That's part of it, certainly, but we forget that the speaker is repairing a wall as he speaks, that the necessity of walls is a belief he shares with his one-dimensional neighbor who can only repeat the aphorism, “Good fences make good neighbors.” The poem, finally, is about needing and repairing walls and about not loving them. It is in that contradiction that the poem lives.

Similarly, we all remember the last lines of “The Road Not Taken”—“I took the one less traveled by, // And that has made all the difference”—but we forget what comes before that. As Jay Parini points out in his superb 1999 biography of Frost, the last lines refer to what the poet thinks he will one day say, “with a sigh.” He is imagining how he will eventually misinterpret what happened. In fact, as Parini notes, “there may well be no road less traveled by.” Frost tells us earlier in the poem that both roads look more or less the same: “Though as for that the passing there // Had worn them really about the same.” What the poem is actually about, in other words, is the way we misread our own past as we get older. Parini explains: “the speaker of the poem gestures toward a simple, even simplistic reading, while the poet himself demands a more complex, ironic reading.” Frost's desire to be understood wrong can't be reduced to mere misanthropy.

Frost's public persona, as Jarrell reflects, is “the Skeleton on the Doorstep that is the joy of his enemies and the despair of his friends. Just as a star will have, sometimes, its dark companion, so Frost has a pigheaded one, a shadowy self that grows longer and darker as the sun gets lower.” But if Frost the celebrity alienated other writers and critics, his poems have influenced multiple generations of American poets—and, especially, New England poets. The anthology *After Frost* groups the poems of 30 poets, from Wallace Stevens through Martin Espada, around four themes echoed in Frost's work. Reading these poems juxtaposed against each other, and against thematically linked selections from Frost, drives home the point that contemporary poets in New England can't escape the Frost tradition.

The connection is most apparent in poems about nature. When Robert Penn Warren watches a sunset and sees “Acid and arsenical light // Streaked like urine,” he is following in the footsteps of Frost, who found in the natural world not a sense of unity but an alien presence, sometimes beautiful but bearing no intrinsic connection to humanity, deserving of respect but also of fear.

Discussion questions
1. Compare the rural folk in Frost's dramatic poems to those of some New England fiction writers. Might the couple in “Home Burial” evolve into Dick and May Pierce from John Casey's *Spartina*? Or, could the characters in "The Hired Man" fit comfortably into an Annie Proulx story? Cite other examples.

2. What do you think Frost meant when he said that he wanted his poems to be understood wrong?

3. Show examples of how Frost brought conversational language into his poems while still preserving rhythm, meter, and stanza.

Further reading

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Robert Frost—the quintessential New Englander—was born in San Francisco, midway between the Gold Rush and the Earthquake.” To many Americans, those words, quoted from Jeffrey Meyers’ 1996 biography of the poet, come as quite a shock. How could Frost be a Californian, of all things? In fact, Frost lived in San Francisco until he was 11, when his father died and his mother returned with her children to her home in Lawrence, Massachusetts. That Frost, at least technically, was an immigrant to New England is only the first in a series of revelations one encounters when reading the man’s work and learning of his life.

Frost was born less than a decade after the Civil War, during Ulysses S. Grant’s second term as president, and lived until 1963, two years after he read a poem at JFK’s inauguration. During the majority of those nearly 90 years, he was America’s most recognized and beloved poet, but the grandfatherly image we have of him—“the other bookend to match Norman Rockwell,” in the words of Peter Davison—is as inaccurate as the assumption that he was born on a farm in New Hampshire. After Lawrence Thompson’s bitter two-volume biography of Frost appeared in the 1960s, the image of the poet seemed on the verge of changing from rustic grandfather to unabashed monster—vindictive, defensive, and uncontrollably ambitious — but subsequent biographies by William Pritchard, Jeffrey Meyers, and Jay Parini have forced us to once again revise our thinking.

Frost is commonly celebrated for having brought the rhythms and speech patterns of ordinary conversation to American poetry, but in order to launch his career and get his first two books, A Boy’s Will and North of Boston, published, he decided it was necessary to leave the U.S. (England won in a coin flip over Vancouver, British Columbia, where a fellow poet had relocated.) Once again, our assumptions are upset: the quintessential New Englander sells the New Hampshire farm he had inherited from his grandparents and moves to Old England, where he finds not only a publisher, but also a circle of poets to review his work. Fellow American Ezra Pound—who, by 1912 when Frost arrived in London, was already well ensconced as a poet and expatriate promoter of the avant-garde—offered a slightly condescending but positive and influential early review of A Boy’s Will, and other English poets and literary figures—Ford Madox Ford, Edward Thomas, and Edward Garnett, among them—chimed in, both in praise of that book and, later, of North of Boston. Frost, the New England bard born in San Francisco and launched in London, was on his way.

It was the monologues and dialogues in North of Boston that clearly established Frost as a fresh and distinctly American voice in 20th-century poetry, but the shorter lyrics in A Boy’s Will, while relying to a degree on the somewhat stilted poetic language of an earlier time (phrases like “thou didst” appear frequently), still announce a poet determined to speak directly, using what Frost called the “sound of sense.” By this he meant the rhythm of the conversational sentence employed in a structure that used the poetic conventions of meter, rhyme, and stanza.

The poem “Mowing,” from A Boy’s Will, displays what would become key elements in Frost’s verse. Drawing its subject from the everyday work of rural folk, the poem describes a laborer cutting hay with a scythe. The poem begins, “There was never a sound beside the wood but one, // And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.” Immediately, we feel the isolation of the speaker (a recurrent Frost theme), but we also hear the speech patterns of everyday life and recognize the intimate connection between the laborer and his labor. The poem’s last lines—“The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows. // My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.”—are echoed throughout Frost’s career and, in a sense, reflect his poetic philosophy. His commitment to using ordinary language to describe the natural world on its own terms is reflected in his celebration of fact, but his desire to mold those facts with imagination produces the “sweetest dream” his labor knows.

North of Boston, which followed the 1913 publication of A Boy’s Will by one year, is still regarded by many critics as Frost’s best book. For anyone who thinks of Frost’s poems as simple-minded celebrations of nature and of hard-working, contented rural folk, the monologues and dialogues collected here show a very different poet. In “The Death of the Hired Man,” “A Servant to Servants,” and especially, “Home Burial,” the rural folk who do the talking are anything but contented.

The sparring husband and wife in “Home Burial” have much more in common with the frustrated Vermonters in Annie Proulx’s Heart Songs than they do with the farmers in a Norman Rockwell painting. The remarkable critic and intrepid Frost supporter Randall Jarrell devotes an entire essay to “Home Burial,” and in his word-by-word analysis, he demonstrates how the couple in the poem, estranged from one another in the wake of their son’s death, strike out, using both silence and words. Displaying an uncanny understanding for the psychological dynamics between husband and wife—the agonizing, tentative attempts to reach out, and the violent power struggle to which such attempts, inevitably misunderstood, must lead—Frost takes the reader through a sparring match that, while far more subtle, is every bit as vicious as the duel between George and Martha in Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf.

When the tortured wife finally allows herself to verbalize the source of her confused anger at her husband, who 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,” it is almost unbearable to read the uncomprehending husband’s response, a complete retreat into bitter irony and self-justification: “I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed. // I’m cursed. God, if I don’t believe I’m cursed.” Yes, as today’s pop psychologists would say, the husband suffers from a case of “It’s all about me.” But Frost goes way beyond that, putting the reader inside the skin of both combatants. He makes us feel, on one level, the injustice that prompts the husband’s outburst, but also shows us, indisputably, why the wife sees his actions as akin to, as Jarrell puts it perfectly, Judas sitting “under the cross and matching pennies with the soldiers.” To read “Home Burial” closely and then to read Jarrell’s essay is to leave behind once and for all any notion of Frost as a purveyor of Hallmark-like sentiments.

But the complexity in Frost’s work is evident not just in his dramatic poems. Even in some of his most famous shorter poems, the ones we think we understand, close reading shows us other levels entirely. (Objecting to the obscurity of T. S. Eliot’s poems, Frost once commented, “I want people to understand me. I want ’em to understand me wrong.”) And so they have, especially in the case of such famous poems as “Mending Wall” and “The Road Not Taken.” We all know the line “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” from “Mending Wall,” and we all believe that the poem is about breaking down borders and bringing people together.