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Free Lesson of the Month April, 2010

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This month’s Free Lesson comes from [Discovering Genre: Poetry](#) and includes two complete poems and discussion questions to help you celebrate National Poetry Month 2010!

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After Apple-Picking

R O B E R T F R O S T

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.
Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear.
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound

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Of load on load of apples coming in.
For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth.
One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.

Questions

After Apple-Picking

- 1** How would you describe the tone of the speaker in this poem? Is he simply weary from the work of picking apples?
- 2** The ideas of labor and sleep operate on both literal and figurative meanings in this poem. On a literal level, Frost refers to a hard day's labor and slumber at the end of that day. What is he speaking of on a figurative level?
- 3** At what point in the poem do you begin to see that the poem is not about merely picking apples? What clues does Frost give that would indicate that this poem takes place during the winter? What literary devices does he use? How does Frost employ sound and rhyme in the poem?

The Road Not Taken

R O B E R T F R O S T

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Questions

The Road Not Taken

- 1** Many people have interpreted Frost's poem as an inspirational one that encourages people to take the "road less traveled by." What clues in the poem indicate that an opposite interpretation exists, one that expresses sorrow about the choice?
- 2** Why do you think Frost titled this poem "The Road Not Taken" instead of "The Road Less Traveled"?
- 3** Frost was long a proponent of poetry that does not necessarily need to be characterized by strict poetic form and structure. Many of his poems, such as "Mending Wall" and "Out—Out—," show this characteristic of his style. Why do you think he uses a very regular form and structure in this particular poem?

SELF-KNOWLEDGE

AFTER APPLE-PICKING

– Robert Frost

1. How would you describe the tone of the speaker in this poem? Is he simply weary from the work of picking apples?

The tone of the poem is ambiguous, and the reader's interpretation of it affects the ultimate interpretation of the poet's message. Some students may interpret the tone as one of regret or dismay, as evidenced in the speaker's mention of "the barrel that I didn't fill." Other students may look at the fact that only two or three apples remain—even the bruised ones are used—and infer a sense of satisfaction at a job done well, if not done entirely.

2. The ideas of labor and sleep operate on both literal and figurative meanings in this poem. On a literal level, Frost refers to a hard day's labor and slumber at the end of that day. What is he speaking of on a figurative level?

The day's labor of apple picking is, on a figurative level, akin to a life's work, and how it can be measured or counted at the end of a person's life. The end of the day is representative of the end of life. Apples are considered sweet, as is apple cider, but the picker seems to have an uncertain attitude about his life, looking back on it, and he does not quite realize the sweetness of it as it comes to an end.

3. At what point in the poem do you begin to see that the poem is not about merely picking apples? What clues does Frost give that would indicate that this poem takes place during the winter? What literary devices does he use? How does Frost employ sound and rhyme in the poem?

Answers will vary about when the poem begins to discuss something other than picking apples, and some readers may see it in the second line with the mention of "heaven." By the sixth line, however, most students should begin to realize the poet's being "done with apple-picking" might indicate much more.

The water has frozen, the world is "hoary," and the woodchuck is "gone"; these are all indications of winter.

Frost describes the water in the trough freezing into a "pane of glass," which is a metaphor. He uses anaphora in "stem end and blossom end" and "load on load." The sentence, "I am done with apple-picking" nearly repeats itself later in "For I have had too much / of apple-picking."

In addition, the woodchuck is anthropomorphized into a speaking creature that can explain differences between death and hibernation.

The poem's rhythm is loose, but each line does rhyme with at least one other somewhere in the poem, which mimics the returning to each bough Frost describes. The rhyme scheme is

ABBACCEDEDFEFGHHGIIJGKJLKLMMNNMOOPQRPQSTSTR.

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

– Robert Frost

1. Many people have interpreted Frost’s poem as an inspirational one that encourages people to take the “road less traveled by.” What clues in the poem indicate that an opposite interpretation exists, one that expresses sorrow about the choice?

The clues are many: The speaker says he is “sorry” he could not travel both roads and that the roads are “really about the same.” He phrases the decision to leave the other road behind as a kind of lament (“Oh, I kept the first for another day!”), and he realizes that he will later tell the story with a “sigh” (of regret, for not being able to take both roads). He seems sorry that he will never be able to retrace the other road because “way leads on to way.”

2. Why do you think Frost titled this poem “The Road Not Taken” instead of “The Road Less Traveled”?

This poem is not about doing something different and unique—it is about regrets and choices that cannot be undone. It is the road not taken that has the greater claim on the speaker’s memory; he will never know how his life might have turned out had he chosen it instead of the one he did. The many differences in his life, which he can never know, were made by the single decision undertaken on that day.

3. Frost has long been a proponent of poetry that does not necessarily need to be characterized by strict poetic form and structure. Many of his poems, such as “Mending Wall” and “Out—Out—,” show this characteristic of his style. Why do you think he uses a very regular form and structure in this particular poem?

Answers will vary. Students may say that Frost uses stanzas marked by similar metrical patterns, lengths, and rhyme schemes to reveal an attitude of feeling hemmed in by the choices the speaker has made. The rigidity of the rhyme scheme [ABAAB in each stanza] complements the belief that there is only one way that the speaker’s life could have turned out once the “less traveled by” road began.