

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 7: Robert Frost (1874-1963)

Outside Link: | [A Frost Bouquet](#) |

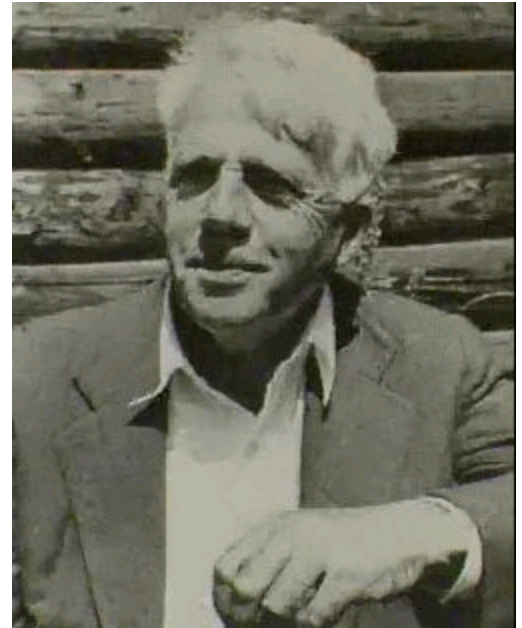
Page Links: | [Primary Works](#) | Selected Bibliography [Biographical 1980-Present](#) [Critical 1980-Present](#) | [Study Questions](#) | [MLA Style Citation of this Web Page](#) |

| [A Brief Biography](#) |

Site Links: | [Chap. 7: Index](#) | [Alphabetical List](#) | [Table Of Contents](#) | [Home Page](#) | February 2, 2008 |



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Source: 1995 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia, the Bettmann Archive

"I'm always saying something that's just the edge of something more." - RF

Employing the plain speech of rural New Englanders, Frost used the short traditional forms of lyric and narrative. As a nature poet, he belongs to the romantic tradition of Wordsworth and Emerson. Although Frost's nature has obvious simplicity, he probes an indifferent universe with its mysteries of darkness and irrationality.

Primary Works

A Boy's Will, 1913; *North of Boston*, 1914; *Mountain Interval*, 1916; *New Hampshire*, 1923; *West-Running Brook*, 1928; *A Further Range*, 1936; *A Witness Tree*, 1942; *Steeple Bush*, 1947; *In the Clearing*, 1962.

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| [Top](#) | Robert Frost (1874-1963): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Ben Ho

Among the brightest names in the vast and expansive collection of great American poetry, few individuals have attained the stature, widespread recognition, and distinguished position of Robert Frost. Even more than 35 years after his death in 1963, Frost is still remembered by many readers, according to Donald Greiner, as the "grandfatherly, white-haired old bard of the nation" (qtd. in Harris 1). From the publication of his first book to his death, Frost created an unprecedented literary legacy that remains his own and unlikely to be matched or forgotten.

Though associated with New England, Frost was born in San Francisco on March 26, 1874, to William Frost, Jr., and Isabelle Moodie, according to Jeffrey Meyers (1-2). Tragedy struck the family when Frost was only 11; his father, whose health had been gradually declining, died in May 1885, leaving his family a huge financial burden. The loss of William Frost, Jr., would have a startling effect upon Robert, who, according to Parini, acquired his father's drive to make something of himself and his passion to excel in whatever he did.

Without a husband and father, the Frost family--Belle and her two children, Robert and Jeanie--traveled from San Francisco to Massachusetts by train, a journey that Frost would recall later in life as "the longest, loneliest train ride" he ever took, displaying the impact of the loss of a vital figure in Frost's childhood. But Frost would continue to seek the promise of the future in New England, where the seeds of knowledge and inspiration were planted for his massive career as a poet. Having completed several grades of education on the West Coast, Frost was a fifth-grader at a Salem elementary school, where he displayed a gift for learning, as Parini writes. His mother, then his teacher at school, read aloud to him from such noted authors as Poe, Wordsworth, and Emerson, the last of whom was Frost's favorite. But in addition to reading these more "recent" authors, Frost also read Virgil, Homer, and Horace extensively as a student at Lawrence High School. It was there that Frost met Carl Burell, a student who had a strong interest in books and introduced Frost to such American humorists as Mark Twain, Artemus Ward, and Josh Billings. Burell, who was interested in botany, was also an aspiring writer, contributing verse and prose pieces to the *High School Bulletin*, which inspired Frost to try writing poetry himself; the result was a poem entitled "La Noche Triste," based on the night when the Spaniards retreated across the causeway over Lake Tezcuco from the city of Tenochtitlan, as described in Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico*. The poem was published in the *Bulletin* in April 1890, when Frost was only a sophomore. During that summer, the Frost family briefly moved to Maine, where Frost and his mother and sister were employed by a hotel in Ocean Park; Frost performed such tasks as retrieving groceries and mail, carrying suitcases, and mowing lawns to support his family financially (Parini 18-26).

During his senior year at Lawrence High School, according to Meyers, Frost became editor of the *Bulletin* and was acquainted with Elinor White, who would incidentally share with Frost the honor of class valedictorian at graduation. Frost courted White in the latter half of his senior year (Meyers 19-20). After the graduation ceremony, for which Frost delivered a speech called "A Monument to After-thought Unveiled," his feelings for White became intense, and the two secretly pledged to marry; while Frost asked that White marry him immediately, White decided that a more appropriate time would come for marriage, since Frost intended to attend Harvard University and she would enter St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York, at the decision of her parents (Parini 31).

Though Frost was admitted to Harvard, his father's alma mater, his grandparents objected to his studying at the university that "ruined" his father, as reported by Meyers; it was at Harvard that Frost's father began to revolt against his puritanical heritage, reject religion, and behave wildly (1, 22). Even Frost's mother, Belle, considered Harvard to be full of freethinkers, individuals who might lead her son in the wrong direction (Parini 32). Thus, Frost was sent to Dartmouth, which failed to meet his expectations for academic and intellectual stimulation; as Meyers writes, Frost was "bored with his classes and disillusioned with the conformist attitude of his classmates." By January 1893, when competition was intense and Frost was under heavy pressure to do well on his midterm exams, Frost had lost focus and

direction, later deciding to leave Dartmouth after spending less than one semester there.

It was after leaving Dartmouth that Frost drifted from one job to the next, all of which increased his knowledge of rural and urban New England and provided the kind of experience that Frost valued more than a college education, Meyers maintains (27). Frost first assisted his mother, still a teacher, in Methuen, providing punishment to disobedient students whom she couldn't control. Later, he became a temporary substitute for his mother during the spring (Parini 38). Frost spent the summer of 1893 doing chores for Elinor White's family on a farm in New Hampshire, and soon worked for a mill in Lawrence (Meyers 26). According to Gould, Frost was responsible for fixing the lights at the mill and placed himself in danger's way since the job entailed scrambling up tall ladders and fitting one's body in awkward angles. It was during this time that Frost wrote his first "real" poem, "My Butterfly," after walking home from work (52).

According to Parini, Frost continued trying other jobs such as writing for the Lawrence Daily American and Sentinel, but found that working for a newspaper involved too much prying into others' business. He decided to teach at a Salem school, which paid him \$24 a month for his service (53).

In December 1895, Frost married Elinor White, whom he had courted before graduating from high school. The couple moved into a small apartment, and their first child, Elliot, was born in September 1896. The following year, Frost realized that teaching would not provide him with the necessary funds to support his family and attended Harvard to study classic literature, which he had always admired. At Harvard Frost performed so well that he earned a prize for excellence in classical studies, but due to health problems and his wife's pregnancy with another child, he left Harvard, in similar fashion to the way he left Dartmouth (Parini 54-64).

Attending to himself and his family, Frost decided to try his hand at raising poultry after receiving a loan from his grandfather to pay for a farm in Lawrence. Shortly before settling on their new farm, the Frosts celebrated the birth of their daughter Lesley, who was born in April 1899. However, their first child, Elliot, who suffered from stomach cramps and digestive problems, died in July 1900 after being infected by typhoid fever. Frost would eventually move from the current farm to another one which contained a farmhouse, barn, peach and pear trees, and an apple orchard, located in the town of Derry (Parini 66-71).

During their years spent on the farm, the Frosts welcomed other children into their lives: their son Carol, born in May 1902; and daughters Irma, born in June 1903; Marjorie, born in March 1905; and Elinor Bettina, who was born in June 1907 but only lived for two days. The combination of the farm environment and personal tragedy at this stage in Frost's life would have an impact on his poetry of later years. Though Frost enjoyed farming as a leisure activity, it certainly didn't provide him a salary that would allow his family to live securely. In March 1906 Frost joined the Pinkerton Academy, earning \$1000 a year for teaching English. In addition to his courses, Frost also coached the debate team, advised the school newspaper committee, and helped with the athletics program (Meyers 57-64).

Searching for a way to have more of his work published and begin a poetic career, Frost gave up teaching in 1912 and traveled to England with his family; Frost chose England because he needed a change of scenery and also considered the nation to be a birthplace of great literary tradition and poetry. Settling in London, Frost met Ezra Pound, who praised and promoted Frost's work, understood his ideas, and encouraged his literary development. With Pound's help, Frost completed *A Boy's Will*, a collection of mainly autobiographical poems published in 1913. Many of Frost's well-known and frequently-used natural elements, such as the stars, clouds, and leaves, are found within the poems of *A Boy's Will* (Meyers 86-100).

| [Top](#) | As Gould presents, Frost's next work to appear after *A Boy's Will* was *North of Boston*, which Frost composed to show New England as more than just Boston's industrial, cultural, and shipping center. The work, published in 1914, was hailed in the London Daily News as a masterpiece of modern poetry, destined to be a classic. These two works would introduce Frost to the world and set the stage for his immense career. While Frost was stubborn to leave England, he and his family departed from Liverpool in February 1915 (125-45).

After Frost returned to the United States, another collection of his poetry, *Mountain Interval*, was published. While Frost felt the work lacked formal unity and was a set of poems "slapped together," Meyers states that *Mountain Interval* is firmly rooted in English pastoral tradition and contains themes common in Frost's poetry, such as isolation, loneliness, and fear. The work also contains some of Frost's most famous poems, such as "Birches" and "The Road Not Taken" (136-8).

In June 1920, Frost purchased a farm in South Shaftsbury, Vermont, attesting to his great love of the outdoors and farming. His experience at this farm would lead to such poems as "Maple," "Wild Grapes," and "Fire and Ice" (Parini 145). Around this time he was invited to teach at both Amherst College and the University of Michigan, between which he switched numerous times before finally settling at Amherst (Meyers 168).

Tragedy struck Frost later in life, as misfortune affected his family in various ways. Meyers writes that Frost's daughter,

Lesley, married a man who was unfaithful and who suffered from a nervous breakdown (201); his daughter Marjorie died of puerperal fever in 1934 (204); his son Carol, who was unable to make friends and sealed himself from others, committed suicide in 1940 (273-4); his daughter Irma suffered from a mental breakdown and was placed in an asylum (287-8); and his wife, Elinor, died in 1938 of a heart attack that she had suffered two days prior to her death (230).

Parini asserts that the death of Frost's wife had a tremendous effect upon Frost, who had thus far dedicated all of his works to her. After his wife's death Frost became increasingly attracted to a woman named Kay Morrison, whom he had met in 1918. Frost proposed to Morrison, who was already married and refused his offer (303-15). But Meyers writes that Frost, who had even composed and dedicated *A Witness Tree* to her, employed her as his secretary and manager. Further yet, she was Frost's "manager, mistress, and muse" for the remainder of his life (241).

Frost spent the latter part of his life reading his poetry in front of audiences and remaining in the public eye. The constant touring he underwent to share his work brought upon him physical discomfort and strain, but Frost continued nonetheless (Meyers 181-2). In 1961 Frost had the distinct honor of reading his poem "The Gift Outright" at the inauguration of President Kennedy, and Frost traveled to the Soviet Union the following year as part of a diplomatic exchange, meeting Soviet premier Khrushchev in the process.

Frost maintains a distinct position in American poetry. John Lynen asserts that Frost stands apart from other poets in the modern era in that his sentences are clear, his verse forms traditional, and language similar to everyday speech. In fact, Frost's simplicity in his poetry was so strong that one might find it difficult to classify him as a "modern" poet (2). Furthermore, as Parini argues, Frost used New England as a frequent setting or backdrop for much of his poetry, and very few poets have so consistently evoked a particular location in their work, almost bringing the region to life. Parini adds that in Frost's poetry, the physical world is a boundless source of metaphors and images, with nature as a symbol of the spirit. The natural cycle from fall to spring, for example, represents the transition of destruction to regeneration in life (443-7). Philip Gerber stresses that Frost's poetry retains its freshness even today because it doesn't depend upon the topic of the day, but rather explores aspects of humanity that are timeless and universal. In dealing with the individual, Frost emphasizes that man remains single, alone with his fate. Life for the individual can hold the possibility of terror, but also contains the potential of beauty (117).

For his work Frost earned numerous awards. According to Parini, some of these include an Academy of American Poets prize in 1953 (390), the Bollingen Prize for poetry from Yale in 1962 (439), honorary degrees from Oxford and Cambridge in 1952 (399-403), the gold medal for "distinguished work in poetry" by the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1939 (325), and four Pulitzer prizes--for *New Hampshire* in 1924 (227), *Collected Poems* in 1930 (267), *A Further Range* in 1937 (308), and *A Witness Tree* in 1943 (347).

At 88, Robert Frost died of infected blood clots and pulmonary embolisms on January 29, 1963 in Boston (Meyers 347). He had established for himself a remarkably prolific career and prominent position in American poetry.

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Study Questions

1. Why do you think Frost chooses the subjects and settings that he does? What does the rural setting provide for Frost that a more urban one would not? In what way is this setting appropriate for the plea or emotions Frost is attempting to express in his poetry?

2. The theme of loss recurs in various guises and ways in a number of Frost's poems. Compare the ways in which loss is portrayed in these poems. How do Frost's characters deal with their situations?

3. "Directive" advises its readers to get lost to find themselves. How does this poem reflect Frost's twentieth-century worldview? What are the relative values of disorientation and reorientation? How does "Directive" offer a modern version of the American dream?

4. Analyze the narrator's attitude toward death in "After Apple-Picking" and in "An Old Man's Winter Night." How does each poem serve as a buffer against mortality and meaninglessness?

5. Analyze one of the following poems to show how Frost's poetic technique itself serves as his own "momentary stay against confusion": "Once by the Pacific," "Desert Places," or "Design."

6. Discuss the limitations and isolation of the individual in either a social or natural environment, plus the related theme of how difficult it is for the self to understand existence.

7. Discuss the ambiguity of nature when it is considered as a source of wisdom.

8. Discuss Frost's sensitivity to the theme of entropy, doom, and extinction.

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| [Top](#) |