forces of decay for as long as he can. The woods are lovely, dark and deep; but he has promises to keep and miles to go before he sleeps. **A Leaf-Treader** resembles **Stopping by Woods** because in both poems Frost enacts by rhythmical means his refusal to succumb just yet to the sleep of death.

In **There are Roughly Zones**, also 1936, Frost's aim is to address the phenomenon of human aspiration: in particular, to examine that characteristic of human nature which inspires men to attempt feats which defy common sense/received wisdom. In this poem, he finds in a farmer's attempt to grow a peach-tree in inhospitable conditions a metaphor for man's innate tendency to challenge his limitations. For this poem, an alternative title, in keeping with other Frost's titles, would be **The Peach-Tree** in that the peach-tree itself becomes an emblem of man's heroic determination to overcome all obstacles and 'extend the reach' of his achievements/the range of his accomplishments.

For the poem, the setting is a remote farm-house on the edge of the Arctic Circle ('very far north'). In this remote farm-house, on an exceptionally 'cold' night, are ensconced a farmer and his wife, wondering whether the next gust of 'the northwest wind' will cause structural damage to their house. Because the house has withstood such adverse conditions in the past, the couple are not especially afraid of them on this particular night; what worries them ('We think of the tree') is the fate of the peach-tree which they have planted in a burst of irrational optimism. Knowing that climatic conditions are hostile to fruit-trees, the couple is fully aware that this hot-house plant is unlikely to survive the night.

Why, then, have the farmer and his wife planted such a tree at all? What on earth has come over them? What is it in human nature that impels man to experiment in such a foolhardy way? Why cannot man stay confined within his known 'limits and bounds'? Why does he have such 'ambition'? is he 'forever so hard to teach'? In short, Frost is wondering why man cannot recognise his own limitations and accept that 'there are roughly zones' within which his 'ambition' must be 'confined'. Of course, there is something faintly rhetorical about this question, for the implied answer is that man, with his natural curiosity, his pioneering spirit, inevitably wants to know not 'roughly', but *precisely* what these 'zones' are. Until he discovers that, he will keep on exploring/testing them.

It is just when 'the northwest wind' blows a Force 10 Gale that the temperature chooses to plummet 'so many' degrees below zero. Although they recognise that they were

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foolhardy/irrationally optimistic in planting this tree, the farmer and his wife still cannot stop themselves feeling that, if circumstances had not conspired so treacherously against them, then the peach-tree would have survived and prospered. Although they knew all along to expect such an eventuality, they feel unreasonably thwarted, hard done to/by. Obviously, they must wait 'till the spring to know' whether the tree has died or not. If it has, then 'it' knows what to 'blame': man's over-enthusiasm, his unwillingness to be constrained within the apparent bounds of possibility: in Frost's phrase, his 'limitless trait'.

Neither Out Far Nor In Deep (also 1936) is another essay on man's limitations. For this poem, Frost has chosen a coastal setting because against such a background 'the people' can appear suitably isolated and perplexed:

> They turn their back on the land.
> They look at the sea all day.

In this geographical setting, 'the people' can both 'turn their back on the land' and 'look at the sea all day': in other words, Frost has found in this location ('along the sand') a metaphor for the alternative ways in which 'people' can confront their senses of limitation. In looking at the land, he has found a metaphor for man's limited powers of introspection; in gazing out to sea, he has found a metaphor for his equally limited powers of imagination.

Frost has noticed that, even though 'the land may vary more', 'the people look at the sea': not having found whatever they are seeking 'on the land', they gaze seawards 'all day'. It is as if they have abandoned fruitless soul-searching for a broader outlook; they are no longer inward-looking, but outward-looking/no longer introverts, but extroverts. For these 'people', the landscape which they inhabit is not enough; to these land-lubbers, the seascape (which offers a vista of infinite possibilities) appears a more spectacular prospect than the shore on which they seem both literally and metaphorically stranded/both physically and spiritually marooned. Out there could exist a form of contact which would give meaning to their lives; forever optimistic, they maintain a steady vigil, keep a 'watch'.

The poem, then, is a reflection upon man's inherent reluctance to accept his limitations, a reluctance which is to be both pitied and admired. In the final quatrain, Frost wonders why 'the people' keep such a steady look-out: after all, the extroverts cannot see beyond the horizon ('cannot look out far') and the introverts are not especially adept at making sense of their fresh experiences ('cannot look in deep'). In Frost's view, 'the people' are not good at either exploration or self-exploration [= at either using imagination or engaging in introspection]. Even so ... By means of a rhetorical question, he both bemoans and celebrates the human tendency to go on trying to overcome each 'bar' to success:

> But when was that ever a bar
> To any watch they keep?

The tone of this question both scoffs at people's determination and at the same time reveres it. Undeterred, 'they' carry on searching for the meaning which would relieve their existential anxieties; both pathetic and heroic, 'they' carry on regardless of their failures to locate it. Although 'the people' are without the capacity for complete self-understanding, they remain instinctively curious both about the world in which they live ('out far') and about themselves ('in deep').

The common human experience for which Frost keeps finding a metaphor is existentialist despair. **An Old Man's Winter Night** (1916) and **Acquainted with the Night** (1928) are two poems in which Frost expresses the bleak view that there is nothing beyond man's material existence to give it a spiritual point. **Desert Places** (1936) and **The Most of It** (1942) are two more poems in which he surveys landscapes which reflect his sense of spiritual emptiness.

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Desert Places (published in 1936) is a poem in which Frost is both literally and metaphorically 'acquainted with the night'. In these four quatrains, the 'desert place' which Frost locates is both an acreage of fallow farmland 'covered smooth in snow' and an absence in his heart. In **Desert Places**, Frost's very title – in which he uses the noun 'desert' as an adjective – announces that this poem is to be about both a geographical location and a moral/spiritual condition; the plural signifies that the poem will provide us with two definitions of a 'desert', only one of which will refer literally to an arid area of land. In this poem, Frost finds in a literal place a metaphor for a loss of self-belief/self-worth: on one level, the meteorological conditions which affect this place ('snow falling and night falling') create an air of desolation; on the other, the 'outer weather' imply a deep dispiritedness which comes of sensing that his existence is without meaning.

Literally, the 'desert place' in question is 'a field' into which Frost, having out-walked the furthest city light, has curiously glanced in passing ('going past'). On this occasion, it transpires that he is night-walking not in rain, but in snow which is falling 'oh' so 'fast' that 'the ground is almost covered smooth'. The snow whites out both the field and its sylvan surroundings:

> The woods around it have it – it is theirs.

Not for the first time Frost finds himself stopping by 'woods' on a snowy evening and engaging in philosophical reflection. He recycles the pronoun 'it' in order to reinforce his perception that the snowfall is impersonal and all-consuming; upon this particular acquaintance with the night, he reflects that the nocturnal landscape is inhospitable to both man and beast ('all animals are smothered in their lairs'). In his case, it suffocates his spirits; his declarative statement – 'I am too absent-spirited to count' – conveys his feeling that he has been reduced by this stark backdrop to insignificance. Suddenly, he feels a sense of isolation, an existential anxiety:

> The loneliness includes me unawares.

This line of iambic pentameter ends with a polysyllabic rhyme (for 'in their lairs') which dramatises Frost's understanding that man is a 'lonely' figure in a dark and comfortless universe which, if not exactly hostile, is nevertheless indifferent to him. Without knowing it, he (in his silhouetted form) has been put into cosmic perspective.

In the third quatrain, Frost describes the indifferent look on the face of the universe as it confronts him; he observes that the more rapidly it snows, the more densely covered the field becomes and the 'more lonely' he feels. In the end, it snows so heavily that he can no longer see even protruding 'stubble' and finds himself staring at 'a blanker whiteness' which in its expressionlessness ('no expression, nothing to express') becomes a metaphor for the indifference of the natural world to human aspiration/emotion. By 'a blanker whiteness', he means not only that the 'benighted snow' will continue to fall, but also that his feeling of desolation will go on deepening. What 'scare' him are not the barren wastes of the winter land, but the 'empty spaces' within himself: 'my own desert places'. What he describes are cold, expressionless surroundings which mirror his own experiences of emotional/spiritual destitution.

In the final quatrain, Frost voices his reaction to the geographical area of desolation (of 'benighted snow') in which he has found himself and explains aloud his extended metaphor: namely, that this snow-covered field represents his existential anxiety. His response to this nocturnal 'desert' is to retort that its 'empty spaces' cannot scare him; in that thirteenth line, he can in effect be heard saying, "They don't scare me". Why not? He explains that he has had previous encounters with himself in 'places' which were far more frightening than any literal acquaintances with the night; in other words, he has been 'acquainted with the night' [= familiar with feelings of despair/accustomed to dark nights of the soul] on occasions which were far more unsettling than the bleak country at the end of this city lane. By means of the rhyme, he emphasises that these self-encounters [= meetings with his 'own desert places'] have more than prepared him for this latest of his exposures to the mere elements. Here, as in **Tree at My Window**, Frost's ultimate

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concern is with 'inner weather': ie. with his state of mind. Looking into himself [= examining his psychological state] is far scarier than looking into a frozen field.

It is therefore important to note that **The Most of It** (1942) rejects outright the positive points-of-view which both **The Tuft of Flowers** (1913) and **Two Look at Two** state with such care and enthusiasm. The iambic pentameter of its opening line –

> He thought he kept the universe alone

– immediately situates Frost's protagonist in a wilderness where he endures an existence remote from his fellow man. When he shouts out, he hears in reply only 'the mocking echo' of his voice 'from some tree-hidden cliff across the lake': in other words, earth (or 'life') does not return his call as it specifically did in **Two Look at Two**. Accordingly, the creature which emerges from the lake does not in this case prove 'additional to him'; this time, the 'great buck' crashes out of 'the crumpled water' and goes its own regardless way, leaving him to a solitude which is not merely geographical.

AFTERWORD

OCR's current prescription of Robert Frost's poems (for its AS Level Module F661) inexplicably excludes **Tree at My Window**, but includes **The Black Cottage**, **"Out, Out ...."** and **To E. T.** **The Black Cottage** (1914) is a poem which comes within the scope of this Bookmark, but requires a commentary too long to be accommodated in the Bookmark itself; a commentary is therefore appended below. The two other poems lie outside the scope of this Bookmark (and are not in any case among Frost's best pieces of work).

APPENDIX

THE BLACK COTTAGE (1914)

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,
> that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,
> that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.
> Thomas Jefferson: Declaration of Independence
> 4th July, 1776.

The 'black cottage' of the title is a metaphor for the 'self-evident truths' which are enshrined in the Declaration of Independence of 1776: namely, that 'all men are created equal and independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable, among which are the preservation of life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' In this poem, the eponymous cottage is an emblem of a liberal democracy which pleases itself to think that it treats all men and women both black and white in the same way: ie. that both sexes and all races are 'free and equal' under the Constitution/under US Federal law. This being so, it is significant that 'the little cottage' is to be located in an isolated spot ('set well back from the road in rank lodged grass') and in a neglected condition ('a weathered windowsill').

By this setting, 'the black cottage' is given an air of geographical remoteness; at the same time, this setting off the beaten track prepares us for the central idea that the values which it embodies are remote from modern civilisation as it appeared under President Woodrow Wilson, a known admirer of the Ku Klux Klan, a racist organisation outlawed in 1871, declared unconstitutional in 1882, but revived in 1915. The poetic significance of 'the black cottage' is that it – not unlike the egalitarian values which it represents – is ***rarely visited*** in 1914; these days, 'these doorsteps seldom have a visitor'. The date is of supreme significance, for in the

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second decade of the twentieth century Thomas Jefferson's declared values were ceasing to inform the conduct of American political life.

Particularly under threat was the equal freedom which the Declaration inalienably accords to persons of all races/all skin-colours. Behind the re-formation of the Ku Klux Klan in the Southern States of America (notably Georgia) are Thomas F. Dixon's two novels (*The Leopard's Spots* 1902 and *The Clansman* 1905) and D. W. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation* 1915; all three texts inveigh against the evil of miscegenation and prepare the way for H. P. Lovecraft's science fiction of the 1920s. It is to the temper of this time that Frost's poem is reacting. Like Dixon, Frost's speaker is a church minister; there the similarities end, for Frost's minister is eager to draw attention to the untouched furnishings of the black cottage ('a buttoned haircloth lounge', 'a crayon portrait on the wall') which are symbolic of an undisturbed set of values. The minister explains to Frost that 'everything' in the cottage is 'as she left it when she died': here, if nowhere else, pieces of furniture and egalitarian/libertarian values lie undisturbed by the changes of political fashion/by the passage of time itself.

Although the minister refers to the late owner of the black cottage only by a pronoun, the effect of this usage is not to diminish, but to enlarge the importance of the old woman: in effect, the pronouns ('she'/'her') dramatise her personal and political integrity. When the minister tells her story, he begins with the American Civil War (1861-1865). It is a central event in her life because her husband, father of her two sons, 'fell at Gettysburg or Fredericksburg'. Despite the minister's aside, it does *not* 'make a difference which' because it is clear that her husband, win or lose, was fighting for the Union side against the Confederate States of the South which owned the black slaves: in other words, he was fighting for the principles enshrined in Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. When the minister comes to reflect upon the aftermath of the Civil War, he is acutely aware of the old woman's sense of priorities: for her, the War was worth fighting ***not*** 'just to keep the States together, ***nor*** just to free the slaves'; in her opinion, neither of 'those ends' was 'enough' to justify the loss of her husband's life. No: what alone justifies her loss is the victory of Jefferson's 'principle that all men are created free and equal'.

At this point, the minister proceeds to explain how enlightened the old woman was. Although 'white was the only race she ever knew', she is not a white supremacist; according to the minister, her argument was that black and white and yellow people cannot be 'so very unlike' because God's hand has made them of 'the same stuff'. The minister recalls how much he came to respect the old woman for her religious politics; he recalls that, out of his respect for her philosophy, he was unwilling to change the wording of his services to 'please' the crowd of younger members of the congregation. To this extent, 'she' became a reference-point by which he took his own bearings; ironically, he reflects that, by her standards, the younger members of the church, who would have preferred a more liberal use of language, but whose politics were toxic with racial hatred, were not liberal at all.

At this point, it makes sense to imagine that the minister is looking again at the black cottage. Regarding its undisturbed state, he muses:

> For, dear me, why abandon a belief
> Merely because it ceases to be true.

The cottage (in which things are preserved exactly as they were 'fifty years' ago) stands for an unabandoned belief in the principles of equality and freedom upon which Jefferson had founded the nation under God (1776) and to which Abraham Lincoln had dedicated the battlefield at Gettysburg: 'that government of the people, for the people, by the people, shall not perish from the earth' (1863). It is in this poetic way that the condition of the cottage becomes 'a sort of mark to measure how far fifty years' *since Gettysburg* 'have brought us'. That ministers and politicians of the present day (such Dixon and Wilson) are preaching racial hatred is no reason to cease believing in the truths which informed the birth of the nation; egalitarianism is not a belief which 'ceases to be true' merely because it has gone out of fashion/'out of favor'.

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For this reason, the minister wishes that he 'could be monarch of a desert land' which he could 'devote and dedicate forever' to Jefferson's and Lincoln's self-evident truths. In this land, such eternal verities (as equality and freedom under the law) would not be subject to re-appraisal with the passage of time; in such a land, 'the truths we keep coming back and back to' would be 'walled by mountain ranges' and thereby immured against any attempts to annihilate or distort them. At this point, the minister sounds rather like Gonzalo in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1612) who sets out his own concept of an ideal commonwealth in which he would hear no evil and see no change.

In the final three lines of the poem, it becomes clear that the free spirit of the old woman survives at the cottage. First, the minister observes that 'there are bees in this wall': when he strikes the clapboards, their 'fierce heads' look out. Such an image invites us to conclude that the bees, with their black and yellow colouring, are living emblems of the old woman's 'fierce' belief in the equality between persons of different colours. Second, Frost himself notes that 'sunset blazed on the windows': from this image, it appears that the black cottage remains luminous with her egalitarian/libertarian ideals.

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