

Birches

Poem by Robert Frost

Mending Wall

Poem by Robert Frost

How can **NATURE** inspire you?

COMMON CORE

RL 1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support inferences drawn from the text.

RL 4 Analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

Spending time in nature often inspires us to think of things beyond our ordinary routines. Whether it's hiking through woods or canoeing down a river, for example, being in "the great outdoors" can help us appreciate our place in the world at large. In the following poems by Robert Frost, the speakers gain new insights into their own lives through their experiences with nature.

QUICKWRITE Think of an outdoor activity that says something about you and what you're like—such as birdwatching, fishing, climbing, or swimming. Write a paragraph describing the activity and what it has helped you realize about yourself.



● TEXT ANALYSIS: FROST'S STYLE

In many ways, Robert Frost is a transitional figure between the 19th and 20th centuries. Like his predecessors, Frost loved and wrote about the natural world, particularly rural New England. His poems, however, contain more than his impressions of simple country life. In them, Frost often uses humor to point to more serious matters, such as themes of solitude and isolation. In this way, his writing anticipates later works of modern poetry and fiction. The following are key aspects of Frost's style:

- conversational or **colloquial language**
- rich sensory **imagery**
- imaginative **similes** and **metaphors**
- realistic **dialogue**
- a playful, mocking **tone**

As you read, notice how these stylistic techniques help make "Birches" and "Mending Wall" works of rare beauty and complexity.

● READING SKILL: MAKE INFERENCES

In modern poetry, speakers do not often make direct statements about how they view the world. Instead, readers must use clues in the texts to **make inferences**, or logical guesses, about the speakers' ideas and feelings. For example, speculate about what the following lines from "Birches" reveal about the speaker's desires:

*So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.*

As you read each poem, try to "read between the lines" and record your inferences in a chart like the one shown.

| "Birches" | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|
| Poem Details | My Associations | Inferences |
| "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." | Birches are white, flexible trees. | Seeing bent birches makes the speaker invent a playful explanation for them. |

Robert Frost

1874–1963

Unruly Youth

Although Robert Frost is linked with rural New England in the public imagination, he spent his early years in cities. At age 11, Frost moved with his mother and sister from his birthplace, San Francisco, to the industrial city of Lawrence, Massachusetts. Undisciplined in grade school, Frost became co-valetudinarian of his high school graduating class. However, he dropped out of the two universities he attended—Harvard and Dartmouth—because he disliked the discipline of academic life.

Farmer-Poet

In his 20s and 30s, Frost worked a 30-acre farm in Derry, New Hampshire. Captivated by Derry's inhabitants and rugged landscape, Frost wrote many of his most beloved poems while living there. He used traditional poetic devices—such as rhyme and meter—to capture the speech patterns of rural New Englanders. Frost's immense achievement was recognized with 4 Pulitzer Prizes in poetry and 44 honorary college degrees.

BACKGROUND TO THE POEMS

Nature's Splendor

In the selections, Frost captures the stark beauty of rural New England. In "Birches," he paints a vivid picture of the white-barked trees that adorn much of the countryside. The birch is a tall, delicate tree with a slender white trunk that can bend easily in a moderate wind. The title "Mending Wall" refers to the act of repairing the stone walls that divide farms and fields in New England. Farmers typically build these walls with stones removed from their own land.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Author
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Birches

Robert Frost

- 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
5 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.
10 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. **A**
They are dragged to the withered bracken¹ by the load,
15 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
20 Before them over their heads to dry in the sun. **B**
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—
25 Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone. **C**

A FROST'S STYLE

Frost uses plain and **colloquial words**—such as contractions—throughout this poem. Find one or two examples in lines 1–13. What effect do these everyday words create?

B FROST'S STYLE

Which sensory details presented so far help the **image** of the birches come alive for you?

C MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 21–27. What can you infer about the speaker?

1. **bracken**: weedy ferns having large triangular fronds and often forming dense thickets.

One by one he subdued² his father's trees
 By riding them down over and over again
 30 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
 35 Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise³
 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,
 40 Kicking his way down through the air to the ground. **D**
 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
 45 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. **E**
 I'd like to get away from earth awhile
 And then come back to it and begin over.
 50 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,
 55 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. **F**

D FROST'S STYLE

In lines 28–40, Frost describes a boy swinging in the birches. Which words or phrases convey Frost's playful and energetic **tone**?

E FROST'S STYLE

Identify the **simile** used in lines 41–47. What ideas beyond the literal meaning of the words does this simile communicate?

F MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 48–59. Think of what this final passage suggests about the speaker. Does he accept or deny reality? Explain.

2. **subdued**: brought under control.

3. **poise**: balance.

Mending Wall

Robert Frost



Cotswold Landscape (1981), Derold Page. Private collection. Photo © The Bridgeman Art Library.

- Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast. **G**
- 5 The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs.¹ The gaps I mean,
- 10 No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.

1. **The work . . . yelping dogs:** The speaker has replaced the stones hunters have removed from the wall when they have been pursuing rabbits.

◀ Analyze Visuals

In what ways might the **setting** shown in the painting represent that of “Mending Wall”? In what ways might it be different?

G FROST’S STYLE

Think about Frost’s decision to use the informal, plain word *something* in line 1. In your opinion, would a more descriptive word have provided a better effect? Explain your opinion.

I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
 And on a day we meet to walk the line
 And set the wall between us once again. **H**

15 We keep the wall between us as we go.
 To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
 And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
 We have to use a spell to make them balance:
 “Stay where you are until our backs are turned!”

20 We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
 Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
 One on a side. It comes to little more:
 There where it is we do not need the wall:
 He is all pine and I am apple orchard.

25 My apple trees will never get across
 And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
 He only says, “Good fences make good neighbors.”
 Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
 If I could put a notion in his head:

30 “*Why* do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it
 Where there are cows? But here there are no cows. **I**
 Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
 What I was walling in or walling out,
 And to whom I was like to give offense.

35 Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
 That wants it down.” I could say “Elves” to him,
 But it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather
 He said it for himself. I see him there,
 Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top

40 In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
 He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
 Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
 He will not go behind his father’s saying,
 And he likes having thought of it so well

45 He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.” **J**

H MAKE INFERENCES

Describe the speaker’s feelings so far about mending the stone wall. Which words and phrases helped you make your inference?

I MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 23–31, looking for details that convey the speaker’s opinion of his neighbor. Does the speaker admire him? Why or why not?

J FROST’S STYLE

Consider Frost’s overall **tone**, or attitude, in this poem. Do you think the poet himself approves or disapproves of walls between neighbors? Explain.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** In “Birches,” what two explanations does the speaker give for the bent trees?
2. **Clarify** Which explanation does the speaker seem to prefer? Explain.
3. **Recall** According to the speaker of “Mending Wall,” what two forces cause the stone wall to fall apart?
4. **Clarify** Why is there no practical need for the wall?



RL 1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support inferences drawn from the text.
RL 4 Analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

Text Analysis

5. **Make Inferences** Review the charts you made as you read. Think about the key inferences that helped you understand each speaker. What personality traits and values does each speaker appear to have?
6. **Interpret** In “Mending Wall,” the neighbor reminds the speaker that “good fences make good neighbors.” Paraphrase this statement. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your response.
7. **Analyze Tone Through Imagery** In his works, Frost often reveals a mischievous attitude toward his subjects through his choice of images. Review lines 23–42 in “Birches” and lines 15–26 in “Mending Wall.” Which **sensory details** in each poem strongly convey Frost’s playful tone?
8. **Analyze Frost’s Style** One hallmark of Frost’s style is his use of imaginative **similes** and **metaphors**. Identify two similes and two metaphors in the poems. Explain how they convey ideas beyond the literal meaning of the words.
9. **Generalize About Poetic Form** Frost often relied on conventional verse forms in his work. Both “Birches” and “Mending Wall” are written in **blank verse**—a form of unrhymed iambic pentameter favored by many English poets, including William Shakespeare. What does Frost’s regular use of this poetic form suggest about him and his writing style?

Text Criticism

10. **Biographical Context** Sharing his understanding of good poetry, Frost once said: “A poem is never a put-up job, so to speak. It begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness. . . . It is at its best when it is a tantalizing vagueness.” Select either poem and explain how it might fit Frost’s standards. Use examples from the poem to support your response.

How can NATURE inspire you?

What can nature teach you about humanity?

Language

◆ **GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Use Verbals Effectively**

Poetry consists of words and phrases that are carefully chosen to create particular rhythms and effects. One kind of phrase that often appears in poetry is the **infinitive phrase**, which consists of an infinitive—a verb form that begins with *to*—plus its modifiers and complements. Infinitive phrases function as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs, but often they are able to provide more information than would one-word examples of these parts of speech. Here are some instances of Frost’s use of infinitive phrases. Note how they function as a noun and adverbs in the poem.

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 (“Birches,” lines 23–25)

In the following revision, notice how the writer uses an infinitive phrase to better describe the neighbor’s wish. Use similar techniques to revise your responses to the prompt.

STUDENT MODEL

The speaker in “Mending Wall” doesn’t understand his neighbor’s wish *to maintain the wall between their properties*.

READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Broaden your understanding of Frost’s poems by responding to this prompt. Then use the **revising tip** to improve your writing.

| WRITING PROMPT | REVISING TIP |
|--|--|
| <p>Extended Constructed Response: Analysis</p> <p>How does the dialogue and imagery in “Mending Wall” help illuminate the differences between the speaker and his neighbor? How do the differences between them help reveal the poem’s theme? Using examples and direct quotations from the poem, write a three- to five-paragraph response.</p> | <p>Review your response. Did you use infinitive phrases to enhance your writing style? If not, revise your response.</p> |

COMMON CORE

L 1b Use various types of phrases to convey specific meanings and add variety and interest to writing. W 9a (RL 2) Draw evidence from literary texts to support analysis; determine a theme and how it is refined by specific details.

Interactive Revision

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