

**Do Now:** What do all these activities have in common? Why?



**Discuss with a partner:**

Why don't adults typically do these things? Why are they seen as "childish"?



60

Watch the video. Would you like to do this? Why/why not?



[https://youtu.be/97Jt4m\\_lBzk](https://youtu.be/97Jt4m_lBzk)

#### Contextual/Critical Information (K)

In writing this poem, Frost was inspired by his childhood experience with swinging on birches, which was a popular game for children in rural areas of New England during the time.

Frost's own children were avid "birch swingers," as demonstrated by a selection from his daughter Lesley's journal: "On the way home, i climbed up a high birch and came down with it and i stopped in the air about three feet and pap cout me."

Frost: "it was almost sacrilegious climbing a birch tree till it bent, till it gave and swooped to the ground, but that's what boys did in those days."



from *Mountain Interval*, 1916

## "Birches"

By Robert Frost

### Learning Objective:

Demonstrate an understanding of the ideas within the poem and the techniques with which Frost presents them.

**Lesson outcome:** A part-annotated poem and a completed paragraph on one language technique

Listen to Frost reading the poem.

<https://youtu.be/aBw-OaOWddY>



Who is speaking, and what is the situation?



*Challenge: Can you see any similarities between this poem and other poems by Frost you've already studied?*



Speaker and Situation



When the speaker (the poet himself) sees a row of bent birches in contrast to straight trees, he likes to think that a boy has been swinging from them. He then acknowledges that actually, ice storms bent the birches. On a winter morning, freezing rain covers the branches with ice, which then cracks and falls to the snow-covered ground. The sunlight refracts on the ice crystals, making a brilliant display.

Although Frost knows the truth, he still prefers his imagination of a boy swinging and bending the birches. The speaker says he also was a swinger of birches when he was a boy and wishes to be so now. When he becomes weary of adult responsibilities, he would like to escape briefly by climbing a birch tree, but only briefly, because earth is the right place for love.



### Essentially...

Real life can be hard, so why not escape into idealism, transcend the mundane, swing a little? Still, don't swing too far – be an **imaginative pragmatist**, remembering your adult responsibilities. It's ok to occasionally be a bit fanciful, but don't let go of the real world entirely.



What comment is Frost making about imagination here?

### Useful vocabulary for this poem

Copy these words down somewhere on the same page as the poem.

- plosives/fricatives
- personal voice
- figurative language
- binary contrast
- escapism
- idealism
- romanticism
- pragmatism

As we increase our understanding of the poem, see if you can spot their relevance, or try to use them in a comment to show you understand them!

**Fricatives** = breathy consonant sounds made by forcing air through a narrow opening, which can be sustained as long as you have enough breath.

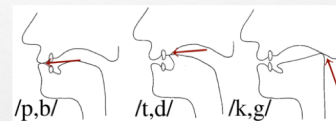


What's the effect of a **fricative** sound?

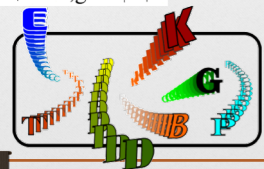
There are nine English fricative sounds:

1. v sound /v/
2. f sound /f/
3. voiced th sound /ð/
4. unvoiced th sound /θ/
5. z sound /z/
6. s sound /s/
7. zh sound /ʒ/
8. sh sound /ʃ/
9. h sound /h/

**Plosives** = hard consonant sounds that are produced by stopping the airflow using the lips, teeth, or palate, followed by a sudden release of air.



What's the effect of a **plosive** sound?



What **plosives** and **fricatives** can you see in these lines?

As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel  
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells  
Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust

Plosives: p, b, d, t, g, k/c  
Fricatives: s, th, sh, v, f, ch

What **plosives** and **fricatives** can you see in these lines?

As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel  
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells  
Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust

**What's the effect/purpose?**

How does this link to what you know about Robert Frost?

As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel  
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells  
Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust



Remember this, from Mowing?

A note on sound!

Poetry is, in essence, an **oral** mode of communication.

Frost emphasised sound in poetry, particularly what he called 'the sound of sense'.

- Narrow Onomatopoeia
- Broad Onomatopoeia

**Frost Quote!** "A sentence is a sound upon which words are strung."



**Further comprehension activities:**

1. Frost's **use of voice**:
  - a) Underline all the times Frost uses the second person (**you**) in this poem
  - b) Underline all the times Frost uses the first person (**I**, **me**) in this poem
  - c) What is the effect of him doing this?
2. Which **figurative language techniques** can you identify in this poem? Annotate accordingly.
3. What **contrasts of opposites** can you see in this poem? Make a note of them in your books.



### Contrasts in the poem

**Obvious...**

- left/right
- birches/other trees
- black/white
- warmth/cold
- sun/ice
- adult/child
- up/down

- pragmatism/romanticism
- truth/imagination
- imagery/naturalistic description
- concrete/spirit
- control/abandon
- flight/return
- earth/heaven

**...less obvious**

### Do Now:

"Birches": Match the quote to the **figurative language technique** used by Frost.  
Some quotes may match more than one technique!

I like to think some boy's been swinging them.	Metaphor
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.	Simile
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.	Onomatopoeia
Trailing their leaves on the ground, Like girls on hands and knees	Adjectives used to create imagery
I was going to say when Truth broke in With all her matter-of-fact about the ice storm	Fanciful Interpretation
climb black branches up a snow-white trunk	Personification

Why is it significant that Frost uses so much figurative language in this poem?

Write a PETAL paragraph in your books about **how Frost uses one language technique** in this poem.

P: In "Birches", Frost uses the technique of *[plosive and fricative alliteration/figurative language/binary contrasts – only pick one!]* when describing...

E: "\_\_\_\_\_"

T+A: Analyse the quotation

L: Link to Frost's purpose, consider a contextual point etc.

### Example:

In "Birches", Frost uses **plosive and fricative alliteration** when describing the ice melting on the trees. "**Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells shattering and avalanching on the snow crust**". The repetition of soft s/sh/th fricatives and harder t/k plosives is **onomatopoeic**, **evoking the sound of the ice**, and lending the poem a **sonic authenticity**. This **verisimilitude** is typical of Frost, who believed in poetry using a "**sound of sense**". Despite this poem being at times very **imaginative** and **fanciful**, with Frost thinking of the birches as being bent because "**some boy's been swinging on them**", this **choice of diction** locates it firmly in the real world. This **symbolizes the contrast between the creative, childish idealism of poetry and the pragmatism of the real world**, with Frost, the **farmer-poet**, inhabiting both.

## Close analysis of the poem – annotate as we discuss

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,  
 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.  
 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.

## Close analysis of the poem – annotate as we discuss

They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,  
 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  
 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 –  
 Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,  
 Whose only play was what he found himself,  
 Summer or winter, and could play alone.

## Close analysis of the poem – annotate as we discuss

One by one he subdued his father's trees  
 By riding them down over and over again  
 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  
 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,  
 Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.

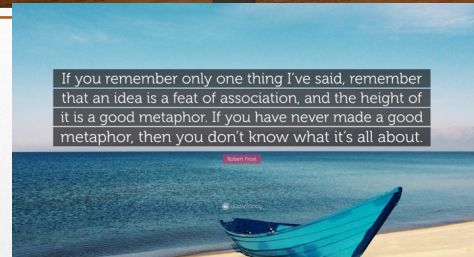
## Close analysis of the poem – annotate as we discuss

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  
 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.



## Close analysis of the poem – annotate as we discuss

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  
 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.



Recap: What is the main metaphor of this poem, and what is Frost using it to consider?

## Copy and complete:

Frost uses the metaphor of swinging on a birch tree in "Birches", to explore the idea of \_\_\_\_\_. The final line where he considers that "One could do worse than be \_\_\_\_\_" is significant, because he is suggesting that...



+ a context comment! Genre, typical conventions, Frost's life experience...

## Contextual/Critical Information (K)

(from *Oxford Student Texts*)

On one level Frost sees the imagination as having the power to transcend the limitations of the real world. However, he also seems to say that complete escape into the world of the imagination is neither possible nor desirable, despite the comfort it can provide, because Earth is the place where love exists. Some have seen the poem as exploring the idea that the world on which we live has limits, external or self-imposed; other readings of the poem extend the idea further and explore the notion that by attempting to push these boundaries, the poetic imagination allows the poet to assert his individuality.

## Contextual/Critical Information (K)

Recap: What contextual information about Robert Frost might be relevant to this poem?



## Contextual/Critical Information (K)

What contextual information about Robert Frost might be relevant to this poem?

Enjoyed swinging on birches as a child – New England

Use of conversational, colloquial style – accessible, authentic



Tendency to use familiar experience as metaphor for "profoundest thinking"

Belief in the "sound of sense"



'Birches' – studied!

Give it a tick, a date and a confidence rating out of 10.



© Index of Poems

Number	Title of poem	Studied?	Confidence?
1	Mowing		
2	Stopping Wood	✓	
3	The Death of the Woodman	✓	
4	Home Burial	✓	
5	The Black Cottage	✓	
6	After Apple Picking	✓	
7	The Road Not Taken	✓	
8	Birches	✓	
9	The Good and Beautiful		
10	Two Trains in Winter		
11	Acquainted with the Night		
12	Out, Out		
13	The Sound of Trees		
14	The Apparition		
15	Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening		
16	Two Larks at Two		
17	Swarming Locusts		
18	A Garden		
19	There Are Roughly Zones		
20	An Unpublished Letter in our Rural Letter Box		

## Homework (yay!)

**Either:**  
Thoroughly fill in your poem revision grid for the first 9 poems.

**OR:**  
Write a poem of at least 12 lines entitled "The Loop Road", inspired by Frost's style of poetry.

© Poem Revision Grid on this is as you go through the poems to set your revision in train. It is:

Line	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	71-80	81-90	91-100
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