

ROBERT FROST

(1874 - 1963)



"Out, Out -"

The buzz-saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside them in her apron
To tell them "Supper." At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off—
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!"
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

Background:

The title of this poem is taken from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Towards the end of the play, when Macbeth hears of his wife's death, he says:

"Out, out, brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."

The poem is based on a true story in which a fifteen-year-old boy died of shock after his hand was badly damaged by a buzz saw on his farm.

Analysis:

The poem opens with a description of the buzz saw that "rattled and snarled". There is a hint of menace in this line. The saw is portrayed as a living thing, and it reminds us of a dangerous animal. In contrast to this dangerous machine, Frost presents us with a description of the sights and sounds of the farm. The cut wood smells when the breeze blows across it, and the view is of mountain ranges in the sunset. The buzz saw interrupts this peaceful scene and the ugly noises it makes are repeated in line 6. The noise it makes varies, depending on whether it is cutting wood or not.

The day is drawing to a close, and nothing has happened. Frost wishes that the workers on the farm could have called it a day then, and given the boy a half hour's freedom, which the lad would have valued. Had they finished work early, the boy's life would have been saved. But they didn't. The boy's sister comes to call him to supper, and, distracted by her, he cuts his hand with the saw. The saw is again personified; Frost describes it as "leaping", almost as if it wanted to have supper too, and was trying to eat the boy's hand. Of course, the boy must have lost his concentration and unwittingly "given the hand". However it happened, Frost says, it was a definitive blow, and the boy knows immediately that he had done serious damage. He laughs in disbelief and shock, and holds his hand up to lessen the flow of blood, and to appeal for help. The description of the boy as a "big boy / Doing a man's work" is a poignant one. He is a child, but experienced enough to know that such an injury is extremely serious. He begs his sister not to allow the doctor to amputate his damaged hand.

The hand, however, is too far-gone to be saved. The doctor anaesthetizes the boy with ether and he falls into unconsciousness. The person taking the boy's pulse suddenly realises that the boy has died. The others are shocked and disbelieving, but they listen to his heart as the beat weakens and then stops, and there is nothing anyone can do. "No more to build on there."

The last lines of the poem seem heartless, but it is simply stating that life must go on. "And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs." This attitude seems very cruel. Life goes on for those who remain, and no matter how sudden or senseless the death, friends and family will carry on as before. They may mourn, but they will also deal with the practicalities of life.

Themes:

Child labour

The boy in this poem is doing a man's work, but Frost repeats the fact that he is only a boy, albeit a "big boy". He is working when he should possibly be playing.

"Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work."

The boy's sister is also working. She appears, dressed in an apron, to tell the workers that supper is ready. Had these two youngsters been playing and not working, the accident would not have happened. Although the boy works hard, he is still "a child at heart" and Frost seems to believe that he should be allowed the freedom to act like a child, instead of taking a man's role on the farm.

Life goes on

Different critics view the ending of this poem differently. Some see it as callous and cruel. The other workers on the farm are not dead, so they simply carry on as before. There is heartlessness implicit in this attitude, but what else are they to do? There is no word of mourning, or of sadness. They are disbelieving at first when they hear the boy has died, but then they go on with their own lives. Do you think Frost is criticising this attitude, or simply pointing out that the people were powerless to change what had happened, so were left with no option but to carry on?