

The Ax-Helve

I've known ere now an interfering branch ^{personification}

Of alder catch my lifted ax behind me.

But that was in the woods, to hold my hand

From striking at another alder's roots,
And that was, as I say, an alder branch. ^{colloquial, relaxed tone}

This was a man, Baptiste, who stole one day
Behind me on the snow in my own yard ^{mysterious - crept up - trespassed.}

Where I was working at the chopping block,
And cutting nothing not cut down already. ^{double negative}

He caught my ax expertly on the rise, ^{characterisation}

When all my strength put forth was in his favor, ^{Baptiste has power / upper hand}

Held it a moment where it was, to calm me, ^{Caesura - pause as character reacts}

Then took it from me and I let him take it. ^{referring back to anecdote - no reason to stop him.}

I didn't know him well enough to know
What it was all about. There might be something ^{nervous/confused Caesura vague language}

He had in mind to say to a bad neighbor ^{word choice}

He might prefer to say to him disarmed. ^{tool as weapon}

But all he had to tell me in French-English ^{Symbolic tool -> excuse to form relationship.}

Was what he thought of - not me, but my ax,

Me only as I took my axe to heart.

It was the bad ax-helve someone had sold me - ^{character dialogue/dialect jargon -> metaphor using farming jargon}

'Made on machine,' he said, ploughing the grain ^{Physically scratching wood metaphorically priming the relationship.}

With a thick thumbnail to show how it ran ^{alliteration Sensory details}

Across the handle's long, drawn serpentine,

Like the two strokes across a dollar sign. ^{rhyming couplet}

'You give her 'one good crack, she's snap raght off. - dialect ^{simile suggesting mass production}

Den where's your hax-ead flying t'rough de hair? ^{Interrogative phonetic spelling}

Admitted; and yet, what was that to him? ^{Rhetorical q - reveals character's suspicion}

'Come on my house and I put you one in

What's las' awhile - good hick'ry what's grow crooked,

^{tree (spare wood)}

^{giving purpose to the wood.}

flowering plant (tree) birch family

adept, strong

Context of French-Canadian immigration

Onomatopoeic mimics sound of scraping the handle.

Reference to St John the Baptist's fate?

} Pre-narrative anecdote
comparison between action of alder branch and action of Baptiste.

} referring back to anecdote - no reason to stop him.

} Baptiste in power - soothing influence characterisation

} Narrator wonders if there will be conflict - 1st assumption suggests narrator is suspicious character.

} using farming jargon Physically scratching wood metaphorically priming the relationship.

} rhyming couplet

} simile suggesting mass production

} Interrogative phonetic spelling

} Rhetorical q - reveals character's suspicion

} giving purpose to the wood.

De second growt' I cut myself - tough, tough!

Something to sell? That wasn't how it sounded.

Further questioning - ongoing suspicion - lack of reciprocal dialogue → silently judging theme of barriers in relationships.

'Den when you say you come? It's cost you nothing.

To-night?'

Characterisation Baptiste intuitively picks up on narrator's concerns

Curious

As well to-night as any night.

Responses all in thought

word choice rather than 'hot'

Beyond an over-warmth of kitchen stove

Looking for differences.

My welcome differed from no other welcome.

Baptiste knew best why I was where I was.

So long as he would leave enough unsaid,

I shouldn't mind his being overjoyed

Connotation of tricked

(If overjoyed he was) at having got me

Convoluting, complex sentence → reflects narrator's confusion and awkward situation.

Where I must judge if what he knew about an ax

That not everybody else knew was to count

For nothing in the measure of a neighbour.

negation

Hard if, though cast away for life with Yankees,

French-Canadian's were not particularly welcome.

A Frenchman couldn't get his human rating!

Diction of sizing / calculating his worth.

Assumes Baptiste wants him to speak well of Baptiste to community.

Mrs. Baptiste came in and rocked a chair

That had as many motions as the world:

Simile

metaphor for life

One back and forward, in and out of shadow,

fatalistic / pessimistic

That got her nowhere; one more gradual,

Crone-like

Sideways, that would have run her on the stove

In time, had she not realized her danger

And caught herself up bodily, chair and all,

And set herself back where she, started from.

'She ain't spick too much Henglish - dat's too bad.'

I was afraid, in brightening first on me,

Then on Baptiste, as if she understood

peasant wisdom.

suggests he thinks Baptiste is trying too hard.

Symbolic of pushing the friendship.

prepared to judge him harshly

Central lines of poem

What passed between us, she was only ^{feigning - pretending} reigning.

Baptiste was anxious for her; but no more
Than for himself, so placed he couldn't hope
To keep his bargain of the morning with me
In time to keep me from suspecting him

The narrator scrutinises and judges Baptiste's actions.

already suspecting him!

Contradiction - Of really never having meant to keep it.
Baptiste is taking too long and he gets ax-helves out "needlessly soon" - he can't win!

Needlessly soon he had his ax-helves out,

A quiverful to choose from, since he wished me

double-meaning
1. Vessel that holds arrows.
2. nervous "quiver".

To have the best he had, or had to spare - judgemental language

↳ insinuates Baptiste is not offering him good helves.

Not for me to ask which, when what he took

Had beauties he had to point me out at length

To insure their not being wasted on me.

He liked to have it slender as a whipstock,

Simile

handle of whip.

Comparisons
create image of traditional artistry - tools/weapons

Free from the least knot, equal to the strain

Details/artful - Baptiste as craftsman and teacher - links to St John the Baptist.

Of bending like a sword across the knee.

Simile

He showed me that the lines of a good helve

Were native to the grain before the knife

Connotations of natural and good

natural to the wood - bringing out the best in something

Expressed them, and its curves were no false curves

Series of caesura

Put on it from without. And there its strength lay

reveals strength and truth - metaphor for art and teaching. understanding writing and poetry.

Emphasises/stresses importance of each thought.

For the hard work, He chafed its long white body

From end to end with his rough hand shut round it.

He tried it at the eye-hold in the ax-head. - successive

compound nouns - adds to rhythm and forms a link between the man and his tool.

'Hahn, hahn,' he mused, 'don't need much taking down.'

Baptiste knew how to make a short job long

For love of it, and yet not waste time either.

Oxymoronic

purposeful and fulfilling labour.

Abrupt change of subject

Do you know, what we talked about was knowledge?

Addressing the reader? Telling another neighbour?

natural rhythm of speech / colloquial

Baptiste on his defence about the children

Sense of gossiping

He kept from school, or did his best to keep -

academic vs practical knowledge

Rights linked to Knowledge

What to think vs how to think

Whatever school and children and our doubts
Of laid-on education had to do

link/allusion to going against the grain.

With the curves of his ax-helves and his having
Used these ^{judgemental adverb} unscrupulously to bring me

more winding, serpentine sentences.

To see for once the inside of his house.

Was I desired in friendship, partly as someone

To leave it to, whether the right to hold

Such doubts of education should depend

Upon the education of those who held them?

Looking to narrator for reassurance about his decision to keep children out of school.

But now he brushed the shavings from his knee

Reveals difficulties of setting in a new place.

And stood the ax there on its horse's hoof,

Sensory details

metaphor - natural form

Erect, but not without its waves, as when

simile and allusion

The snake stood up for evil in the Garden -*

Repetition of snake imagery

Shows narrator is still suspicious Is Baptiste devilish?

Top-heavy with a heaviness his short, ^{imagery - like an axe}

Thick hand made light of, steel-blue chin drawn down

dash - reflection, pause.

Also, led to knowledge - Baptiste as teacher.

And in a little - a French touch in that.

Baptiste drew back and squinted at it, pleased:

'See how she's cock her head!'

Exclamative → Joy Baptiste has in his work and desire to share this with another → themes of relationships / connection.

Demonstrates continued anxiety of Baptiste

Do we want knowledge? Should we be suspicious of it?

Links to Mending Wall:

- Good / bad neighbours and relationships between men.
- Judgements / barriers in relationships
- Lack of forming own opinions.
- Purposeful vs pointless labour.
- How we create relationships while maintaining distance.

* The point where humans and nature living in harmony was lost. Pastoral poetry concerned with a return to this harmony. Yet knowledge is what allows us to craft around flaws.

Key Vocab

- dialect
- extended metaphor / symbolism
- personification
- allusion
- characterisation
- questioning
- simple-minded wisdom (trope)
- suspicion
- judgement
- knowledge
- fulfilment
- artisan