

## 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. 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

*Great Horned Owl*, Rod Frederick. Copyright © 1986 Rod Frederick/The Greenwich Workshop®, Inc. Courtesy of The Greenwich Workshop, Inc., Shelton, Connecticut.



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.

# Literary Analysis

## FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Language that communicates ideas beyond the literal meaning of the words is called **figurative language**. Specific types of figurative language, called **figures of speech**, include **similes** and **metaphors**. A simile is a comparison between two things using the words *like* or *as*. Frost makes use of the following simile to compare the tree trunks to young girls:

*You may see their trunks arching  
in the woods . . .  
Like girls on hands and knees that  
throw their hair  
Before them over their heads to  
dry in the sun.*

A metaphor makes a comparison without using the words *like* or *as*. Frost uses a metaphor that compares the ice falling from trees to "heaps of broken glass."

**Paired Activity** Create a metaphor and a simile to add to Frost's description of the wintry scene. Compare your figures of speech with those of your classmates.

## ALLITERATION, ASSONANCE, AND CONSONANCE

**Alliteration** is the repetition of a consonant sound at the beginnings of words, as in "Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells." **Assonance** is the repetition of vowel sounds within words, such as "When I see the birches end to eft and right." **Consonance** is the repetition of a consonant sound within and at the ends of words, as illustrated by "girls on hands and knes." Find two more examples each of alliteration, assonance, and consonance in this poem.