

The Tuft of Flowers

I went to turn the grass once after one
Who mowed it in the dew before the sun.

The dew was gone that made his blade so keen
Before I came to view the levelled scene.

I looked for him behind an isle of trees;
I listened for his whetstone on the breeze.

But he had gone his way, the grass all mown,
And I must be, as he had been,--alone,

'As all must be,' I said within my heart,
'Whether they work together or apart.'

But as I said it, swift there passed me by
On noiseless wing a 'wildered butterfly,

Seeking with memories grown dim o'er night
Some resting flower of yesterday's delight.

And once I marked his flight go round and round,
As where some flower lay withering on the ground.

And then he flew as far as eye could see,
And then on tremulous wing came back to me.

I thought of questions that have no reply,
And would have turned to toss the grass to dry;

But he turned first, and led my eye to look
At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,

A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared
Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared.

I left my place to know them by their name,
Finding them butterfly weed when I came.

The mower in the dew had loved them thus,
By leaving them to flourish, not for us,

Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him.
But from sheer morning gladness at the brim.

The butterfly and I had lit upon,
Nevertheless, a message from the dawn,

That made me hear the wakening birds around,
And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground,

And feel a spirit kindred to my own;
So that henceforth I worked no more alone;

But glad with him, I worked as with his aid,
And weary, sought at noon with him the shade;

And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech
With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.

'Men work together,' I told him from the heart,
'Whether they work together or apart.'

Analysis

The poem opens almost conversationally. The mower, or reaper, had been early that morning to cut the grass, and now Frost has come to turn the grass in the sun, so that it dries and does not rot. It is easier to cut grass early in the morning, when it is wet

with dew, which is why Frost does not meet the man who cut it. He has been and gone already.

Frost describes the field with its cut grass as a "leveled scene". There is something slightly melancholy in this description, and we think of ruined cities, perhaps after a war. He looks about to see if the mower is anywhere to be seen – maybe he is behind the trees, just out of sight – and he listens for the sound of the mower sharpening his scythe. When we think of a man with a scythe, we think of the grim reaper. This adds to the impression that the start of this poem is centred on the idea of endings, solitude and sadness.

Frost comes to the conclusion that the man who cut the grass has gone. His job is done, and he has moved on. The word "But" in line seven indicates a change of mood. The poet is alone. He cannot rely on the companionship of others. It is up to him to take the next step. This may suggest that, on a metaphorical level, Frost is following in the footsteps of other long gone poets whose work has enabled him to benefit from their labours and move on. There is a sense of deep sadness in these lines, emphasised by the assonance in the long vowel of the words "mown" and "alone". The dash before the word "alone" has the effect of making the word stand alone, and also of making us pause before reading it. Again, this emphasises the point Frost is making in these lines – that man is ultimately alone in the world. The use of the word "must" suggests that Frost has not necessarily chosen to be this way, but that this is a state the world has thrust upon him. He has no choice in the matter.

Frost extends this idea to include all mankind. We are all alone, he says, whether we "work together or apart." This is a rather melancholic message, and Frost seems to be saying that we are alone in this world and lack fellowship, even if others surround us. There is a note of resignation in his declaration that "all must be" alone. The tone of this section of the poem is overwhelmingly pessimistic.

There is another change of mood of the poem immediately after line ten, signaled by the use of the word "But". Just as the poet is resigned to the notion that there is no fellowship, no shared humanity in the world, he sees a butterfly. The butterfly is confused because it cannot find the flower it landed on the day before. The reaper, or mower, of course, has cut down the flower. Frost, who has been unable to

settle down to his work, is further distracted by the appearance of the butterfly. (In ancient Greek literature, the butterfly was a symbol of the psyche, or the soul.) He watches the insect fly around, looking for the flowers that were there yesterday but that are now "withering on the ground." The butterfly appears to fly away, but comes back to Frost "on tremulous wing", which suggests nervousness, excitement or uncertainty. (The word "tremulous" means trembling, shaking or timid.) Frost seems concerned with other matters, and thinks about "questions that have no reply", but before he can turn back to his work, the butterfly turns and, watching where it flies, Frost's gaze falls on a tuft of flowers by the brook. The reaper has left them untouched. Frost describes the flowers as "A leaping tongue of bloom". Is he saying that, through the flowers, he is now in some way communicating with the absent mower? Is he no longer alone, having seen this evidence of humanity?

Frost explores the reasons the mower may have left the flowers alone. He does not think it was for the butterfly, or for other people, but for the mower himself. The mower, Frost says, did not do it to draw any sort of attention to himself, but rather because he was moved by "sheer morning gladness". Still, whether or not the mower intended for anyone to notice his action, Frost feels that it is almost as if the absent worker has sent him a message of sorts. He is moved to joy himself, and begins to look more closely at the world around him. He hears the "wakening birds" and almost believes he can hear the mower's "long scythe whispering to the ground." He no longer feels alone. He sees the flowers as evidence that the mower has "a spirit kindred to my own". Now he and the mower are working together, in a way. When he rests, at noon, Frost imagines a conversation with this other worker.

The final couplet reminds us of the poet's claim, earlier in the poem, that all men are alone, even if they work together. Now he feels a solidarity with the mower, and he believes that we are never alone, even if we appear to be.

Theme: "The Tuft of Flowers" explores our need to belong and to have a sense of community. The poet works alone but it is important for him to feel a connection with the other man who started the day's work. Until he makes this connection, he feels a little lost and unhappy and cannot settle down to the task he set out to do. The work of a poet is largely solitary, but depends to a certain extent on the work of other poets who have gone before and who have led by example.

to carry on?