

Robert Frost

1874–1963

Other Works

"The Road Not Taken"

"Mending Wall"

North of Boston

New Hampshire

Unruly Years Although Robert Frost was born in San Francisco, his ancestors were New Englanders. At age 11, shortly after his father's death, Frost moved with his mother and sister to Massachusetts. His mother was a teacher, but Frost was an undisciplined child who frequently skipped school. He did not become interested in books until high school. He then began studying, wrote poems for the school magazine, and was named co-valedictorian of his senior class, an honor he shared with his future wife.

Farmer-Poet Frost attended college briefly and then worked at a variety of jobs, including mill work and teaching. Between 1900 and 1909, he wrote many of his famous poems while living and working on a farm near Derry, New Hampshire. A

few were published in magazines, but Frost was almost 40 before his first book was published, in England. He had moved to England in 1912, and by the time he returned to the United States three years later, he was rapidly becoming a distinguished poet.

Honors and Achievements During his lifetime, Frost was awarded 44 honorary college degrees and was invited to teach at numerous colleges and universities, including Dartmouth and Harvard. Ironically, he had once attended and dropped out of both universities. Frost's other honors include four Pulitzer Prizes and a Congressional Gold Medal. He published his last book of poetry, *In the Clearing*, at age 88.

Author Activity

Presidential Inauguration Frost was asked to read a poem at the inauguration of a United States president. He wrote a new poem for the occasion but, in the sun's glare, could not see to read it. Instead, he recited another poem from memory. Find out the name of the president and the name of the poem that Frost read.

“So was I once
myself a swinger
of birches.”

Birches

Poetry by ROBERT FROST

Connect to Your Life

Tree Climbers Did you ever try to climb a tree? Perhaps, as a child, you hoisted yourself up to the lowest branches of a tree in your yard or a nearby park, or maybe you climbed up the trunk all the way to the top. Why do you think tree-climbing has such a strong appeal to children? Why do you think people generally lose interest in this type of activity as they grow older? Share your thoughts and experiences with classmates.

Build Background

Frost's Birches In many of his poems, Robert Frost describes scenes from rural New England, where he lived as a child and later worked on his own farm. In “Birches,” one of his most famous poems, Frost paints a vivid picture of the white birch trees that adorn much of the New England countryside. The white birch is a tall, delicate tree with a slender white trunk that can bend quite easily in a moderate wind or under the footsteps of a young tree climber.

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE The poem “Birches” is rich in **figurative language**, which conveys ideas beyond the literal meanings of words. The general term *figurative language* includes specific **figures of speech**, such as **similes** and **metaphors**, which make comparisons between two unlike things that have at least one thing in common. Similes use the word *like* or *as*, while metaphors do not. In “Birches,” the poet describes life with the following simile:

And life is too much like a pathless wood

Look for other examples of figurative language throughout the poem.

ACTIVE READING ANALYZING IMAGES Frost uses **images** to create sensory experiences for the reader. The images in “Birches” convey in vivid detail two very different scenes, the birches after an ice storm and a boy swinging on the trees. The last third of the poem is more reflective but still contains powerful imagery.




READER'S NOTEBOOK

As you read, try to see, hear, and feel what is described by the poem. Record your observations in a chart like the one shown.

Birches	Images of Sight	Images of Sound or Touch
Line		
1–20		
21–40		
41–59		

Birches

Robert Frost

A vertical illustration on the left side of the page shows several birch trees with their characteristic white bark and black lenticels. A Great Horned Owl is perched on a branch in the upper left, looking towards the right. The trees are partially covered in snow or frost, and some yellow leaves are visible at the top.

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.
They are dragged to the withered bracken 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.
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.
One by one he subdued 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 poise
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.
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.
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.

