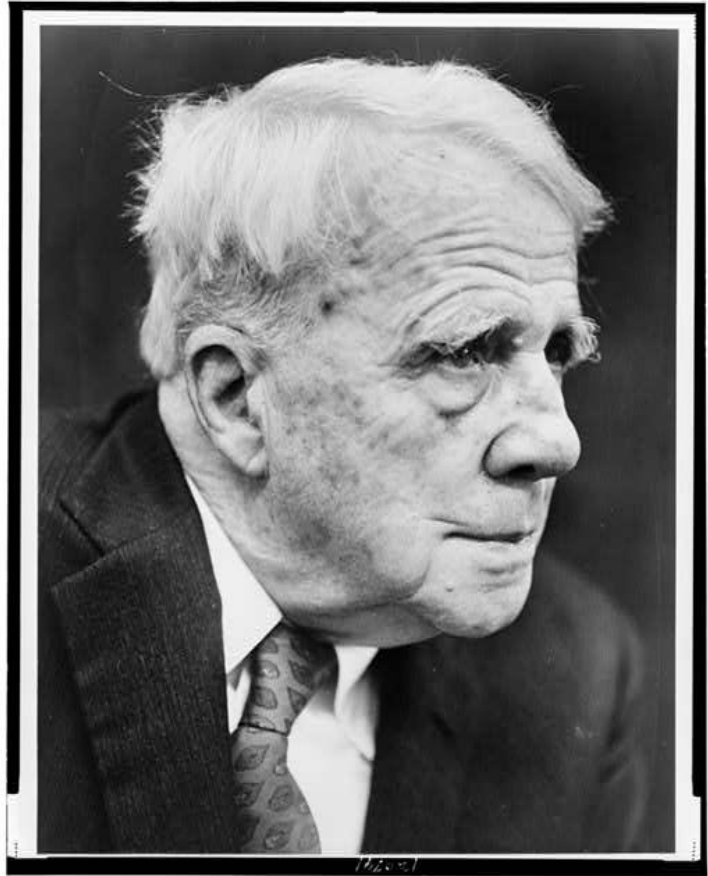


Lecture Sheet

Robert Frost's Life & Poetry

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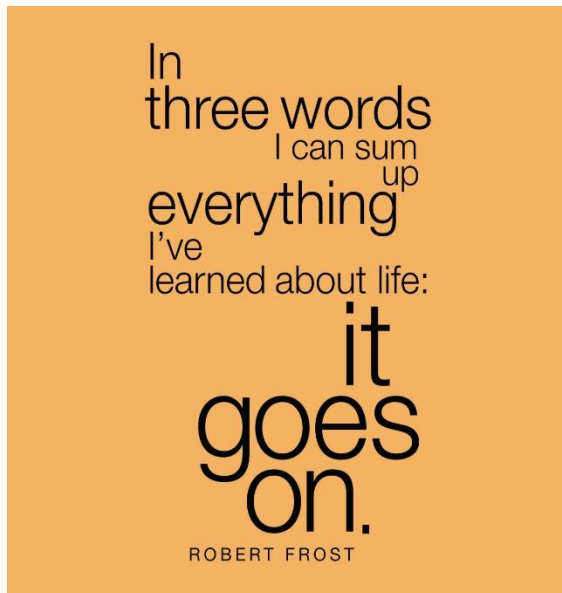
Frost was a poet for all people in that, as a mature poet, he used plain English, and he wrote about the everyday things in his surroundings, often as metaphors for the day-to-day cares of life. He was a farmer by choice for much of his life, and wrote about nature and the seasons, especially favoring Winter. His life was not extraordinary in any important way, though he did have more than the usual share of sorrow. However, he never quite fit in anywhere, as evidenced in his poem: Two Roads Diverged in a Yellow Wood: "I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." It was not Robert Frost's life being different which made him and his poetry, but rather, his



reaction to life which was different, and his insight and ability to see things and communicate that to the reader that made him a distinctive voice in the wilderness.

Poets are not born: they are made. A poet needs to have a facility with language and an eye to see (not necessarily the actual eye, but discernment) truth. Poets make connections, and so every poet's work is intimately connected with who he or she is. What they write is their interaction with life.

One place that Frost did not fit in was at school as a student. His father died when he was eleven and he and his mother moved back to Massachusetts from San Francisco to live with relatives. “In



1897 he enrolled at Harvard, hoping to prepare for a career in college teaching, but he left after two years without a degree.” (Greenberg and Hepburn ix) His grandfather despaired that he would ever succeed at anything and gave him a farm in Derry to help him out. Frost worked the farm, but could not make enough to support him and his wife. He was obligated to work the farm for ten years, and he wrote all this time. One interesting facet of poetry is that the actual writing of a poem may not be representative of its incarnation. That is, a poem may begin in the subconscious long before it finally rolls off the pen.

So we have no way to know when any particular work of Frost’s began forming in his mind. We only know when it was published. Therefore we can only guess by the content when any particular poem had its genesis.

For example, the poem *The Good Hours* (1915) is written about the narrator taking a walk through the town and far past, then returning to find everything closed down, and all the windows dark. He commented that he felt a connection to them: “I had such company outward bound.” When he came back, he realized that he was still an outsider. Everyone else in the small farming community was asleep and yes, he “profaned” the snowy streets with his footsteps. So we find that he valued nature, and this idea likely began while he was still living in Derry, but he was an outsider. He was even more alone after his mother died. He echoes this in his almost shockingly frank poem, *Home Burial* (1911).

Frost and his wife went to England in 1912, where he made the acquaintance of Ezra Pound, a prime influence in his life. It was in England in 1913 that his first volume, *A Boy’s Will*, was published. He wrote “his second letter to Miss Ward. He gave her information about how *A Boy’s Will* came to be published, not omitting to mention that he believed she would know the poems in

it were the natural result of his life.” (Sutton 83) So we see, even from his own words, that his poetry was very connected to his life. By this time he had lost both parents and this was not the last of his trials. It is no wonder that death figures in many of his poems. In fact, from his biography one wonders how he wrote so much of joy, as in *The Road Not Taken* (1916).

By 1915 Frost had bought yet another farm in New England and began teaching at Amherst College. “In his discussion of nature in Frost’s poetry, for example, Robert Faggen argues that in Frost’s natural world one does not find Arcadia. Instead, Frost’s nature “creates hierarchies and stability only for a moment before its relentless warfare cancels and levels inequalities insect and human alike.” (Wilcox and Barron 133) However, nature seems to have drawn him to itself in both his writing and his life. He simply could not live in the city. We see this in *Acquainted with the Night*, which alludes to all the evils in the city and the need to “outwalk every city light”

If one reads merely a list of the titles of Frost’s poems, it is all about nature, one poem after another. Yet Frost never really made his living with any of his farms. In *Mending Wall* we get a hint of the way he felt so different from other New Englanders.

“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.” “ (Frost 1930)

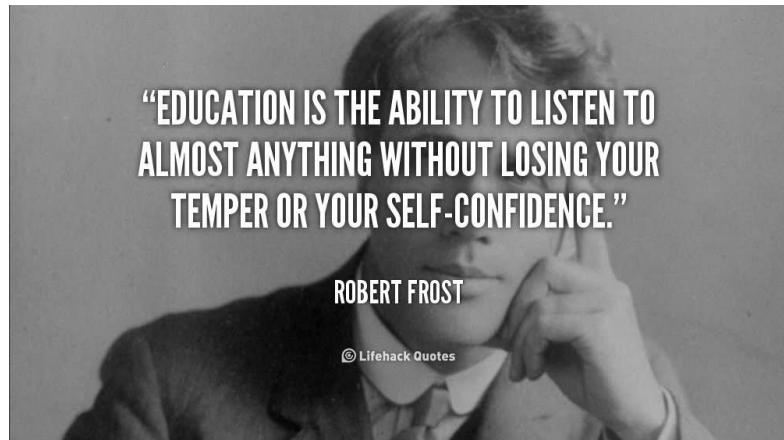
His neighbor’s cows would never mix with his trees, yet his neighbor insisted on mending the wall. Walls keep people apart and cultural barriers, such as the values shown in this poem, where his neighbor is adamant about keeping a tradition which is not only needless but useless work. And

the telling phrase, “Good fences make good neighbors”, points out that the neighbor defines a “good neighbor” as one who stays on his side of the wall.

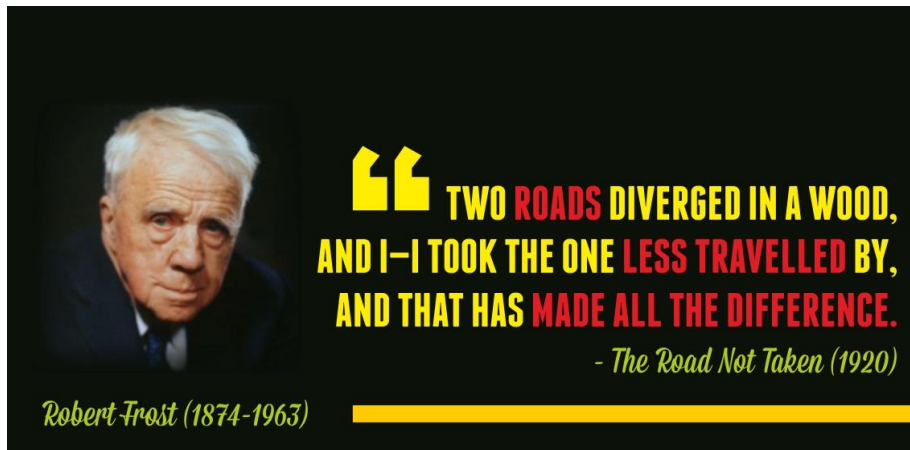
By 1920 it was obvious that mental illness would plague his sister until she died ten years

later. As time passed, Frost’s poetry dealt with the strangeness and thoughts of death in *Fire and Ice* and *Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening*. *Fire and Ice* is a very subtle touch on opposing forces and sanity as he talks about an insane choice. In the second poem, we know that he is thinking about how “lovely, dark and deep: the snowy woods are, and reminds himself that he has “promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.” Those miles were years, many of them spent alone after his wife died in 1938. Frost lost a daughter, a son, and his wife all within 12 years from his sister’s death. It is extremely hard for parents losing one child. Frost lost two children, his sister, and his wife at a very young age. So a man who already felt isolated seemed to become even more alone and nature, while close, was also cruel, as evidenced in poems like *An Old Man’s Winter Night*: “One aged man — one man — can’t fill a house, A farm, a countryside, or if he can, It’s thus he does it of a winter night.” (Frost 135)

Many with whom I have discussed Frost and the meaning of his poems say they think he was merely literal, that I read too much into him. I cannot believe this. It is simply too convenient to be a mere coincidence that there seems always to be some double meaning in his poems. I think that too many people have been touched by the feelings conjured up by his poetry for it to be that simple. He saw things from a different angle, not like a child who creeps along and looks from the ground and then climbs a tree, but more like a cat who walks quietly a few steps, then stops to observe his footprints. In *Gathering Leaves* he calls an arm full of soggy, dead, and colorless leaves a crop, as if he felt that this was all he had done for his life: planted trees only to harvest dead leaves. Is this what he thought of some of his words? After all, leaves can also mean pages.



Frost did not have an easy life by far, but I cannot think of any great poet who did. So maybe the two go hand in hand: tragedy and literary talent. I seem to remember hearing once that one cannot wring blood from a stone. Now I know that this was an expression meaning one cannot get money where that is no way to squeeze it out. However, the expression fits here also, meaning that one must be vulnerable to bleed. Bleeding is a rite of passage in many cultures, so it has significance here since poetry requires that one lives and experiences before one can write it. It seems, though, that Robert Frost had more than his share of sorrow, and he bled golden words. As alone as he may have felt many times in his life, he had an intimate understanding of people, so he never shut them out.



We could probably study Robert Frost's poetry for years and still not know his entire meaning. After all, Frost believed that the reader had to do his part also. I am not sure if he ever read Rosenblatt,

but he left us a lot in his poetry for us to interpret for ourselves. Yes, there is a tragedy in his life and it is reflected in his poetry. However, there is also the beauty of New England there and it also is reflected in his poetry. Some of his poetry even reflected on his poetry, as I think After Apple Picking did. For me, the poems are the apples: and the ones which "fall to the ground", heavy and thick, go to the cider press.

"For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest, I desired." (Frost 1930)

Lucky for us, his poem was not self-fulfilling. He lived on to write many more beautiful poems, all connecting life, and people, and nature.