

comprehensive study guide
to

SEVEN POEMS BY ROBERT FROST

佛洛斯特詩

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SEVEN POEMS BY ROBERT FROST

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Introduction

Robert Frost was perhaps the most beloved poet in America. Even at the age of 85, his public reading of his own poetry in a tremulous, barely audible voice still attracted thousands of young listeners satisfied with just being there and hearing the cadence of the verses. He had become the un-official poet laureate of America. In the mind of his readers he was the country poet, the farmyard poet, not of the great farms of the West but of the man-size farm of New England, only slightly mechanized in fact, and not at all so in Frost's poetry. He was the wise old man who had lived a long life in communion with nature and could still look at her with fresh eyes, a sense of her beauty, and an uncanny penetration of her teachings.

To the 20th century man, industrialized, urbanized, and divorced from nature, Frost's poetry brings a renewed contact with her. Guided by the poet, he learns to observe her and draw lessons from her; it is a kind of return to the good old days when life was simple and its problems could be solved with common sense, a life close to nature following the rhythm of her seasons rather than the rhythm of complex economics.

Frost's success did not come easily. In 1912, when he was 38, his poems had all been rejected by publishers. He could hardly make a living at various jobs--teaching, newspaper work, shoemaking, and farming. His farm yielded more poetry than profit. He then decided to try his luck in England. He sold his farm and sailed for Europe

with his growing family where he met Ezra Pound and succeeded in having *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*, two collections of poems, published in London. Surprisingly, these poems full of New England imagery were well received by the public and the critic. In 1915 he came back to America and was astonished to find himself already famous. From then on he was read, appreciated, and loved, receiving all sorts of prizes for his later collections of poems--*New Hampshire* (1924), *West-Running Brook* (1928), *A Further Range* (1937), *A Witness Tree* (1942), *A Masque of Reason* (1945), *Steeple Bush* and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947), *In the Clearing* (1962). He was the guest poet at the Inauguration of President Kennedy in 1960. In 1962, aged 88, he was sent on a cultural mission to Russia where he read "Mending Wall" in all innocence, so he said, although many thought he was making an indirect reference to the infamous Berlin Wall.

Frost preserved his public image with great care until his death at 89 in 1963. Since then, probes have been made into his private life and a recent work by his long time friend, Lawrance Thompson, entitled *Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1974-1915*, has created a stir among admirers of Frost by damaging the well established myth of the wise, old, and kind country poet. Thompson shows that Robert Frost was in fact a neurotic, tormented by guilt over the death of two of his children, haunted by fears and nightmares, twice threatening murder, given to temper tantrums and spells of jealousy, often sulking and brooding on suicide. In *The Figure a Poem Makes* (1939), Frost had

already confessed that for him composing a poem was momentary stay against confusion. For all poets, of course, poetry brings order to the disordered reality of the world and of life. But for Frost it seems to have meant also order in the turmoil of his feelings.

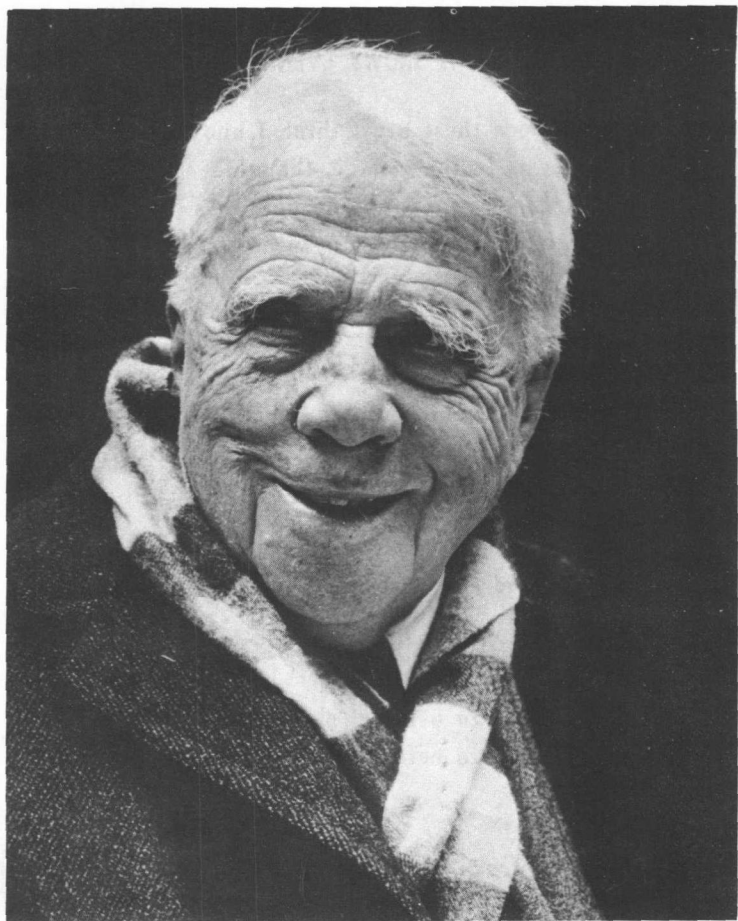
Frost's public image of the serene old man to whom a life-long communion with nature had brought wisdom was perhaps, to use T. S. Eliot's reflection on calm old age, "a receipt for deceit." It hid the emotion storms of the real man behind the image. This duality is reflected in Frost's poetry. The beautiful countryside images of nature and of man attuned to her expressed in a language that is a subtle rhythmic re-ordering of the actual speech of New Englanders have been the elements of Frost's poetry which endeared him to so many readers. But the most perceptive critics had probed beneath the peaceful, pastoral surface of Frost's poems so refreshing to industrialized, departmentalized modern man, and discovered the age old disturbing preoccupations of man--the meaning of life; questionings about life after death; the despair of the swift, destructive passing of time; a sense of decay. Death was one of Frost's greatest obsessions. In "*Departmental*" it appears as a huge moth, a giant in the eyes of ants. Particularly, there is almost omnipresent in Frost's poetry a basic death-wish, which psychologists find is the deepest subconscious desire of contemporary man living in a time of cultural decadence.

The speaker in Frost's poems is often a tired old man wishing for release from the pain of living. "*Stopping by Woods*" with the speaker's attraction to darkness, the snow covering the earth like a winding-sheet in the dead of

winter (the darkest day of the year), the life-giving water dead-frozen, and sleep itself taken all together form an almost overt statement of the death-wish. "*After Apple-Picking*" presents the same tired old man desiring a kind of sleep that is much like the sleep of death. "*The Death of the Hired Man*" is the death of a defeated old man trying to preserve some dignity to the last. "*Birches*" with all its pleasant imagery of boyhood pleasures on the farm reveals finally the desire of the old speaker to get away from earth at least for a while. In "*Departmental*" the speaker is shocked that the obsession with death is not the obsession of every man but is left in ant-like society to the care of a specialized group.

The speaker in Frost's poems seems to be facing a difficult choice between dying and continuing to live, work, and suffer. He chooses life but not out of attraction to beautiful nature, but rather with reluctance, dreaming about the choice he did not make, the road not taken. In "*Birches*" the old speaker dreams of swinging birches; in "*After Apple-Picking*" he dreams of magnified apples. Both these dreams are views of life beyond nature. In a dream-like illusion, the old man of "*The Death of the Hired Man*" thinks he has saved his dignity in death.

Frost does not state this particular feeling directly. He is the master of the implied statement as well as of the understatement. What he wants most to say he says indirectly, in lines full of ambiguities, leaving to the reader the task of discovering it if he cares to penetrate beneath the beauty of mother nature and perceive her cruelty. Frost the lovable wise old man reveals himself in his poetry as a disturbed and disturbing artist.



Robert Frost (1874—1963)

STOPPING BY WOODS
ON A SNOWY EVENING

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer 5
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. 10
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, 15
And miles to go before I sleep.

Line	Word or phrase	Annotation
1.	woods	森林（象徵自然的神秘）。
3.	see	可以當“understand”解釋。
4.	snow	雪。雪是白色的，象徵崇高或單純等。
9.	harness bells	馬具上的小鈴。
12.	easy wind	微風。
	downy flake	柔和的雪片。
14.	promises	約定；諾言。這裡指日常生活中應做的事情。

一、類型 (Genre)

這首詩的背景有原野，森林，湖泊，村莊，與農舍。此外還有雪片紛飛著的雪景。主述人乘著小馬車，路過這樣一個引人入勝的地方，情不自禁的停下來，欣賞黃昏時刻大自然的美景。陶醉在這樣的美景之中，雖然依依不捨，但却又不得不離開，繼續他的行程。

這首詩的背景充滿田園詩 (pastoral poetry) 的風格，內容在發抒主述人心中矛盾的情緒，因此這首詩又可以說是一首田園式的抒情詩 (pastoral lyric poem)。從這首詩中象徵的意義上看來，這是一首有思想的詩 (a poem of idea)，表現出主述人對自然與人生的看法，其間隱約還帶有說教 (didactic) 的意味。

二、主題 (Theme)

表面上，我們覺得主述人只是在描寫森林中美麗的雪景，發抒個人心中矛盾的情緒。通常我們認為在兩種不同的欲望同時發生時，便會產生矛盾的情緒。主述人來到森林處，一方面被美景所吸引，想要探究自然的神秘；一方面他還有不得不做的事情。詩中主述人說得很清楚，停下馬來是因為 “To watch the woods fill up with

snow”。主述人心中爲何會有矛盾的情緒呢！他說：“But I have promises to keep”。簡言之，主述人想要表答的就是「矛盾情緒」的概念。從象徵的觀點上來看這首詩的意義便更深長了，因爲主述人心中的小衝突（small conflict）象徵著人生際遇中許多的大衝突（large conflict）。主述人好像在暗示“promises”很重要，我們無法永遠沉醉在美的懷抱之中，所以說這首詩內容上有點說教意味，但並未被清楚的表答出來。

三、象徵與對比 (Symbols and Contrast)

詩中最明顯的象徵與對比便是“woods”和“snow”。森林可能象徵自然的神秘；雪可能象徵純潔，崇高等等。兩者之間正好構成強烈的對比。第一節中，主述人說他停下馬來是“To watch the woods fill up with snow”，這句話彷彿是在告訴我們神秘的自然表面時常蓋著一層看似單純的東西；表面上看起來是“lovely”，事實上却是“dark and deep”（第十三行）。“lovely”和“dark and deep”便是象徵「善」與惡或「單純」與「複雜」式的對比。最後主述人像是在感嘆著想要去探究那“dark and deep”中的神秘是不大可能，因爲人生中要做的事情著實太多了。

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.

最後一行的“sleep”可能象徵著「死亡」。這便是這首詩更深一層的意義。同時說明了作者對自然的態度。

四、聲響與意義 (Sound and Sense)

一首好詩的聲韻效果必與意義有不可分的關係。這首詩的韻律就是這個樣子，非常有規律。全詩共分四節 (stanzas)，每節各四行 (lines)，每一行都是很規律的抑揚四步格 (iambic tetrameter)

。押韻 (rhyme) 除最後一節外也都是很有規律的，即 /aaba/bbcb/ccdc/dddd/ 節奏的單調規律情形正可用來表達日常生活的缺乏變化。作者似乎故意在最後的一節破壞 /aaba/bbcb/ccdc/dded/ 的循環韻律，來表現主述人被森林美景所吸引，因而主述人規律的生活引起了變化，並使主述人平靜的內心產生矛盾的情緒。這首詩被認為是一首好詩，這或許是其中的原因之一。

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth; 5

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, 10

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. 15

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference. 20

Line	Word or phrase	Annotation
1.	diverged	分歧，叉開。
5.	undergrowth	生長在大樹下面的灌木或矮樹。
8.	wanted wear	人跡鮮稀。無人踐踏。

Robert Frost 作詩的一個特點便是善於運用眼前看似平淡無奇的瑣事，來表達一個深刻的思想或哲理。換言之，他長於運用具體的事物以說明抽象的概念，使讀者易於接受和瞭解。本詩便是一個最好的例子。

在本詩裡，詩人回顧往日，在他人生的旅途中曾遭遇岔道的困擾，兩條叉路擺在眼前，任擇其一，魚與熊掌勢難得兼。他佇立路口，沉思良久，放眼望去，只見其中一條的盡頭掩沒在叢林裡，又見另一條綠草如茵，杳無人跡，於是走上了這條自認少人行走的路。但經他一走，也免難足跡斑斑了。既走上了這條路，還冀望來日再走那條，但又自知人生旅途如大江東去，勢難折回。在此，詩人表現了一絲淡淡的懊悔，對這種人力不可挽回的事，也沒奈之何。

再遙想未來，自己將嘆一口氣，把這故事重提，當時選擇了這條人跡鮮稀之途，才有今日的種種。

本詩是以某樹林為背景，但却可轉用到任何地點和任何時間上去。詩人在追憶昔日可能發生而未發生的事，當時的一個決定便影響後來的一切。這是人人在日常生活中都會遭遇的難題，作者以簡明的筆調，生動的畫面說明了這個事實。用字平實，共分為四節，每節押韻很工整，都依×○××○這樣的韻型寫成。

MENDING WALL

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing: 5
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, 10
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. 15
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. 20
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 25
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
f I could put a notion in his head:
“Why do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it 30
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, 35
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. 40
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. ” 45