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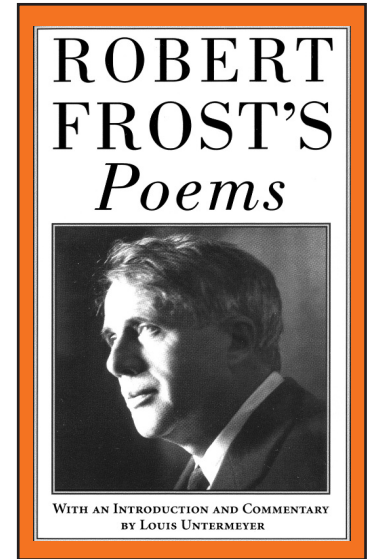
TEACHER'S GUIDE

Robert Frost's Poems

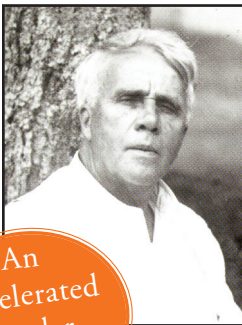
With an Introduction and
Commentary by
Louis Untermeyer

“[Frost] has bequeathed his nation a body of imperishable verse from which Americans will forever gain joy and understanding.”

—John F. Kennedy



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An
Accelerated
Reader
Title

TO THE TEACHER

Portable and affordable, readable and reliable, a beloved and bestselling volume for several decades, this classic collection of the poetry of Robert Frost contains over 100 poems, with ample selections from every phase of Frost's long career. Now published exclusively by St. Martin's Press, *Robert Frost's Poems* presents all of Frost's best-known poems alongside dozens of others. This is the perfect book—the ideal introduction—for all teachers seeking to bring the vast and imperishable work of this great American poet into their classroom.

Robert Frost, who died in 1963 at the age of 88, is perhaps the most cherished of all American poets, achieving over the course of his career a level of fame and popularity that few poets other have ever known—and that continues to this day. Frost is a poet who composed, per William Wordsworth's memorable phrase, in “the language really used by men.” Thus his work is as accessible as it is beautiful, as fresh as it is timeless. The voices and visions of the New England countryside are his primary subjects, the many different things to be heard and seen and experienced in this rich, rustic landscape.

The wit, wisdom, and well-structured qualities of Frost’s poetry appeal to readers of all ages and backgrounds. With its common speech, direct expression, folksy candor, and steadfast adherence to rhyme, meter, and other formal issues, his poetry is as vital, memorable, and influential as any this country has produced. As *Time* magazine once observed: “Of U.S. poets, none has lodged poems more surely where they will be hard to get rid of . . . [Frost’s] lines often have the trenchancy and inevitability of folk sayings.” But although many are drawn to his traditional manner or old-fashioned simplicity, Frost is actually a poet whose writings are sometimes dark or ironic in tone, or even brutally realistic in their ideas and imagery. Such characteristics are not overlooked in this well-rounded selection of his verse; it gives us the wide range, the whole feeling, of this poet’s art and craft.

The poet, editor, and anthologist Louis Untermeyer, Frost’s friend and colleague, chose the poems that appear in this long-cherished volume. He also supplied its Introduction, a thorough yet informal assessment of the life and work behind these poems, as well as its running commentary. However, Untermeyer’s comments, appearing in between the works throughout *Robert Frost’s Poems*, should not be relied on too heavily; teachers should encourage their students to form and develop their own impressions of these poems. Untermeyer’s commentary, valuable and learned though it is, should be seen as a series of introductory or explanatory asides meant to expand on—rather than limit or narrowly define—the music and meaning we find in Frost. These comments are suggestions, not instructions, on how to read and understand the poetry.

**PRAISE FOR
ROBERT FROST**

“Frost was the first American poet who could honestly be reckoned a master-poet by world standards.”—Robert Graves

“[Frost is our] most eminent [and] most distinguished . . . Anglo-American poet.”—T.S. Eliot

“Frost [is among] the greatest of the American poets of the 20th century.”
—Randall Jarrell

“No other American poet has so much art or so much subject matter.”
—Mark Van Doren

**PREPARING
TO READ**

This Teacher’s Guide is primarily divided into two sections, which both appear immediately below. The first, “Reading and Understanding the Poems,” is meant to help students with reading comprehension, conceptual appreciation, the interpretation of symbols, the possibilities and complexities of words, and related

matters. “Questions and Exercises for the Class,” the second section, aims to enable students to think more freely, creatively, comparatively, or associatively about the varied writings that comprise *Robert Frost’s Poems*. A brief supplementary section, “Other Readings and Resources,” is offered in conclusion.

1. Louis Untermeyer’s Introduction to this selection of Frost’s poetry ends with “The Pasture.” (p. 15) Why do you think Untermeyer finishes with this particular poem? Who is the speaker here—and who is the audience—both literally and figuratively?

2. “Home Burial” is a dramatic-narrative poem, one with characters, dialogue, and a story—or at least a scene—to reveal to us. (p. 27) What happens here? Who are the characters? Describe them; describe the crisis they are facing. What crucial events have occurred before the action of “Home Burial” takes place? Is the crisis of this scene resolved? Explain, paying particular attention to the poem’s ending. Also, what other dramatic-narrative poems did you find in this book?

3. Frost visits the zoo in his “At Woodward’s Gardens” poem. (p. 48) What points is Frost making in this poem about the similarities and differences between human beings and monkeys? What is a “burning-glass”? And what does Frost mean by saying that one monkey put a hand up to his nose “as if perhaps / Within a million years of an idea”?

4. Look again at “The Fear.” (p. 60) What happens at the very end of this poem? Why do you think Frost is slightly unclear in this regard?

5. Explain the title of “The Code.” (p. 83) What is this code? How is it both respected and disrespected over the course of the poem?

6. “Birches” is one of Frost’s most beloved poems. (p. 90) Consider the clear, conversational language used throughout it. Do you think the speaker of this poem is the same person as the young boy pictured swinging amid birch trees? Why or why not? How would you describe the tone or overall attitude of the narrator of this poem? Also, explain why the word “toward” (in the fourth-to-last line) is italicized. What distinction or clarification is being made here?

7. Untermeyer states in his prefatory comments for “Mending Wall” that this poem “rests upon a contradiction. Its two famous lines oppose each other.” (p. 95) Identify these two lines, explaining why you do or do not agree that they are contradictory. Moreover, explain what each line means in the context of this poem—as well as what each means in a broader, more universal context.

8. Paraphrase the action of “Two Tramps in Mud Time.” (p. 111) Who are the people encountered by this poem’s speaker, and what do they want from him? An extended digression on the weather, focusing on the cycles of nature and running for a few stanzas, occurs in the middle of the poem. Why do you think this descriptive aside was included here? How would you characterize the speaker’s feelings about the natural world?

9. “The Hill Wife” is a poetic sequence, or the verse equivalent of what is called a suite in music. (p. 149) In Frost’s series of lyrical sketches, we are shown, as Untermeyer notes, “a remarkably rounded portrait of fear and love and loneliness.” Re-read each of the five poems individually, commenting on how each poem enhances or enriches the complex subject of this sequence: the wife herself.

10. What link does Frost establish in “Revelation” between “babes that play / At hide-and-seek” and “God afar?” (p. 154) More generally, what does this poem have to say about our means of communication, about our “light words that tease and flout” as well as our “literal” words?

11. Describe in detail the image that informs the entirety of “A Patch of Old Snow.” (p. 171) How does Frost metaphorically connect the snow in this poem to a newspaper he might have “forgotten” about? Does this connection seem ironic to you? Explain why or why not.

12. Explain the meaning of the title for “In a Disused Graveyard.” (p. 183) Identify those who still visit the graveyard, and those who do so no longer. What attributes and attitudes does Frost assign to the grave stones herein? What is “the lie” he thinks the stones might believe?

13. “Stopping by Woods on a Snowing Evening” is another Frost poem that has been known and recited by generations of readers. (p. 189) Look at the final four lines of this poem. How, if at all, do they set the tone and meaning for the poem as a whole? What meaning(s) do you, as an individual reader, derive from these famous four lines of poetry? Why do you think the last two lines are identical?

14. “To err is human, not to, animal”—so goes a pivotal line in “The White-Tailed Hornet.” (p. 203) What does that line mean in the context of this poem? Describe the poem’s thesis, especially as it concerns human-versus-animal “downward comparisons” and the ideas of “instinct” and “fallibility”? And how does this thesis compare and contrast with the point of view expressed in Frost’s poem called “Waspish”? (p. 205)

15. “The Road Not Taken” is surely one of Frost’s most familiar and most famous works. (p. 219) Describe its overall mood. How does the speaker of the poem feel about the choice he made, about the road he chose? And which “road,” in your view, is the one being referred to in the title: the “road not taken” by most people or the “road not taken” by the speaker? Explain. Finally, what lesson do you find in this poem concerning how one should live one’s life? What is the moral here?

16. Explicate the satire of these lines (taken from “The Grindstone”): “But standing outdoors hungry, in the cold, / Except in towns at night, is not a sin.” (p. 226) Where else in this book did you find Frost casting a satirical eye on society, culture, politics, and so forth?

17. To anthropomorphize means to give human traits to a non-human thing, or to animate a non-human thing with human characteristics. How are both the sun and moon anthropomorphized in “A Hillside Thaw”? (p. 232) What purpose(s) might describing them in this way serve, given all that this poem has to tell us about the superhuman powers of nature? Also, what are the countless “silver lizards” appearing in this poem?

18. Consider the “we” that is mentioned throughout “Riders.” (p. 237) Who is the narrator of this poem speaking for—and what is it that “we” are riding? Where are “we” riding to? And why does the narrator believe “we” are doing all this riding in the first place? What does the “headless horse” signify? Defend your answers with references to the text of this poem. (And what are “blandishments”? Consult a dictionary if you are unsure.)

19. Define the term “mind” as it is used in the last four lines of “A Considerable Speck.” (p. 251) Also explain the following line: “Plainly with an intelligence I dealt.” Why does the speaker in this poem choose to spare the life of the “speck” he encounters?

20. Note the repetition running through “Acquainted with the Night.” (p. 268) What words, phrases, and lines are repeated? How, if at all, was your reading and understanding affected by these echoes? Did such repeating strike you as odd, mysterious, frightening, or otherwise? Explain your impressions by citing key terms and images here.

21. Look again at the last line of the last poem printed in *Robert Frost’s Poems*: “I had a lover’s quarrel with the world.” What is the poet saying about himself, and about the life he has lived, in this famous line of verse? What is he saying about the way lovers quarrel?

1. Comparing two of Frost's poems, "The Witch at Coös" (p. 33) and "Ghost House" (p.46), Untermeyer points out that they are both ghost stories. He continues: "It is not hard to guess which poem was written in Frost's youth and which was composed in his forties." Would you agree? When do you think each poem was written—and why?
2. "Frost is most profound when he is most playful," as Untermeyer comments near the conclusion of Section II. (p. 82) Indeed, as Frost himself remarked more than once: "I am never more serious than when joking." Identify several poems in this book that support this contention, explaining how and why they do so.
3. Point out a dozen or so different poems in which Frost makes direct and detailed comparisons between mankind and nature. Then, as a class, discuss how Frost regards the relationship between mankind and nature.
4. In the preceding question, you were asked to discuss Frost's views of the relationship between mankind and nature. Now—again as a class, and looking in particular at the poems in Section V—conduct a similar discussion about Frost's depiction of the relationship between mankind and animals. How do the people and the creatures of the earth compare in these poems? How do they contrast?
5. "After Apple Picking" conveys the world as it is experienced by an exhausted laborer. (p. 224) What words, lines, ideas, or images in this poem make it clear that the narrator's mind and body have been weakened by so much working? Where else in *Robert Frost's Poems* do you find the poet writing about labor and/or laborers? Finally, what does work itself mean to Frost—both poetically (as a subject to write about) and personally (as a part of life)? Point out poems in this book that support your views.
6. Re-read "Fire and Ice." (p. 237) Then conduct a classwide dialogue about the symbolism in this brief yet powerful poem. What do you think "fire" and "ice" stand for? And how does Frost's use of informal or conversational language help him get his message across here—or doesn't it? Explain. Also, what is the message of this poem? What is Frost's main point?
7. Like many other poets, Frost sometimes composed works meant to be read and appreciated as mysteries—not in the sense of detective stories, but in a more individual, cosmic, philosophical, or even playful sense. With this in mind, discuss the questions that are posed—and the answers that are, perhaps, sought—in "For Once, Then, Something" (p. 185), "Design" (p. 208), and "Directive" (p. 266).

OTHER
READINGS AND
RESOURCES

8. Because his poetry is so consistently and effortlessly rhymed, and so formally and vividly composed, Frost is an author whose works are often memorized, especially his short, decidedly folksy or epigrammatic lyrics. Select a couple of your favorite brief Frost poems and commit them to memory. Then, recite these works before your class, explaining what you like about them—and how the poems speak to you personally.

9. Robert Frost once remarked in a letter (which Untermeyer quotes on p. 220) that a poem “is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought, and the thought has found the words.” Using these criteria as your guidelines, write a few “complete” poems of your own. Afterwards, you may wish to share them with your classmates.

Henry Holt and Company, which was Frost’s American publisher for all of his distinguished career, offers many fine editions of his work in affordable paperback editions. Teachers looking for more of the work of Robert Frost should investigate the following volumes: *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, which collects all eleven books of poetry that Frost saw published and is therefore the most comprehensive gathering of his verse in print; *The Robert Frost Reader*, which assembles not only many poems from throughout Frost’s lifetime but also speeches, interviews, letters, one-act plays, and other materials; *You Come Too*, which is a collection of Frost’s verse intended specifically for younger readers; and *The Road Not Taken*, which is an abridged version of the thorough but somewhat hefty *Poetry of Robert Frost* (mentioned above).

For those instructors requiring a fuller biographical understanding of Frost, Henry Holt and Company also publishes *Robert Frost: A Life* by Jay Parini (of Middlebury College). This detailed, well-written biography first appeared in 1999 and was thus praised by Christopher Lehmann-Haupt of *The New York Times*: “Graceful . . . A pleasure to read . . . [Combines] penetrating commentary on the poetry and good illustrative anecdotes . . . Mr. Parini has brought [Frost] more sharply into focus.”

ABOUT THE
AUTHOR

Perhaps the most popular and successful poet in American history, **Robert Frost** (1874-1963) received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry on four different occasions (1924, 1931, 1937, and 1943), as well as the Bollingen Poetry Prize (1963) and numerous other awards and honorary degrees.

Louis Untermeyer (1885-1978) worked as a poet, editor, and anthologist over the course of his long and influential career.

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