Frost

THEMES & ISSUES

- SOCIETY /URBAN/RURAL LIFE/ HUMAN RELATIONS - ordinary life: “the primary laws of our nature”, compromise, boundaries between people, human nature, lack of communication, loneliness, survival, decision-making, fate and its control over people.
- NATURE & TIME - nature’s strength (creative & destructive, indifferent, bleak, natural but dangerous); time’s control over everything.

STYLE

- IMAGERY: concentrated.
- SYMBOLS
- LANGUAGE: ordinary, colloquial, clarity of thought.
- RHYME, ALLITERATION, ASSONANCE, REPETITION.
- ALLUSIONS
- ORDINARY SPEECH
- ALLEGORY
- CONTRAST
- CAESURA (a pause within a line of poetry - for effect) (“Little - less - nothing!”)
- TONE (shifting, defined movement, often SOMBRE, REALISTIC, STARK, BLEAK)

The Road Not Taken: (positive but sense of regret or sadness. Mixed signals)

- This poem charts the difficulty implicit in decision-making.
- ALLEGORICAL implications: two roads/two choices.
- IMAGERY: autumnal wood SYMBOLIC of maturity in life.
- TONE: a sense of regret perhaps or a sense of realisation that decisions can have vast implications.
- Personal point-of-view.
- Narrative structure

Mending Wall: (ostensibly a positive experience but tinged with sadness or regret that boundaries are required)

- This poem treats of the relations associated with neighbours in the area of compromise, boundaries between people and human nature.
- Ironically, the narrator and his neighbour work together to maintain the boundary that separates them; they are unified by their divisions.
- The poet points to three elements which destabilise boundary walls, leading to the need for him and his neighbour to meet to repair them: 1. Natural forces, e.g. frost, “that sends the frozen-ground-swell under it.” 2. A sense of the supernatural which conspires to force the men together, “No one has seen them made or heard them made.” 3. Hunters who seek to “have the rabbit out of hiding.”
- The supernatural theme is continued with the notion of it being a game; one where they have to “use a spell to make them balance.”
- The notion of boundaries for the sake of boundaries, the need to question why and “to whom I was like to give offence.”
- TONE: mocking of the neighbour’s traditional, conservative attitude.
- “Good fences make good neighbours.”
- CONTRAST between them. A contemptuous image of a primitive, unsophisticated man, “an old-stone-savage armed.”
Out, Out :-: (positive environment but bleak conclusion, sense of unfairness)

- This poem, like Macbeth’s speech, “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...” emphasises the brevity of human existence.
- The boy is depicted as a tragic hero, destined by forces beyond his control to meet an untimely and pointless death.
- The title may also refer to the blood flowing from the mutilated hand and the departure of life from the body.

**IMAGERY/CONTRAST:** initial threatening images are contrasted immediately with the tranquil beauty of the natural world.

- His sister, homely in her apron, announces that supper is ready. Like the stove-logs, supper is life-sustaining.
- cruel IRONY: the saw takes its cue, leaps to devour the boy’s hand, and bites into the flesh.
- The final image of the living turning away from the corpse draws attention to the cold indifference operating in the universe that Frost frequently stressed in his work. Their attitude appears to concur with Shakespeare’s conclusion that life is indeed a tale ‘full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’.

Spring Pools: (the contrast in nature- positive and negative in one; the poet as a sad, lonely, removed figure)

**THEME**
*In this poem...*
Frost examines nature’s cycle of life and death. The spring pools of the title will disappear, having being sucked up by the trees that need water to live.

**Possible metaphor**
The destructive effects of creative energy. The poet, like the pools, can reflect the world, even in difficult circumstances (the forest). However the act of creation can be destructive; poets are often unhappy, difficult figures, drained by the demands of their craft.

**Form follows theme**
- Rhyming scheme in stanzas mirror one another, like the water the sky
- Continuity of nature echoed in run-on lines (only two full-stops).
- Pools and flowers merge as they disappear: ‘flowery waters’ and ‘watery flowers’

**LANGUAGE & IMAGERY**
Opening words focus your mind’s eye on the subject: ‘These pools...’

**Darkness of poem**
- ‘chill and shiver’
- ‘will soon be gone’

**Unusually for nature poetry, the trees are a destructive force**
- ‘dark foliage’
- ‘pent-up buds’
- ‘darken nature’
- ‘powers/ to blot out and drink up and sweep away’

**Mood:** the predominating atmosphere or tone in a literary work.
Lyric:

Acquainted with the night: (hope/positivity tinged with inevitable sadness)

In this solemn, measured meditation, Frost describes how he walked alone at night, a metaphor for a time of loneliness, alienation and disconnection from reality.

While ‘Acquainted with the Night’ is indeed profoundly dark, the repetition of ‘I have...’ may, because its past tense, suggest hope. The poet has been in those dark places, and has lived to tell the tale.
Note the two biblical allusions. Both deal with redemption.
‘A dark poem’: Heaney.

Physical darkness
• ‘night’, ‘rain’, ‘rain’, ‘outwalked the furthest city light’.

Spiritual darkness
• ‘saddest’, ‘dropped’, ‘unwilling to explain’, ‘interrupted cry’, ‘But not to call me back’, ‘unearthly clock’, ‘time was neither wrong nor right’ (why not ‘right nor wrong’?)

Rhyming scheme: terza rima (three line rhyming stanza) used by Dante to describe the descent into hell.

Slow, purposeless walk suggested by:
• aba bcb cdc ded ee rhyming scheme.
• iambic pentameter
• Repetition of ‘I have..’
• ‘I have walked out in rain - and back in rain.’

Hope suggested by:
• ‘I have...’ (as opposed to ‘I am..’
• Biblical allusion: the unusual phrase ‘acquainted with...’ is from Isaiah, a key text in the Christian mystery of redemption through suffering;
• Biblical allusion: Psalm 129 (130), De Profoundis (Out of the depths) uses the image of a watchman waiting for the dawn to illustrate the longing of the human spirit for God and confidence in his forgiveness. (Consider: why else the archaic word ‘watchman’? Why not ‘security guard’?)
“Frost’s poems, while often expressing positive sentiments, are tinged with sadness.”

Write a response to this statement with reference to both the style and subject matter of Frost’s poetry.

“No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader.” This observation from Frost is indicative of his approach to writing poetry. He expresses his observations on life with an honest nuance, beginning often in positivity but achieving an insight which can often be of a sad nature by the end of the poem in question. Also, he refers to human endeavour and how circumstances can conspire to control people’s behaviour. The natural world is another source of inspiration, allowing Frost to achieve insight, albeit in a negative sense. Finally, his viewpoint on the loneliness of the creative impulse can be observed across his poems.

The opening of The Road Not Taken is full of possibility...this is echoed by the idyllic landscape detailed at the beginning of “Out, Out - ” and the possibilities presented by rural living in Mending Wall.

(2011 Question)

“Frost’s simple style is deceptive and a thoughtful reader will see layers of meaning in his poetry.”

Do you agree with this assessment of his poetry? Write a response, supporting your points with the aid of suitable reference to the poems on your course.

On first reading Frost’s poetry, it occurred to me that his poems are simple in content and style. He writes about nature, the passing of time and the relations between people in an ordinary everyday world. He uses the colloquial language of the everyday, backed up by focused, concentrated imagery. His poems often come in narrative form, with open-ended conclusions. All of the above contribute to the deduction that there is most definitely more to Frost than meets the eye.

Spring Pools although short, provides a key insight into the depth we see in Frost’s poetry. Almost in recognition of this, the misleading title is our first indicator of extra depth. It suggests fresh growth and renewal. Spring is a time of rebirth and water has the power to promote growth but the early lines of the poem soon put paid to this hopeful interpretation.
In stanza one, *the scene is bleak and wintry*. The pools ‘reflect the total sky almost without defect’, as the branches of the trees surrounding them are *bare and leafless*. The pools, ‘like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver’, in time, ‘will like the flowers beside them soon be gone.’ The repetition of ‘like’ here draws in the reader and highlights a more profound point. Nature has some control by way of its cycle of creation: the snow forms the pools and the pools in turn feed the flowers until they too are *absorbed by the roots of the trees*. Ultimately, however, time is *the relentless destroyer* and catches up on everything, a point which Frost succeeds in making with a simple approach.

In *Mending Wall*, Frost sets the poem in a field, specifically on either sides of a wall dividing the field between two neighbours. Ostensibly, this is a reflection on the two men harmlessly bantering over the reasons for the damage to the wall which requires their attention.