Birches Study Guide

Birches by Robert Frost

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Contents

Introduction

"Birches" is one of Robert Frost's most popular and beloved poems. Yet, like so much of his work, there is far more happening within the poem than first appears.

"Birches" was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in August of 1915; it was first collected in Frost's third book, *Mountain Interval,* in 1916. "Birches," with its formal perfection, its opposition of the internal and external worlds, and its sometimes dry wit, is one of the best examples of everything that was good and strong in Frost's poetry.

The main image of the poem is of a series of birch trees that have been bowed down so that they no longer stand up straight but rather are arched over. While the poet quickly establishes that he knows the real reason that this has happened - ice storms have weighed down the branches of the birch trees, causing them to bend over - he prefers instead to imagine that something else entirely has happened: a young boy has climbed to the top of the trees and pulled them down, riding the trees as they droop down and then spring back up over and over again until they become arched over. This tension between what has actually happened and what the poet would like to have happened, between the real world and the world of the imagination, runs throughout Frost's poetry and gives the poem philosophical dimension and meaning far greater than that of a simple meditation on birch trees.

Author Biography

Robert Frost is universally identified with New England, his home for many years and the setting for much of his poetry. However, he was born in San Francisco, California, on March 26, 1874, and did not move to New England until after the death of his father in 1885 when his mother resettled the family to Lawrence, Massachusetts. There, Frost attended Lawrence High School where he was the co-valedictorian with his eventual wife, Elinor.

Frost was admitted to Harvard but did not have the money to go to school there. He briefly went to Dartmouth College in New Hampshire and worked at a variety of teaching and other jobs. He married Elinor in 1895 and began attending Harvard as a special student, but he left in 1899 to take up farming to support his family.

Frost published a few poems in 1894, and between 1899 and 1912, he wrote articles and poems and worked as a teacher in New Hampshire. In 1912, he moved his family to England in order to concentrate on his writing. While in England, he published his first book of poems, *A Boy's Will,* in 1913 and was enthusiastically reviewed by the American modernist poet Ezra Pound (1885-1978), who soon made his acquaintance. In 1914, *North of Boston,* his second book, was published; in 1915, when Frost returned to the United States, *North of Boston* was published there and became a major success, bringing him immediate fame.

From then on, Frost settled into a career of writing and teaching, holding jobs at several major universities. He rapidly became known as one of the most important American poets of the twentieth century. He won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry four times. In 1961, he was invited to read one of his poems at President John F. Kennedy's inauguration.

Frost's personal life, in contrast to his professional success, was often painful and bitter. Only four of his six children survived to adulthood; one of his daughters died after giving birth, another was institutionalized for mental illness, and his son committed suicide. His marriage was often stormy, and Frost has been accused of being cruel and domineering to his family. He strongly disliked left-wing politics and programs, such as the New Deal, which earned him the distrust of many literary critics. He was disappointed that he never received the Nobel Prize for literature.

Robert Frost died at the age of eighty-eight on January 29, 1963, in Boston, Massachusetts.

Poem Text

When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay
As ice storms do. Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust—
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
So low for long, they never right themselves:
You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.
But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter of fact about the ice storm,
I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows—
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.
One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer. He learned all there was
To learn about not launching out too soon
And so not carrying the tree away
Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.
So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It's when I'm weary of considerations,

And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.
I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse that be a swinger of birches.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4

Frost opens the poem with an image of the birches bent "left and right / across the lines of straighter darker trees" (lines 1-2) and quickly puts forth one explanation for how they got that way: a boy had been swinging on them. Right away, however, he admits this is false, saying in line 4, "But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay." However, the image of the playful boy is a powerful one for Frost, and he will soon return to it.

Lines 5-11

The first break in the poem occurs in line 5 when Frost admits that it is ice storms, not boys, who bend down the birch trees. The next few lines are a beautiful description of birch trees, their branches frozen and encrusted with ice in the morning after an ice storm. However, their beauty is only short-lived; soon, in line 9, the sun "cracks and crazes their enamel"—the ice, which breaks and falls into the snow. This is the first hint of destruction in the poem (other than the birches themselves).

Lines 12-20

Frost makes another break in line 13 when he raises the symbolic level of the poem with the sentence "You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen." This line not only anticipates the last lines of the poem, but it also signals the beginning of a retreat from reality. The language of the poem becomes more "poetical"; for the first time, Frost uses a simile, comparing the bowed birch trees to girls on all fours, their hair hanging down in front of them. More than just destruction, the imagery now turns to symbols of conquest: the birches are bowed so that they can never right themselves; the image of the girl is also the image of a captive kneeling before her captor. This becomes an important theme in later parts of the poem.

Lines 21-27

The second really significant break (the first was in line 5) occurs now. Frost dismisses the ice storm as a cause of the birches' condition in favor of his original explanation that a boy had bent them—despite the fact that he knows that a boy didn't do it:

But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter of fact about the ice storm,
I should prefer to have some boy bend them

The word *prefer* is very important here. Frost rejects the narrow limitations of the outside world in favor of his own poetic vision. However, this world must necessarily

have its own limits, for it inhabits only his own mind. Likewise, the boy is separated from other people and plays alone.

Lines 28-35

In these lines, Frost returns to the theme of conquest. The boy "subdues" his father's trees, riding them until he takes the "stiffness" out of them, leaving him, in lines 31-32, absolutely victorious over the trees: "not one was left / For him to conquer." The boy's conquest of the trees mirrors the victory of Frost's poetic imagination over the real world, for now his vision has completely supplanted the ice storm as the cause of the trees' condition.

Lines 36-40

These lines contain a description of the boy's technique for climbing and bending the trees. He must take painstaking care to reach the top of each tree, which Frost describes in line 38 as similar to the care that one must take to fill a cup "Up to the brim, and even above the brim." This is an important line. Frost is here describing a method of reaching beyond the limits of things (filling a cup beyond the brim) to a realm beyond the real. This is not just the internal world of his imagination but something even greater—a theme he will begin to develop more fully in the concluding sections of the poem. Also, the care taken by the boy is similar to the careful construction involved in writing a poem, making the boy's actions in climbing the trees a parallel for Frost's act of creating the poem.

Lines 41-47

Frost begins this section (lines 41-42) with a note of nostalgia: "So was I once myself a swinger of birches. / And so I dream of going back to be." This longing for the simpler days of childhood stands in sharp contrast with the pain of the adult world, which is described as a "pathless wood." But this section also further develops the theme of the imagined world versus the real world: the boy's birch climbing has been wholly imaginary, a peaceful, playful time when one person can alone remake the world as he imagines it; in contrast, the real world lashes out at the narrator, and it is clear that he will achieve no victory over it.

Lines 48-53

Frost now, in line 48, develops his idea of escaping into an imaginary world: "I'd like to get away from earth awhile." However, he also makes it clear in lines 52-53 that he does not want to permanently escape the real world and that such a fate is not even desirable: "Earth's the right place for love: / I don't know where it's likely to go better." It is almost as if the limits of the real world must exist in order for the imaginative world to exist. This is similar to the theme of Frost's contemporary, the American poet Wallace

Stevens (1879-1955), in his poem "Sunday Morning," in which he calls death "the mother of beauty." The real world makes possible the fantasies of the poetic imagination and makes them more poignant because they cannot be reality.

Lines 54-59

In the concluding section of the poem, Frost ties these ideas together with the image of the birch trees. The act of his poetic imagination—reaching beyond the limits of reality—is now likened to climbing the birch tree. The motion of the tree, which allows a person to climb to its top only to bend down and drop him back on the ground, is in fact the way Frost wants his imagination to work: to allow him only to approach "heaven" and then to bring him back to the real world. This also ties in with the image of filling a cup beyond its brim (line 38): it is possible to exceed the limits of the real world but only a little bit, or else there is disaster. The poem's concluding line, which at first seems to be a bit of folksy wisdom—"One could do worse than be a swinger of birches"—contains darker possibilities: one could certainly do worse by not making the attempt, that is, by not using one's imagination, or one might actually escape—the birch might not swing, but instead it might allow the climber to leave the world of limitations entirely behind. The limits of the real world may be painful, but they define one as a person (or as a poet); if it is a solitary existence, it is still existence. Without limits, there can be no love (see line 52) or, for that matter, any other human emotion. Frost thus brings the poem back to the duality he expressed in the first lines of the poem. The real world provides the limits that make his poetry possible.

Themes

The Imagination vs. the Real World

One important theme of "Birches" is how Frost uses his poetic imagination to transcend the limits of the real world. He rejects the true reason the birches have been bent over in favor of his own fanciful explanation. On some level, he is claiming that this act of the imagination embodies a larger "truth" and is a worthy task, one that must be made with great care and diligence.

On the other hand, Frost makes it clear that one must remain within the natural world itself and that complete escape into the world of the imagination is impossible and not even desirable. It is this tension within the poem that makes each world both appealing and painful - the real world might be a place of pain, but it is also the place for love; the imaginary world is innocent, but it is also solitary and, by extension, loveless.

The Need for Limits

In "Birches" and many other Frost poems, the limits imposed by the real world are seen not only as a consequence of being in the world but as a necessary condition for existing as a person. The borders of the world define a person and place him or her in the real world, just as the birch trees are bent back toward the earth by the ice storm. In much of Frost's work, the idea that one could remove all the barriers between oneself and the world is at best undesirable and at worst terrifying. Thus, in "Birches," Frost pleads that "no fate willfully misunderstand me / And half grant what I wish and snatch me away." The removal of limits would leave one's personality groundless, with no way to define itself. Thus, wherever one looks in "Birches," one will find people or forces imposing limits: both the boy and the ice storm bend the birches, gravity pulls the narrator back down to earth as he climbs "toward heaven," surface tension holds water just past the brim of a cup.

This theme runs throughout Frost's work and can be found in many other of his poems, for example, "Mending Wall," "For Once, Then, Something," and "Desert Places," one of the most terrifying poems he ever wrote.

Conquest

Related to both the above themes is the idea of conquest, which occurs often in the first two-thirds of the poem. The ice storm conquers the trees, bending them down almost in supplication; the boy also bends the trees down in Frost's imagination. This expands the idea of the need for limits that push the boundaries of those that naturally occur. Thus, the poetic imagination becomes, in a sense, an act of conquest, allowing the poet to vanquish the natural world with his own mind. It is both the ultimate limit and the ultimate expression of his individuality - he stands alone in a world of his own making.

Some critics have also seen the images of conquest in terms of psychoanalytic theory. James Ellis, for example, notes that the boy "subdues" his father's trees, implying a kind of Oedipal conflict where the boy must symbolically kill his father in order to become his own person. In this reading, climbing the trees has overtly sexual meanings, and the trees themselves are phallic objects.

Pastoralism and Nature Poems

A pastoral is a kind of poem that is about rural life. It generally presents the natural world as unspoiled and idyllic as compared to the corruption and troubles of city life. In some respects, "Birches," as well as many other Frost poems, can be considered a pastoral in that it has a rural setting and represents the boy's solitary life as something to be desired. However, this picture is complicated by the fact that Frost admits freely that it does not actually exist; thus, his preferring it to reality is somewhat ironic because he knows it is false.

Style

Frost, unlike his great contemporaries such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams, never stopped using traditional forms in his poems. He continued using strict meter and rhyme forms throughout his career, famously remarking that free verse - poetry written without strict meter or rhyme - was like "playing tennis without a net."

"Birches" is written in blank verse. Blank verse is a kind of unrhymed, metered poetry that is very common in English. It consists of five "feet" (syllable groups) of two syllables each, in which the first syllable of each foot is unstressed and the second stressed: dah-DUH. This stress pattern is called iambic pentameter: an iamb is the two-syllable foot just described, and pentameter simply means that there are five feet in each line.

Blank verse has a long and glorious history in English poetry. It is the verse pattern of Shakespeare and Marlowe's plays, for example, and such other poems as Wordsworth's "The Prelude" and Keats' "The Eve of St. Agnes." As with all more formal verse patterns, it had fallen into disuse in the twentieth century but was still sometimes used, for example, Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning." Frost's stubborn use of traditional poetic forms not only reflected his personality but ties in with the theme of limits remarked upon above.

Historical Context

It is perhaps ironic that "Birches," set in a peaceful, almost idyllic New England landscape, first appeared during one of the most destructive wars in history. "Birches" was first published in 1915, when World War I was raging on the European continent. "Birches" shows little sign of the larger conflict that was engulfing the world; it is in no sense a war poem, and it displays no obvious political content. However, it is notable that there are many violent acts either shown or implied in the poem and that the language of conquest is conspicuous in the middle section of the poem.

Although Frost first reached prominence around the end of World War I, he had little in common with other poets, such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, who also became famous at that point. For one thing, he was over ten years older than either poet; for another, he lacked the rebel sensibility that led the younger poets to reject traditional forms in favor of a new poetics that are today called modern. Pound and Eliot were influenced by poets such as Baudelaire, author of "Flowers of Evil," and by his successors, French symbolist poets such as Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, and Stephane Mallarme. Their poems not only made use of a rich vocabulary of symbolic expression (often drawn from religious or mythological sources) but also turned away from traditional verse forms, which they found too rigid and artificial to express their ideas and feelings. Pound and Eliot (in his early period) worked within a style known as imagism, a successor to the symbolist movement, which strove to find concrete, arresting images that contained powerful symbolic associations and to create a vivid picture in the reader's mind.

Frost, however, looked back to an earlier tradition. He remained within the bounds of regular verse forms, and his primary influences were poets from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, such as the English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) and the American poet Edward Arlington Robinson (1869-1935). Typically for Frost, however, he cited earlier poets as his influences: the American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and, even further back, the Roman poets Horace and Virgil.

Frost's language, though, reflected the changes sweeping through the world of poetry. He rejected the stilted, artificial poetry of many nineteenth-century poets (including Robinson) in favor of a language, despite its use of such words as "e'en" and "twere," that sounds like the speech of ordinary people. His descriptions of the natural world are both arresting images and complex symbols that carry the weight of his moral convictions. So, although most of his poems do not reflect the political and historical realities of the time they were written (only late in his life, when Frost had become somewhat of a political figure himself as perhaps America's most well-known and beloved poet, does his poetry begin to reflect these things) and despite their backwards-looking forms, they remain very much, poems of their time.

Critical Overview

"Birches" has been viewed as an important expression of Frost's philosophical outlook as well as a transitional poem that signaled a significant change in his literary development. Critic Jeffrey Hart, writing in *Sewanee Review,* terms "Birches" a "Frostian manifesto" due to the poem's skeptical tone regarding spiritual matters. Hart draws attention to the first part of the poem, where Frost presents the fantastic idea that the trees were bent by a boy, then discredits this thought with a more rational explanation regarding ice storms. In this manner, according to Hart, Frost casts doubt on the irrational aspects of the spiritual realm and upholds the value of earthly reality. "Birches," the critic writes, "asserts the claims of Frost's skepticism and sense of human limits against the desire for transcendence and the sense of mysterious possibility." A similar conclusion is reached by Floyd C. Watkins in an essay published in *South Atlantic Quarterly.* Watkins explains that Frost "contemplates a moment when the soul may be completely absorbed into a union with the divine. But he is earthbound, limited, afraid. No sooner does he wish to get away from earth than he thinks of 'fate'— rather than God. And what might be a mystical experience turns into fear of death, a fear that he would be snatched away 'not to return.'"

John C. Kemp, in his book *Robert Frost and New England,* notes that "Birches" was written at a time when Frost's work took a new direction. In 1913, the poet was completing work on *North of Boston,* a collection that is considered one of his finest. "Birches" was also composed in 1913 but was withheld from *North of Boston*. Kemp believes that Frost made this decision because he "evidently knew that he had done something different in ['Birches'], something not quite appropriate to the tone and dramatic impetus of the other poems" that were published in the volume. In specifying what that difference is, Kemp argues that the poems in *North of Boston* often reflect the observations of "perplexed and uncertain" outsiders as they observe rural New England life. "Birches" on the other hand, expresses the "confident, affirmative, and dominating" voice of the "Yankee farmer." The farmer is a self-assured native who delivers pronouncements and wisdom based on his experiences in the countryside. Frost's later poetry continued and intensified this attitude, according to Kemp, making "Birches" a precursor of Frost's subsequent work. The critic also contends that this change in direction ultimately harmed Frost's poetry. "By adopting the stance of the Yankee farmer," Kemp writes, "Frost committed himself to conventional poses and slighted his original, imaginative impulses."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Smith is a writer and editor. In this essay, she argues that, while "Birches," like so many of Robert Frost's poems, is a delicate balancing act of memory and imagination, reality and fantasy, and heaven and earth, the poet's intent is not to judge these things but to find his own way among them.

Many people read Frost's poetry, especially better-known poems such as "The Road Not Taken" or "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," and come away with a sense of Frost as a rustic, good-natured painter of nature scenes. While Frost was indeed a great poet of the natural world, his vision was far more complex and nuanced than most readers realize at first. One of his great concerns was how a person can define himself or herself in the world - that is, what does it mean to be conscious and what is the relation between the external, observed world and the interior world of the mind and imagination? And his view of nature never forgets the vision of Emerson, the great romantic philosopher and poet who nevertheless held that all life comes from the death of other things.

Themes of estrangement and alienation abound in the poetry of Robert Frost. Yet his attitude towards estrangement is complex. On the one hand, being separated from people and things is lonely, dangerous, and maddening; but at the same time, giving in, tearing down barriers, and allowing oneself to merge with the outside world means losing definition, self-hood, one's sense of identity. Neither alternative is totally satisfactory, and both provide a constant tension that runs through the very heart of much of his greatest work.

For example, consider the trees at the beginning of "Birches." They are separated from the "straighter, darker trees" behind them, alone and beaten down. Yet at the same time, the fact that they have been bowed means that they have been part of the larger world and have been buffeted by its forces. They are both alienated and a part of the world. They may stand in defeat, but they still stand. In that respect, they exist as emblems of the darker part of Frost's vision.

That Frost considers some alienation not only a consequence of being alive, but perhaps its defining characteristic, can be seen in his attitude toward barriers and limits. "Birches" treats two such kinds of limits: the natural limits that are created and enforced by the outer world and the inner, self-defined limits created by the mind and the imagination. In the end, both are necessary, in a sense, but Frost definitely seems to have a preference for one over the other.

Natural limits occur throughout the poem, but they are most directly treated from lines 5 through 20 and from lines 45 through 52. Frost's view of these limits is complex, neither condemning them fully nor embracing them.

Consider the description of the ice-laden trees in the beginning of the poem (lines 6-11). First, it should be noted, we are inclined to view the ice storm negatively because Frost

has used it to refute his hoped-for explanation in line 3 of why the trees have become bowed: "I like to think some boy's been swinging them." Yet the storm, which has encrusted the branches with crystalline ice, makes them far more beautiful than they were before. They delight both eye and ear as they "click upon themselves" (line 7) and the sun "cracks and crazes their enamel" (line 9) - a line which conjures up an image of a vase whose enamel has been specially heated so that it cracks into a multicolored pattern of cracks (and which perhaps echoes, unconsciously, the image of the urn in John Keats' poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn.") The storm, despite impinging upon the trees, has given them the ability to become more lovely.

Yet another natural limit intrudes upon this scene: the sun, which causes the ice to melt and slide off the trees' branches and lie scattered around them. Frost thinks of heaven when he looks at this shattered ice, and from this point forward, imagination begins to intrude upon the natural world: the poem's first simile soon follows, and in a short while we have entered his fantasy, where it is a boy, not an ice storm, that has brought down the trees.

This fantasy lasts from lines 23 through 40, and Frost says that this is the one he "prefers." Yet, this fantasy, while it allows escape from the limits imposed by the outside world, is in its own way just as limited. The boy, while freed from the constraints of time and able to play in any season, is totally alone and isolated. And his freedom from the constraints of the natural world means that he is just as alienated from it as he is from other people.

Also, his world still limits what he can do. Climbing the trees requires painstaking care- as much care as trying to fill a cup beyond its brim. And he can only subdue things, not connect to them; when he is done with the birches, they are limp and unable to stand alone any longer. The imaginary world has affected them just as badly as the natural world and its ice storms.

The image of conquest, however, is an important one. Both the natural world of the ice storm and the imaginary world of the boy affect the birches in the same way, and the imagery is the same for both: that of violence, of bending another person to your will. The birches, after the ice storm is finished with them, are reduced to an attitude of supplication, like girls on their hands and knees. That they will never stand up straight again makes the victory of the ice storm complete; it has forever changed what they were, imposed its limits permanently on them.

The boy also takes all the "stiffness" out of his father's trees and does so until "not one was left / For him to conquer" (lines 31-32). On the face of things, his victory is as complete as the ice storm's. But it is undermined by our knowledge that this is a fantasy, that Frost himself has told us that it is ice storms, not boys, that affect birch trees so. However, the image of the trees as girls is an example of a simile; in other words, to see the totality of the ice storm's victory in the poem, we must use the tools of the imagination. Each side in this debate is limiting - and reinforcing - the other.

Following the fantasy of the boy among the trees, Frost returns to the natural world but depicts it in a very imaginative way. He describes a "pathless wood" in which the narrator wonders alone and afraid, burdened down with the hard choices of being an adult, his face burning and tickling "with the cobwebs / Broken across it, and one eye is weeping / From a twig's having lashed across it open" (lines 45-48).

Now the natural world is attacking the poet himself, rather than just the object of his consideration. It is imposing its limits upon him and inflicting pain as it does so. Yet this whole passage is itself a simile. Once again, in order to understand how the natural world limits us, we must turn to the imagination.

In the same way, the narrator's imaginative escape at the end of the poem relies on a specific image, that of climbing up the birch tree. The urge to move upwards, out of the naked reality of the world and into the timeless world of the mind - of heaven - is defeated once again by the outside world, which drags the tree down and places the narrator back in it. And this is what he wants: not the absolute conquest of the imagination displacing the real world, nor the awful destruction of himself - in a very real way, a death - that would result from his surrender to the outside world. Instead, he must exist along the arch of the birch tree, the curved path between two opposite poles, a narrow way to exist but the only way to exist and be his own person - and poet. Return now to the image of the ice-bound birches: the natural world has affected them and made them more than they were; so too does it affect the poet and make it possible - necessary - for him to use his imagination and create a poem. Thus Frost "likes to think" that it is boys who bow down birch trees.

There are glimpses of the terror Frost puts into other poems, such as "Design" or "Desert Places," in "Birches" - the passage about the woods is certainly frightening when one considers that Frost is using it as a metaphor for everyday life - but it never reaches the depths that those poems approach. Rather, it maps out the way we all are: we desire escape, freedom from death and time, but we cannot stand the alienation that such escape entails; we need the limits of being in the world. Thus, dark and pathless as the woods are, they remain "the best place for love." We need the world as much as our imagination and so must all go on being "swingers of birches."

Source: Erica Smith, Critical Essay on "Birches," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Barron is associate professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi. He has co-edited **Jewish American Poetry** *(from the University Press of New England) and* **Roads Not Taken: Rereading Robert Frost** *(forthcoming from the University of Missouri Press), as well as a forthcoming collection of essays on the poetic movement, New Formalism. Beginning in 2001, he will be the editor in chief of* **The Robert Frost Review.** *In the following essay, he shows how "Birches" is really a profound meditation on the meaning of and need for poetic metaphors in everyday life.*

Of all the poets in his generation, Robert Frost is the most surprisingly subtle. Compared to such American poets as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens, Frost's poetry seems to be accessible, straightforward, free of learned allusions and difficult language. The subtlety, however, reveals itself whenever readers begin to closely read a Frost poem. The careful attention close reading requires demonstrates just how complex, even tricky, Frost's poetry can be. A look at "Birches," for example, will show that, while it is a simple tale of a boyhood experience, it is also a profound meditation on the meaning of, and the need for, poetic metaphors. While a number of scholars have examined Frost's theory of metaphor, even those who have turned their attention to "Birches" do not go into the detail that a close reading requires. Of the recent critics who do, two are exemplary: Judith Oster's *Towards Robert Frost: The Reader and the Poet* and George Bagby's *Frost and the Book of Nature.*

Yet for all their insight into the meaning of metaphor in this poem, neither Bagby nor Oster accounts for the metaphorical richness of "Birches." When one does, one finds that, from the very first lines, metaphor is a central issue in this poem. The poem begins with a simple declaration. The poet tells his readers that, when he sees "birches bend to left and right," he likes to imagine what caused them to be so bent. He says, "I like to think some boy's been swinging them." Given this relatively flat declaration, the first three lines of the poem seem as straightforward as any three lines of poetry can be. But notice that Frost's explanation for the bent trees is actually just a wish, an imagined possibility, not a fact. He says, "I like to think." And, after he admits his own fantasy, he corrects that imaginative, poetic idea with a naturalistic fact: "But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay / As ice storms do." That natural fact, at war with his poetic imagination, ought to put an end to his delightful image of a boy's exuberant play among the trees. Notice, though, that this naturalistic fact does not put an end to Frost's imaginative desire to create metaphors.

What poets call a caesura, a pause, occurs in line 5 with the period in the middle of the line. This caesura is immensely important because it stops the intrusion of the natural fact midway through the line. Frost, in effect, will not let natural science have the last word. Instead, after stating the natural fact of the ice storm, he appeals directly to his readers: "you must have seen them." It is as if Frost were asking his readers to confirm his own sense that bent trees are a strange and even exciting phenomenon - so strange that they are worthy of metaphors. Describing the trees after the ice storm, Frost's language is both exact and vivid. Then, in line 9, he begins to get carried away: his

language becomes poetic, which is to say that it becomes metaphorical. Describing the effect of wind and light on the ice in the trees, he says that the "stir" of the wind "cracks and crazes their [the trees'] enamel." Well, the birches do not really have enamel on them; that is a metaphor for the ice. And what does "crazes" mean? In a 1918 talk, "The Unmade Word," to high school students about this very poem, he asked the students about his use of the word "crazes." One of the students took notes on the talk and later described it. Frost asked, "Where do you think I got that word 'crazes'? [no answer] Mr. Frost went to the blackboard, and drew a pattern of crackly china." The word, as this anecdote reveals, is a metaphor to explain the image of the trees. And this is not the only metaphor. It is just the beginning of a series of metaphors. In the next four lines (which comprise a complete sentence), one finds even more. It is as if, having created one metaphor, he finds he cannot stop himself from creating even more. He goes so far as to say that "You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen." Again, in his talk to the high school students mentioned above, Frost said, "I wonder if you think I fetched that word dome too far?" After asking that question, he added, "but I like it."

These are not the only metaphors in this part of the poem. After comparing the trees to china or pottery, and then to heaven, Frost next makes the most alluring and surprising metaphor of them all: he compares the trees to "girls on hands and knees that throw their hair / Before them over their heads to dry in the sun." Here, he introduces a sensual image and prepares the way for a serious theme about love that will emerge only at the end of the poem. But at this point, in the first twenty lines, it is enough to notice that Frost has devoted more than half of his lines (twelve) to metaphors about the ice on the trees. Without using *like* or *as,* the first part of Frost's poem is little more than a comparison of ice-storm-bent trees to various other things and people. Then, in line 21, Frost returns to his beginning: he returns to line 4. In line 21, he basically apologizes to the reader for ever even mentioning the fact of the ice storm:

But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter of fact about the ice storm,
I should prefer to have some boy bend them

These seemingly simple statements are in fact amazingly complicated. For "Truth," the mundane natural fact of the ice storm, was, in the previous twenty lines, already undercut by the poetic imagination of Frost's many metaphors. And the imagined ideal of a boy is, in the lines that follow, presented not as something startling and imaginative, but as a fact. In other words, "Truth" with a capital "T" may well be the fact that an ice storm bent the trees - but, in this poem, it is depicted as a fantasy of heavenly domes, young girls, and pottery. The imagination, by contrast, which would rather have a boy bend those trees, is described in non-metaphorical, realistic imagery. Indeed, from line 21 to line 40, Frost offers a set of brilliant, exciting, and powerfully vivid images of a boy swinging the trees down to their present bent shape. Even though this is supposed to be his imagination at work, the language is almost entirely descriptive, offering almost no metaphors.

In line 41, Frost then explains why his fantasy seemed to be so real. He admits, "So was I once myself a swinger of birches. / And so I dream of going back to be." These

lines are the very meat and substance of the poem. They explain why Frost is so committed both to metaphor and to his own image of a boy rather than to an ice storm as the explanation for these trees' shape. When he says that he "dreams of going back" to being a "swinger of birches," he is using that image as a metaphor for a state of being, for a time of life, for the condition of youth. He says as much in the next lines, which are powerful precisely for their honesty. And, in them, one learns why metaphors are necessary. They demonstrate to readers that metaphors are psychological tools by which one copes with everyday life:

It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.

Look at the imagery here. Comparing life's journey to a wood without paths, to a place where there are no roads, no directions, Frost explains that it will be inevitable that in such a situation one will become injured. One's face, even one's eyes, will be damaged. There will be pain. Frost explains his sense of getting older, of traveling on life's journey through this metaphor of the woods. And by comparing life to a wood and adulthood to a journey through it, he tells his readers that young people are far happier than adults since they do not have to go anywhere. They get to swing and play. In fact, *they* damage the trees. In other words, the trees have to submit to the boy; they have to bend to *his* will. Older people, says Frost, are not so fortunate; they have to submit to nature. They walk with "one eye weeping."

Given this realization that youth is a far more pleasant experience than maturity, a realization stated entirely in metaphorical terms, Frost admits that, though he is an adult, he would much rather be a swinger of birches; he would rather, as he says in line 48, "get away from earth awhile / And then come back to it and begin over." Immediately, however, Frost realizes that these lines have another implication. They can be interpreted as meaning that he *really* wants to get away from earth; they can be interpreted to mean that, in other words, he wants to die, that he wants to leave the world altogether. Not intending to imply that at all, he adds ironically and even humorously, "May no fate willfully misunderstand me / And half grant what I wish and snatch me away."

By insisting that this is not a poem about the afterlife, that it is not a meditation on death or a contemplation of suicide, Frost wants his readers to focus only on his idea of life's meaning. So far, in this poem, Frost has said that life is a difficult journey filled with pain. He has shown through his own example how that pain can be tempered, even eradicated, through the salvific power of the poetic imagination. The poetic imagination allows one to make metaphors, and the metaphors offer comfort when nothing else will. The poem, then, is a profound meditation on the meaning of aging, of maturity, and above all on the necessity of making metaphors.

What happens next, however, is especially mysterious, and only a close reading reveals just how strange it is. After Frost insists that he is not in any way asking for death or putting all his faith and hope into an imagined afterlife, he writes, "Earth's the right place for love." What makes this mysterious is that love has not been an issue anywhere in the previous 51 lines. Why does he make it an issue here? What, as the rock star Tina Turner would say, has love got to do with it? The concluding seven lines offer a tentative and profound answer. In them, Frost not only defends the need for his own metaphor of a boy, rather than an ice storm, being the cause of the trees' shape, but he also defends his refusal to adopt the conventional Christian attitude that life on Earth is but a prelude to the afterlife. As one Catholic scholar of Frost, Edward Ingebretson, put it, these lines show that for Frost "Love is the soul's essential gravity." Also, when Frost in these concluding lines, turns to love, he says that life on Earth must be about the experience of human love. For Frost, the purpose of life, as of love, is poetic. As he says, "I don't know where it's likely to go better." Together, these two lines - "Earth's the right place for love: / I don't know where it's likely to go better" - constitute Robert Frost's creed. And, as the Frost scholar James M. Cox put it, they are also "Frost's greatest lines - lines which reveal the grace and loss and gain of all Frost's life and language." These lines, it must be said, are not the boy's words. They are Frost the poet's words. The boy, a swinger of trees, has not yet come to this realization, but Frost implies that he will. Still, the boy has not yet come to any of that, and his life without considerations, without the need to forge paths, without pain, enables him to be the master, not the mastered. Such a situation certainly holds its attractions. A man of this world, Frost readily admits his own need for the boy's youthful experience of mastery, irresponsibility, and play. At the same time, he wishes for the adult world despite the pains that come with it. Frost concludes, "That would be good both going and coming back." By this, Frost means that if he could have his way, he would have both attitudes at once. A mature man, he would, at the same time, like to be a boy.

In the final line, when Frost says, "One could do worse than be a swinger of birches," one might well ask, what could be worse? The answer is that to be only such a swinger is to forsake love altogether. While one might want to forsake the "pathless wood" of life to be such a swinger, Frost implies that, in the end, one will have a lonely, hollow existence based on power and will. The playfulness of youth comes with its own price. Nonetheless, Frost will not give up on that dream, that metaphor, either. For if he were to forsake his imagined world of a boy swinging on trees, he would be left only with a mechanistic, non-poetic, scientific view - truth. To insist on the need for his own metaphor of the boy is to insist, as well, on the importance of love, the least practical and sensible of emotions.

Source: Jonathan N. Barron, Critical Essay on "Birches," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Perkins has published widely in the field of twentieth-century American and British literature. In the following essay, she examines how Frost uses images of nature in his poem to reflect its themes.

Robert Frost's "Birches" presents vivid, personal descriptions of nature as he describes a boy playfully swinging on birches. As he often does in his poetry, Frost here presents an ambiguous view of the natural world and uses that as a starting point for a questioning of larger issues. As he describes a hypothetical boy climbing high up birches and then riding them down to the ground, Frost raises questions about the nature of human existence.

The poem opens with the speaker seeing "birches bend to left and right" and imagining that a young boy has been swinging on them during play. Immediately, though, he undercuts his imaginative, pleasing image with the harsher truth of nature. He acknowledges that only ice storms could have bent the trees in such a way. Frost continues this juxtaposition of pleasant and harsh images when he contrasts the sun's warmth with the shattered ice.

The damage done by the ice causes them to "never right themselves." The speaker notes that "Truth broke in" to his pleasant vision of a boy at play. Nature can be beautiful and offer an opportunity for contemplation and escape from the pressures of life, but it also can be cruel and destructive. This duality in nature is echoed in his 1923 poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." In this poem, while the speaker stops to watch "woods fill up with snow," he notes the "lovely, dark and deep" setting as well as the fact that stopping there too long would result in death.

The ambiguity Frost finds in nature becomes a metaphor for the ambiguity he finds in human experience. This larger theme is first glimpsed through the boy's playing on the trees. Here, again, Frost juxtaposes positive and negative images. What at first seems like innocent play gains a darker note when the speaker describes the ultimate damage done by the boy:

One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer.

Frost may be suggesting that the boy's need to subdue and conquer the trees points to the destructive side of human nature. The boy's motive could also stem from his feelings of isolation since he was "too far from town to learn baseball" and so was forced always to "play alone."

The speaker contrasts the more negative images of the boy's experience with the birches with his own fond memories of playing on the trees although both turn to this activity as a form of escape. The speaker longs again to be "a swinger of birches."

Frost uses harsh images of nature to suggest the speaker's world-weariness:

And life is too much like a pathless wood....
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.

He wants to swing on the trees, not to conquer them as the boy does, but to have an opportunity to reach up toward heaven.

As the speaker describes his dream of going back to the birches, Frost introduces another topic in the poem and, as he has done with the others, presents it ambiguously. The speaker's desire to escape the earth's demands and climb toward heaven suggests he is looking for a spiritual salvation. Instead of escaping the problems of life through trying to control nature, the speaker's goal is to reach up to a higher level. Yet, when the speaker concludes that he wants to come back to earth "and begin over," Frost questions the reality of spiritual salvation:

May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.

So, while the trials of life prompt him to search for a higher power that can lead him to paradise, he ultimately is more comfortable with the "Truth" of his earthly existence. Yet he would like to experience both worlds, climbing "Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more," then dipping him down back to earth.

A further comparison of "Birches" to "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" might suggest another motive for the speaker's climbing of the birches. Critics have suggested that the speaker in "Stopping by Woods" may have a death wish. As he stops to watch the "lovely, dark and deep" woods fill up with snow, he is pulled into the tranquil scene with its "easy wind and downy flake" and could be contemplating suicide. His horse, however, recognizes the danger in staying too long on "the darkest evening of the year" next to the frozen lake and so pulls the speaker away from the brink of death. And so he decides that while the scene could offer him ultimate peace, he will remain.

The speakers in both poems feel a need "to get away from earth awhile" but also to "come back to it and begin over." Perhaps both also consider death as a movement "toward heaven" and peace. Frost's ambiguous spiritual images raise questions about the speaker's motives and about the nature of human experience but provide no concrete answers.

Two critics offer similar conclusions about "Birches." Jeffrey Hart, in his article "Frost and Eliot," published in the Sewanee Review, finds a skepticism about spirituality in

"Birches." He argues that since the beginning of the poem, Frost has questioned reality, starting with the reason for the bent birches. Thus, he continues, Frost carries that same sense of doubt to the notion that one can attain a heavenly paradise. "Birches," he concludes, "asserts the claims of Frost's skepticism and sense of human limits against the desire for transcendence and the sense of mysterious possibility." This thesis is echoed by Floyd C. Watkins in "Going and Coming Back: Robert Frost's Religious Poetry." Watkins asserts that Frost

contemplates a moment when the soul may be completely absorbed into a union with the divine. But he is earthbound, limited, afraid. No sooner does he wish to get away from earth than he thinks of "fate"— rather than God. And what might be a mystical experience turns into fear of death, a fear that he would be snatched away "not to return."

In another poem, "Design" (first published in 1912 as "In White" and then heavily revised and retitled in 1936), Frost also questions spirituality as he focuses on a common scene in nature. As the speaker observes a spider trap a moth on a flower, he questions not only the cruelty he finds in nature but the very existence of God:

What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?—
If design govern in a thing so small.

In his study of modern poetry, critic David Perkins comments on Frost's style:

the wisdom of [Frost's] poetry lies not so much in what he says as in the way he says it. The form is the major content. He keeps his balance, not coming down on one side or the other of arguments that cannot be settled. He moves forward, and momentary clarifications of an attitude or point of view rise to the surface, shimmer, and are submerged in the ongoing flow. He gives order and unity not to existence, but to an episode, a figure, and the figure has some "ulteriority" about it, a meaning beyond what is said.

In "Birches," as in many of his poems, Frost turns to the world of nature to find "an episode" that has this sense of "ulteriority" about it. In his description of a young boy, and later an older man, experiencing the pleasure of swinging on birches during a New England summer, Frost creates a perfect metaphor to express his insightful commentary on the ambiguity and complexity of the human experience.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "Birches," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay excerpt, Wallace explores the theme of solitude in "Birches," calling it "characteristic Frost."

Frost offers us poems written in the spirit of solitude, with all of her delights. Solitude is separateness seen upside down, or from the other side, where what are sometimes felt as limits are not barriers at all. Therefore the popularity of "Birches" isn't at all incidental to Frost's central concerns. "Birches" truly is representative Frost, but in it privacy is choice, and the sweetness of the poem is genuine, the sweetness of solitude. Because Frost's intelligence is always part of feeling in his best poems, "Birches" fills us with the recognizable delight of a world inhabited only by the self, a world made by the self, at the same time that it recognizes the limits and temptations of that satisfaction. "Birches" makes a grove of privacy, creates the place where the poet imagines the poem's central figure:

Some boy too far from town to learn baseball
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.

We never feel the boy's loneliness as deprivation, but as pleasure. The imagined grove of trees becomes the scene, in the poet's mind, for a boy's playing out of his impulses, subduing and bending the world to his own shape as only solitude permits us. In this privacy there is the wide space of freedom. "Birches" is characteristic Frost because in it he confirms his own connection both to a landscape of solitude and to a solitary figure. And what we love about the poem, no matter how long we have read or studied Frost, is what first drew us to it and draws us back again: the image of the trees, at one with our memory and longing for the child's world which is the self, where everything bends to the self, and our whole being seems to spill out of us, and yet is contained, like a cup filled "even above the brim."

We like the swish upward and back as well, the swings built into the rhythms of the poem. They are the gestures of expansiveness and contraction which we know and remember in ourselves, and they are part of the poet's playfulness which includes us, unlike his teasing which excludes us. This playfulness originates in the world of solitude Frost makes for himself, and we make as we listen to the poem. But "Birches" brings intelligence to this sweetness because Frost listens to himself as he creates this world, and hears how part of solitude's sweetness depends upon its limits, the responsibility of return to the world of others. Without *that* the sweetness *would* turn sugary, as Randall Jarrell thought it did, and the delight of a world where he is the sole inhabitant would become vanity, the remove from the world of others which can make one a monster. That's why Frost swings out and back again, doubles back on himself in the poem. He has to ground solitude with the acknowledgement that "Earth's the right place for love."

Source: Patricia Wallace, "Separateness and Solitude in Frost," in *Kenyon Review,* Vol. VI, No. 1, Winter 1984, pp. 5-6.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay excerpt, Kemp analyzes "Birches" in the context of Frost's poetic output of 1913, finding it to be "an initial and highly consequential experiment."

Although Frost can be said to have reached his artistic maturity in the summer of 1913 when he completed the regional poetry that made *North of Boston* a significant contribution to American literature, he soon discovered how difficult it was to combine his new role as Yankee poet with his ambition to be "one of the most notable craftsmen" of the age. By December of that crucial year, the struggle to select, revise, and organize his poetry into an effective structure left him "clean shucked out," and, as the conclusion to *North of Boston* indicates, somewhat distraught and discouraged.

In the ensuing years, he sought a more reassuring regional identity, a different approach to the "poetry of the farm." Instead of presenting himself as an observer, analyst, and explorer north of Boston, he often posed as a spokesman for the region and an embodiment of its virtues. Although less faithful to his personality and background, this pose was gratifying in several ways. The more he played the true rustic, the more favorably his audiences and commentators seemed to respond. It was also easier to forget or overlook fears and uncertainties about his relationship to New England than to confront them as he had in his second collection.

His decision to place "The Wood-Pile" and "Good Hours" at the end of *North of Boston* is the most obvious evidence of his unsettled frame of mind late in 1913. Although written earlier, the two pieces seemed to present a judgment on his recent work, implying that the brilliantly dramatized regional studies were a "profanation" of New England, an unworthy artistic endeavor.

The precarious state of Frost's artistic development is also suggested by another conclusion he reached while struggling with the "larger design" of *North of Boston:* his decision to exclude from the volume a poem referred to as "Swinging Birches" in his letter of 7 August to John Bartlett. Strangely, among the twelve "New England Eclogues" described to Bartlett as destined for the "next book," only "Birches" was later found unworthy to appear in the final version.

How are we to explain this change of heart? Possibly, Frost failed to reach a satisfactory revision of "Swinging Birches" until after *North of Boston* had gone to press. It seems more likely, however, that if he had the piece well enough along to mention it to Bartlett in August, he *could* have completed it, had he been committed to it, by November, when he gave the collection to his publishers. His apparent lack of early commitment is particularly significant, given his tendency in later years to single out the poem as one of his most characteristic pieces. But his decision was the right one: "Birches" is not well suited to *North of Boston.* On the contrary, it is important as a transitional piece, prefiguring much of the post-1913 poetry.

Although not comparable to the twelve overtly dramatic poems in *North of Boston,* "Birches" is broadly similar in form to the three meditative lyrics, "Mending Wall," "After Apple-Picking," and "The Wood-Pile"; thus Frost could not have omitted it on generic grounds alone. Yet he evidently knew that he had done something different in it, something not quite appropriate to the tone and dramatic impetus of the other poems. Its speaker is a much more confident, affirmative, and dominating figure in the poem than are the other speakers. They face conflicts that leave them perplexed and uncertain, whereas the swinger of birches, surmounting all doubts and difficult questions, is given to pronouncements that have an oracular finality about them, despite their casual tone: "Earth's the right place for love. . . . One could do worse than be a swinger of birches."

It is noteworthy that two scholarly detractors of "Birches," Cleanth Brooks and Radcliffe Squires, though not concerned with its relationship to *North of Boston,* have nevertheless elected to contrast it with "After Apple-Picking," one of the 1913 meditative lyrics that *does* belong in that collection. The contrast between these poems is important because Frost shifted his focus subtly when he wrote "Birches," moving away from vivid evocation of experience (as in "Mending Wall," "After Apple-Picking," "The Wood-Pile," and the other poems in *North of Boston*) and toward ardent expression of philosophy. The speaker proclaims a Yankee identity with unprecedented confidence, coming "downstage," as Brooks phrases it, "to philosophize explicitly." His tone and the stance he takes in the poem are entirely different from what we saw in *North of Boston,* where the persona tends to be unsure of himself, a bit uncomfortable, and occasionally apologetic.

The philosophy articulated in "Birches" poses no threat to popular values or beliefs, and it is so appealingly affirmative that many readers have treasured the poem as a masterpiece. Among Frost's most celebrated works, perhaps only "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" ranks ahead of it. Yet to critics like Brooks and Squires, the persona's philosophical stance in "Birches" is a serious weakness. And another perceptive commentator, Randall Jarrell, has complained that so much popularity makes it almost impossible for us to approach Frost without "the taste of 'Birches' in our mouth - a taste a little brassy, a little sugary." Associating such an undesirable flavor with the "Yankee Editorialist side of Frost," Jarrell proposes, as a major objective for his essay "To the Laodiceans," to cleanse away this all-too-persistent pungency.

It is not the purpose of the present study to arbitrate the dispute over "Birches." No easy compromises are likely, owing to sharply conflicting tastes among Frost's readers. The didactic and philosophical element that some critics have attacked strikes others as the very core of Frost's virtue. The poet's friend Sidney Cox dedicated an entire book to expounding the philosophy of the "Swinger of Birches," with exempla from the poems and from the conversation of the master. Indeed, the brassy, sugary taste that offended Randall Jarrell may appeal to many other readers precisely because of its reassuring strength in an age of anxiety and uncertainty.

Perhaps impartial observers can accept the notion that "Birches" is neither as bad as its harshest opponents suggest nor as good as its most adoring advocates claim. There

must be *some* poetry in a work that remains so delightful and touching, so vivid and quotable after half a century in the spotlight. Yet, how can we consider it a true masterpiece when a significant group of intelligent, expertly qualified, independent readers - undoubtedly a minority, but still a group to be reckoned with - has raised serious and thoughtful objections to it? What needs to be recognized is that it is a controversial piece, and that we can find nothing quite like it in Frost's work up through the Beaconsfield period. The intense debate it has aroused should also help us to realize that the poem is an anomaly deserving close study as an initial and highly consequential experiment with a new approach to New England poetry.

Robert Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience* provides a theoretical basis that helps to explain the difference between "Birches" and Frost's other meditative lyrics of 1913. Langbaum has demonstrated the importance of what he calls the "extraordinary perspective" as a device "to keep the poem located - to keep the dramatic situation from turning into a rhetorical device and the landscape from turning into a metaphor for an abstract idea." Extraordinary perspectives dominate "Mending Wall," first in the speaker's perception of a mysterious "something . . . that doesn't love a wall," then in his quirky glimpses of fence mending as game, ritual, even tragedy, and finally in his climactic vision of the neighbor as an "old-stone savage." In "After Apple-Picking," the pervasive "strangeness" of looking through a thin sheet of ice leads to chimerical dreams and recollections of the harvest effort. And "The Wood-Pile" presents extraordinary perspectives not only on the "slow smokeless burning of decay" and the remarkable "small bird" who seemed to take things "as personal to himself," but also on the entire setting, where "the view was all in lines" and the speaker could not say "for certain" whether he was "here / Or somewhere else."

"Birches," on the other hand, contains three fairly lengthy descriptions that do not involve unusual perspectives. In fact, the most original and distinctive vision in the poem - the passage treating the ice on the trees - is undercut both by the self-consciousness of its final line ("You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen") and by the two much more conventionally perceived environments that follow it: the rural boyhood of the swinger of birches and the "pathless wood," which represents life's "considerations." As a result, the poem's ardent concluding lines - its closing pronouncements on life, death, and human aspiration - do not arise from a particular experience. Instead, they are presented as doctrines that we must accept or reject on the basis of our credence in the speaker as a wise countryman whose familiarity with birch trees, ice storms, and pathless woods gives him authority as a philosopher.

Since in "Birches" the natural object - tree, ice crystal, pathless wood, etc. - functions as proof of the speaker's rusticity, Frost has no need for extraordinary perspectives, and therefore the poem does little to convince us that an "experience," to use Langbaum's wording, "is really taking place, that the object is seen and not merely remembered from a public or abstract view of it." This is not to deny that the poem contains some brilliant descriptive passages (especially memorable are the clicking, cracking, shattering ice crystals in lines 7-11 and the boy's painstaking climb and sudden, exhilarating descent in lines 35-40), and without doubt, the closing lines offer an engaging exegesis of swinging birches as a way of life. But though we learn a great deal about this speaker's

beliefs and preferences, we find at last that he has not revealed himself as profoundly as does the speaker in "After Apple-Picking." It is remarkable that the verb "to like," which does not appear in Frost's nondramatic poetry prior to "Birches," is used three times in this poem: "I like to think"; "I'd like to get away"; and "I'd like to go." The speaker also tells us what he would "prefer," "dream of," and "wish." But while his preferences are generally appealing, and while they seem intellectually justified, they are not *poetically* justified in the sense that Langbaum suggests when he discusses the "extraordinary perspective" as a "sign that the experience is really taking place": "The experience has validity just because it is dramatized as an event which we must accept as having taken place, rather than formulated as an idea with which we must agree or disagree."

"Mending Wall," "After Apple-Picking," and "The Wood-Pile" are centered on specific events that involve the speaker in dramatic conflicts and lead him to extraordinary perspectives. The act of repairing the wall and trying to reason with the crusty farmer, the termination of the harvest and the preparation for a winter's rest, the vagrant woodland ramble and the discovery of the perplexing woodpile - all these are events that we indeed "accept as having taken place."

Unlike the meditative lyrics Frost selected for *North of Boston,* however, "Birches" does not present a central dramatized event as a stimulus for the speaker's utterance. Although the conclusion seems sincere, and although Frost created a persuasive metaphorical context for it, the final sentiments do not grow dramatically out of the experiences alluded to. Yes, the speaker has observed ice storms that bend the birches "down to stay"; he has "learned all there is / To learn" about swinging birches; and he has struggled through the "considerations" of life's "pathless wood." But the relationship of these experiences to his present utterance - the poem - is left unclear. We would be more willing to accept what Squires calls a "contradictory jumble" of images and ideas if we were convinced (as Eliot and Pound often convince us) that the diverse materials had coalesced in the speaker's mind. Frost's confession that the poem was "two fragments soldered together" is revealing; the overt, affected capriciousness of the transitions between major sections of the poem indicates that instead of striving to establish the dynamics of dramatized experience, he felt he could rely on the force of his speaker's personality and rural background. In early editions, a parenthetical question, "(Now am I free to be poetical?)," followed line 22, making the transition between the ice storm and the country youth even more arbitrary.

By comparing "Birches" with Frost's other work in 1913 we can see that even before completing *North of Boston* he had begun to explore a different way of exploiting his new sense of identity as a New Englander. The confidence he gained while fashioning his "book of people" encouraged him to don his Yankee mask more aggressively than he had in poems like "Mending Wall" and "After Apple-Picking." Less than a year after denying to Miss Ward the "virtue in Location", he produced a poem that relies on a fundamental association of his poetic self - "So was I once myself" - with the rustic lad who tended cows and lived "too far from town to learn baseball." The poem's philosophy presupposes a philosopher who was once himself just such a rustic lad - a role that Frost was more than willing to play, even though *his* boyhood had been one of

basepaths rather than cowpaths, and town sandlots rather than country pastures. (His biographer attests that he knew more about stealing bases when he was fourteen than he did about milking cows at twice that age.)

It may seem arbitrary to press too hard the issue of honesty in this poem. Art, after all, relies on fantasy and deception. Yet there are different types of fantasy and many motives for deception. If we are confident that an artist has kept faith with some personal vision or inner self, we can accept falsification of many things. When Frost presents himself as a farm worker, for instance - a mower wielding his scythe or apple picker resting his weary body - the fantasy seems sincere and convincing. When we consider Frost's career and personal history, however, we may wonder about his motives in falsifying the character of his childhood. The resulting images lack originality and inspiration. Surely "Birches" contains some vivid and forceful passages, but when a line or phrase gives us too strong a sense of the poet's calculated effort to validate his speaker's rusticity, the spell of the poem, its incantatory charm and imaginative vision, is threatened. Fortunately, in "Birches" this threat is hardly noticeable, certainly not overwhelming or repellent, unless we want it to be.

"Birches," of course, is not an extreme instance of the Yankee farmer as poetic persona. But after writing for more than twenty years, Frost had never - not in his two early experiments with a regional speaker ("The Tuft of Flowers" and "Mowing") and surely not in *North of Boston* - come so close to producing advertisements for himself as a Yankee poet. Thus this poem in 1913 was a significant step toward more blatant exhibitions soon to come. He had not been in England a year when he began to speculate about how his "New England impressions" might be jeopardized by too much exposure to alien settings. Soon the planned trip to France was called off, and shortly after *North of Boston* went to press, he started to entertain a "dream" that, having gained a name for himself in London, he could "do the rest of it from a farm in New England where I could live cheap and get Yankier and Yankier."

Source: John C. Kemp, "The Poet of New England," in *Robert Frost and New England,* Princeton University Press, 1979, pp. 134-42.

Critical Essay #6

In the following essay excerpt, Hart shows how "Birches" represents the difference between the earthbound Frost and the transcendentalism of T. S. Eliot.

In "Birches" the poet begins by recalling that he has seen birches permanently bent by the ice that collects on them in the winter, and then he toys with a pleasant fancy. When he looks at birches bent in this way, he "likes to think some boy's been swinging them." But he knows that this is not true—that the trees bent by ice all winter are permanently bent and that swinging does not do this, and he withdraws the thought almost as soon as it is offered. In this seemingly casual discourse, a serious point is being broached: truth has asserted its claims at the expense of fancy. Ice, not a boy playing. But fancy is not defeated. It comes forward again in the form of a playful simile. The trees, bent by the ice, now arch in the woods

Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.

Only "like" girls. The poet returns to the ordinary world of prosy reality:

But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm
I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows

The resistance to the metaphorical mode throughout the first part of the poem is important—indeed it is the subject of the poem: the Frostian skepticism will admit no easy beauties, and this skepticism prepares us for the emblematic passage which follows. The poet himself, we hear, was a swinger of birches when a boy, and now, when "weary of considerations" and when "life is too much like a pathless wood," he dreams of going back: "I'd like to get away from earth awhile / And then come back to it and begin over."

Frost's "pathless wood" in this poem can hardly fail to remind us of Dante. Frost too has been lost in that wood. He would like to get away from earth awhile—but only for awhile. Frost will not go on with Dante to the Paradiso and the heavenly love of Beatrice; the movement is back to earth, a movement analogous to those lines in which Truth successfully asserted its claims against fancy:

May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.
I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,

But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

It is the point of the birches that they climb toward heaven, but also return the poet to earth, for "earth's the right place for love: / I don't know where it's likely to go better." The skepticism is pervasive, and works both ways: *he* does not know where it is "likely" to go better. Issues of epistemology and probability lurk behind the line. We are in the mental climate of eighteenth-century skepticism, and among eighteenth-century philosophical issues; we think of Locke and Berkeley, and of Hume. And this eighteenth-century skepticism, this resistance to metaphor and analogy, takes on an ultimate importance in Frost, for all philosophical theology, all affirmation of connection between time and eternity, man and God, depends on some form of analogy: it gets us from here to there and back again. Despite his pervasive skepticism, and despite the experience evoked in the lines about the pathless wood, Frost does make his affirmation. Not only that "earth's the right place for love" but that, as in the childhood joys of swinging birches, earth enables us to climb "toward" heaven. Whether we ever get closer or not, our approach is from earth. These affirmations, moreover, are all the more potent because earned amid the surrounding skepticism. The final two lines develop enormous power: good both going away and *coming* back to earth. Then in the seemingly casual throwaway: "One could do worse."

Read in this way, "Birches" asserts the claims of Frost's skepticism and sense of human limits against the desire for transcendence and the sense of mysterious possibility. His goal is to wring a great poetry out of an irreducible minimum, to triumph over the possibility of desolation which is always present, and is never finally transcended. The triumph is in its way as impressive as Eliot's.

Source: Jeffrey Hart, "Frost and Eliot," in *Sewanee Review,* Vol. 84, No. 3, Summer 1976, pp. 425-47.

Adaptations

A videocassette, *New England in Autumn* (1998), distributed by Monterey Home Video, includes footage of Robert Frost's homes in New England and readings of his works.

Another video, *Robert Frost* (1988), includes interviews with Seamus Heaney and other poets and a dramatic reading by Joan Allen of one of Frost's poems.

Henry Holt & Co. has produced an interactive computer resource on CD, *Robert Frost: Poems, Life, Legacy* (1998). It includes an interactive documentary, 1,500 pages of critical and biographical literature, and 69 poems read by Frost himself.

Topics for Further Study

Frost remarks that "Earth's the place for love" and does not want to be separated from it. Do you agree? What do you think this means about Frost's attitude about the afterlife?

Frost's poems are intimately connected with the natural environment and climate of New England; for example, the ice storms that bend down the birches. What is unique about the climate or area in which you live? Search for poems in which your area or climate has been celebrated.

Write a poem about your own childhood or on how you remember your childhood. Do you think you were more innocent then than now? If so, or if not, explain whether or not that childhood innocence is something to be desired.

Compare and Contrast

1915: War rages across northern France; T. S. Eliot publishes "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in Poetry; "Birches" appears in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Frost is forced to return to America by the war, while Eliot moves to London.

1948: Eliot receives the Nobel Prize for literature. By this time, Frost had won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry an unprecedented four times (1924, 1931, 1937, 1943)—yet, much to his dismay, he is never considered for the Nobel Prize. This is perhaps due to his deep association with New England and the apparent concern of his poetry only with its landscape, as opposed to Eliot's more cosmopolitan life and his concern with the universal issues of life and religion.

1961: Frost is selected to read his poem "The Gift Outright" at President John F. Kennedy's inauguration. Frost at this point has held the position of official U.S. Poet Laureate, from 1958 to 1959.

1992: Derek Walcott, the Caribbean poet, wins the Nobel Prize for literature.

What Do I Read Next?

The Poetry of Robert Frost (1969) includes all of the poems mentioned in this article and remains the standard source for Frost's work.

The American poet Galway Kinnell also features New England as the setting for many of his poems. His *Selected Poems*(1982) includes "For Robert Frost," an account not only of his visit with Frost but an assessment of his life and career as a poet.

Homage to Robert Frost (1996) includes essays about Frost and his poems by (among others) Nobel Prize winners Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Derek Walcott.

Peter Davison's *The Fading Smile: Poets in Boston, 1955-1960* (1994) examines Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath, among others, who were some of the best poets working in the United States at the time.

Further Study

For Further Study Bloom, Harold, ed., *Robert Frost,* Modern Critical Views series, Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.

This book contains many essays by leading critics about the poems of Robert Frost.

Meyers, Jeffrey, *Robert Frost:* A Biography, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997.

This controversial biography examines the author's personal life closely, including a previously unchronicled affair with his secretary.

Parini, Jay, *Robert Frost: A Life,* Henry Holt & Co., 1999.

Parini's biography is more sympathetic to his subject than other biographers have been without ignoring Frost's many personal faults.

Winters, Yvor, *The Function of Criticism,* Allan Swallow, 1957.

This book by the American poet and critic includes an essay critical of Frost and his relationship with Emerson and romanticism.

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Watkins, Floyd C., "Going and Coming Back: Robert Frost's Religious Poetry," in *South Atlantic Quarterly,* Autumn 1974, pp. 445-59.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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