

## Chapter & Verse

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### A QUARREL WITH THE WORLD: ROBERT FROST (1874-1963)

Although Robert Frost is regarded as a quintessentially American poet, his father was of English descent and his mother of Scottish descent. He is also thought of as a deeply rural poet but he was in fact born in San Francisco and spent all of his formative years in cities. When he was thirteen, his family moved to the city of Lawrence in Massachusetts. After leaving Dartmouth College, Frost returned home and worked at various jobs including teaching, delivering newspapers and working in a factory for a number of years.

He went on to study at Harvard University and it was when he was a student that he got married. In order to support his wife and children, he left university before taking his degree. Before his death, his grandfather purchased a farm in New Hampshire for him and he worked on this farm for the next nine years. Although he was unable to keep the farm going and returned to teaching, many of Frost's best known poems arose from the experience of farm work and rural living.

In 1912, Frost and his family sailed to Britain and he first lived in Glasgow, perhaps influenced by his mother's ancestry. He then moved to Beaconsfield, outside London and it was when living there that met Ezra Pound and Edward Thomas with whom he formed a close friendship and had considerable influence in Thomas'

decision to devote his talents to writing poetry rather than prose. Some of Frost's finest poems were written while living in England but he returned to America a year or so after the outbreak of the First World War.

There is a common perception of Frost as rather a cosy, reassuring poet but he in fact had one of the darkest and most disturbing visions of life and humanity of any of the great poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As he grew older and became more famous, Frost liked to pose as the

genial, white haired, universal uncle although his nature was far from genial as his wife and those closest to him well knew. Although many of his best loved poems are short, it is his long narrative poems such as *A Servant To Servants*, *The Death of the Hired Man* and *Home Burial* which reveal his extraordinary depth and power. The wonderfully perceptive American poet and critic, Randall Jarrel called Robert Frost the greatest narrative poet to write in English since Chaucer.

'I saw you from that very window there,  
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,  
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly  
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.  
I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.  
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs  
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.  
Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice  
Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,  
But I went near to see with my own eyes.  
You could sit there with the stains on your shoes  
Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave  
And talk about your everyday concerns.  
You had stood the spade up against the wall  
Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.

\* \* \*

'I can repeat the very words you were saying:  
"Three foggy mornings and one rainy day  
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build."  
Think of it, talk like that at such a time!  
What had how long it takes a birch to rot  
To do with what was in the darkened parlour?  
You *couldn't* care! The nearest friends can go  
With anyone to death, comes so far short  
They might as well not try to go at all.  
No, from the time when one is sick to death,  
One is alone, and he dies more alone.  
Friends make pretence of following to the grave,  
But before one is in it, their minds are turned  
And making the best of their way back to life  
And living people, and things they understand.

Strangely, Frost is often at his most penetrating when speaking through a female narrator as in the following passage from *Home Burial* when the wife of a farmer berates her husband for his apparent indifference to the death of their infant son who he himself had buried years previously.

Such was his fame in the USA that at the age of 86, Frost was invited to give a reading at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy. He never failed to live up to his public persona of the comforting country poet who everyone could understand. Two years later, he died due to complications which arose after an operation. The words on his gravestone hint that he was not so at peace with the world as many of his readers liked to believe:

***I had a lover's quarrel with the world.***

In *A Servant to Servants*, Frost again uses a female narrator to take the reader into what Joseph Conrad called *the heart of darkness*. The woman who suffers from periods of manic depression, not helped by endless domestic drudgery and isolation, from *doing things over and over that just won't stay done*, relates how a mentally disturbed relative was caged at home, a practice not uncommon among people who did not want to risk being shunned by their puritanical, rural neighbours who believed that physical or mental disability in the family was God's way of punishing sinners. There is more than a hint of murder at the end of this passage. We have come a long way from the rural idyll which his less perceptive readers fondly imagined that Frost had depicted.



I've been away once--yes, I've been away.  
The State Asylum. I was prejudiced;  
I wouldn't have sent anyone of mine there;  
You know the old idea--the only asylum  
Was the poorhouse, and those who could afford,  
Rather than send their folks to such a place,  
Kept them at home; and it does seem more human.  
But it's not so: the place is the asylum.  
There they have every means proper to do with,  
And you aren't darkening other people's lives--  
Worse than no good to them, and they no good  
To you in your condition; you can't know  
Affection or the want of it in that state.  
I've heard too much of the old-fashioned way.  
My father's brother, he went mad quite young.  
Some thought he had been bitten by a dog,  
Because his violence took on the form  
Of carrying his pillow in his teeth;  
But it's more likely he was crossed in love,  
Or so the story goes. It was some girl.  
Anyway all he talked about was love.  
They soon saw he would do someone a mischief  
If he wasn't kept strict watch of, and it ended  
In father's building him a sort of cage,  
Or room within a room, of hickory poles,  
Like stanchions in the barn, from floor to ceiling,--  
A narrow passage all the way around.  
Anything they put in for furniture  
He'd tear to pieces, even a bed to lie on.  
So they made the place comfortable with straw,  
Like a beast's stall, to ease their consciences.  
Of course they had to feed him without dishes.  
They tried to keep him clothed, but he paraded  
With his clothes on his arm--all of his clothes.  
Cruel--it sounds. I s'pose they did the best  
They knew. And just when he was at the height,  
Father and mother married, and mother came,  
A bride, to help take care of such a creature,  
And accommodate her young life to his.  
That was what marrying father meant to her.  
She had to lie and hear love things made dreadful  
By his shouts in the night. He'd shout and shout  
Until the strength was shouted out of him,  
And his voice died down slowly from exhaustion.  
He'd pull his bars apart like bow and bow-string,  
And let them go and make them twang until  
His hands had worn them smooth as any ox-bow.  
And then he'd crow as if he thought that child's play--  
The only fun he had. I've heard them say, though,  
They found a way to put a stop to it.