

Robert Frost: An Overview

Aoife O'Driscoll

www.aoifesnotes.com

Themes

- ✧ Isolation / Friendship / Sense of community
- ✧ Nature
- ✧ Transience of life / bleak view of life
- ✧ Despair

Style

- ✦ Figurative language: 'figures of speech' - the words mean something other than their literal meaning. Examples are metaphor, simile etc.
- ✦ Simple, conversational language
- ✦ Adherence to the rules of rhyme and metre
- ✦ Conclusions can be open-ended and interpreted a number of different ways

"Every poem I write is figurative in two senses. It will have figures in it, of course; but it's also a figure in itself - a figure for something, and it's made so that you can get more than one figure out of it."

-Robert Frost

2011 Question

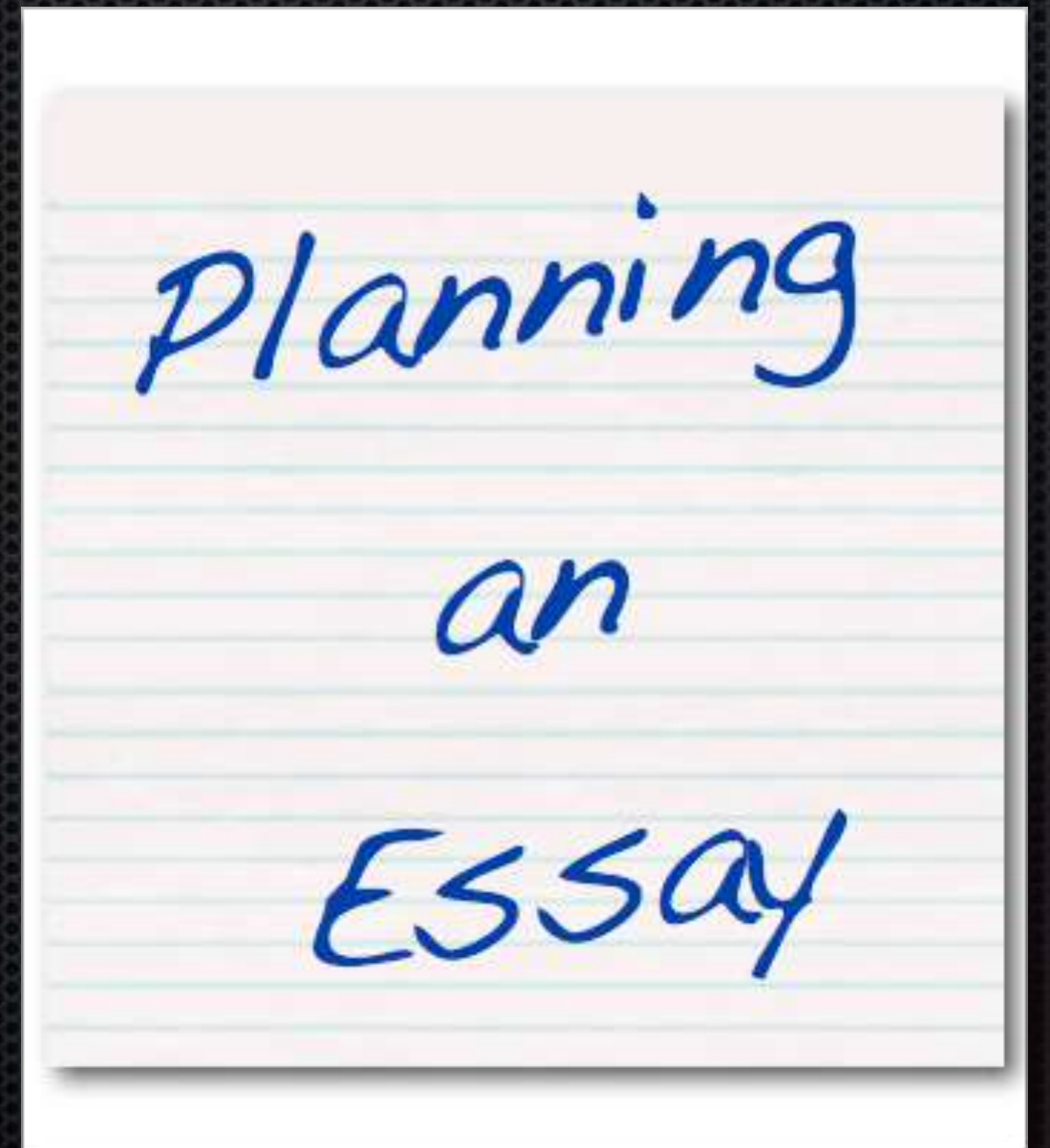
- ✦ “Frost’s simple style is deceptive and a thoughtful reader will see layers of meaning in his poetry.”
- ✦ Do you agree with this assessment of his poetry? Write a response, supporting your points with the aid of suitable reference to the poems on your course.



- ✦ Material might be drawn from the following:
- ✦ - conversational language used to probe underlying preoccupations
- ✦ - metaphors/symbols tease readers into discovering insights
- ✦ - tone/repetition/aphorisms lead to open-ended meanings
- ✦ - narrative approach simplifies/clarifies darker, complex themes
- ✦ - delicate yet powerful imagery offers universal insights Etc.

Planning Your Answer

- ✦ Read the question carefully and try to guess how it might be coded. Highlight the key words. In this case, they are 'deceptively simple' and 'layers of meaning'. Make sure you address both of these aspects of Frost's poetry throughout your answer.



- ✦ For each poem you choose, jot down (a) what is simple about the style and (b) what closer reading reveals
- ✦ You should aim to write in detail on four poems in your answer. Five is fine too, if you feel you have time!
- ✦ Put your poems in order. You may wish to move from the simplest to the most complex or vice versa. Equally, you could move from optimistic to pessimistic. Your essay should be structured.
- ✦ As always, do not give the examiner a rehash of your poetry notes.
- ✦ Every single point you make should be linked back to the question. Check this at the planning stage

Marking Scheme

- ✦ Candidates are free to agree and/or disagree with the statement, but they should engage with simple style is deceptive” and “layers of meaning” in Frost’s poetry. Allow that “thoughtful reader” may be addressed explicitly or implicitly.
- ✦ Code DS +/– for deceptively simple style.
- ✦ Code LM +/– for layers of meaning.

"I would sooner write free verse as play tennis with
the net down."

Robert Frost

For each poem you choose, ask yourself the following:

- ✦ What is it about the poem that is straightforward? Is it the subject of the poem? Does the language help to make it easy and accessible?
- ✦ On closer reading, what is the poem exploring? How does the language used contribute to our deeper understanding of the poem?

The Tuft of Flowers

- ✦ Ordinary story about the everyday experience of farm life
- ✦ Simple, narrative structure
- ✦ Celebrates beauty of nature: 'leaping tongue of bloom' etc.



- ✧ Observation leads to reflection: Frost begins considering the human condition
- ✧ Explores the more complex issues of isolation and a sense of community.
- ✧ Each couplet contains one complete thought

Closer reading

- ✦ Human beings' need to belong to a community
- ✦ Melancholy of working / being alone
- ✦ Solitary nature of a poet's life: he must work alone BUT he is also part of a long tradition of poets which offers some consolation and a sense of community
- ✦ Look out for all the words connected with communication / listening / speaking in this poem: that is what a poet concerns himself with
- ✦ Could also be interpreted as the comforting knowledge that those who have died are still with us in spirit

“Poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom.”

–Robert Frost

Mending Wall

- ✦ Like 'The Tuft of Flowers', 'Mending Wall' presents us with a simple narrative in an everyday, rural setting.
- ✦ Humour of the poem: 'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!' draws us in and makes the poem engaging, accessible and enjoyable.



Closer Reading

- ✦ Written in blank verse: (unrhymed lines, metre is iambic pentameter)
- ✦ The lines are not all in iambic pentameter: some have eleven syllables. This may seem a minor point but nothing Frost does is without reason. The longer lines capture our attention and make us focus on what is being said.
- ✦ Some critics have also suggested that the irregular line length makes the poem resemble an uneven wall when viewed sideways.

- ✧ In 'The Tuft of Flowers', Frost referred to men 'working together... Whether they work together or apart'. Here, however, even though the men work together, they are working apart. Why is this?
- ✧ This poem is also about communication. However, the lines of communication between Frost and his neighbour are increasingly broken down as the poem progresses.
- ✧ The wall becomes a symbol of the wall between individuals.

- ✦ Frost challenges tradition in this poem. The neighbour 'hides behind' his father's words, but Frost believes that all ideas and opinions should be explored before being accepted.
- ✦ The blank verse may signal a slight break with tradition

- ✧ Nature and man come slightly into conflict in this poem: 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall'.
- ✧ Frost's playful use of language might be missed on first reading: the 'something' which sends 'the frozen-ground-swell' under the wall, toppling it, is frost. Thus we see his views on a complex issue - the boundaries we create between ourselves and others - dealt with in a subtle way.

“Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying
one thing and meaning another.”

Robert Frost

‘Out, Out –’

- ✦ Again, the familiar setting.
- ✦ Seamus Heaney said that when he read this poem he found its attraction lay in ‘the sense of familiarity with the world that was in the poem’.
- ✦ Simple language does not hide the sense of menace: repetition, foreshadowing of danger and death, personification of saw, onomatopoeia



Closer reading

- ✦ Title suggests the transience of life: it is like a 'brief candle' which can be snuffed out in a moment
- ✦ Critics have argued over the meaning of the final lines of the poem: this gives us a clue that the analysis may not be straightforward!

- ✦ Are those who are 'not the ones dead' simply being practical? After all, there is nothing we can do to change the fact and the inevitability of death. Therefore, should we just accept it and move on?
- ✦ Are the final lines cynical and bitter? Is the poet judging those who accepted the death in such a matter-of-fact, stoical way?
- ✦ Could the poem be viewed as a comment on the way young men - many of them little more than boys - were sent to their death in WWI?

The Road Not Taken

- ✦ Often read as a celebration of non-conformity, of going your own way.
- ✦ One of the most famous and popular of Frost's poems



Closer reading

- ✦ However, the poem is far from as simple as it might first appear
- ✦ It is more about the difficult choices we must make in life, and how we will justify those choices to ourselves and others
- ✦ For every road we take, there is a road we did not take and, although we may have meant to come back to it, the reality is we never will

- ✦ The metre of the poem is a little unusual: instead of using iambic pentameter, Frost uses iambic tetrameter in the poem. This departure from a more typical metre may be seen to reflect the speaker in the poem choosing his or her own path.
- ✦ Frost himself warned readers to be careful of this poem, that it was 'tricky'.

Recommended Reading

- ✦ An excellent article about 'The Road Not Taken' and how it may have been responsible for Frost's friend going to war. There are great quotes from Frost himself about the meaning of the poem in this piece. Follow the link below:
- ✦ <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/29/robert-frost-edward-thomas-poetry>