Out, Out—

POEM TEXT

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside him in her apron
To tell them 'Supper.' At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. 'Don't let him cut my hand off—
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!'
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

SUMMARY

A buzz saw made a harsh and loud sound in the yard. Dust flew about as the saw cut pieces of wood for the stove, and the dust smelled sweet as it floated on the wind. Looking around, the scenery was beautiful: five mountain ranges were visible beneath the Vermont sunset. The saw made that same noise again, over and over, whether it was cutting wood or not. It is an uneventful day that was pretty much over. The narrator expresses a wish that those involved would have called it a day at this moment. This would have let the young boy working with the saw have an extra half hour of free time, which, as a boy, he'd have appreciated. The boy's sister stood next to him to announce that it was time for dinner. As though it was reacting to her announcement, the saw seemed to jump out at the boy—but in reality, it must have been that the boy slipped. Whichever way it happened, the saw and hand made contact. In shock, the boy laughed nervously before turning towards his family, holding his hand aloft in a way that was half looking for help and half trying to keep the blood from gushing out. Then, it dawned on the boy—who was still a child but old enough to do "a man's work"—that the situation was very serious. The boy begged his sister repeatedly not to let the soon-to-arrive doctor cut his hand off. But the hand was already lost. When the doctor arrived, he anaesthetized the boy with ether. The boy breathed with difficulty, and the doctor noticed that his pulse was dropping. No one could believe what was happening as they listened to his heart. The boy's heart beat fainter and fainter, before finally coming to a stop. That ended his life, with no more growing-up to be done. Because they weren't the ones who were dead, everyone else went back to their everyday lives.

THEMES

LIFE AND DEATH

"Out, Out" tells the tragic tale of a boy injured in an accident. Just as he is about to go in for his dinner, his arm gets caught in a buzz saw—he loses his hand, and subsequently dies from blood loss. The poem is thus a stark reminder of the fragility of life, and that tragedy can happen to anyone at any time. But the poem doesn't simply lament this sad loss—it also hints at the way life moves on after people die, gently questioning the value of life in the first place.

The speaker begins the poem by painting a deliberately mundane scene, luring the reader into a false sense of security (though the buzz saw does carry with it the threat of violence from the beginning). In doing so, the poem is able to show the suddenness and apparent arbitrariness with which death can strike. Aside from its mentions of the buzz saw's snarling and rattling sound, the opening of the poem is almost pastoral—that is, idyllic and set in rural surroundings. The breeze is "sweet-scented," and "five mountain ranges" look over the boy's family

home. Indeed, even the buzz saw's threatening sound is painted almost as part of the landscape, in the way that this sound seems to simply continue on throughout the day without any incident.

The poem makes this sense of mundane and everyday life abundantly clear: "And nothing happened: day was all but done." There is only half an hour's work left to do, and the speaker, foreshadowing the accident that is to come, wishes that the family had "call[ed] it a day" there and then. If they had, the boy would have lived—highlighting the fine margins between life and death, and the way that seemingly harmless decisions can have dire consequences.

The boy is also presented as a typical young man, going about the chores that he has been told to do but also longing to be done with the day's work. "Supper"—called out by his sister—signals that it's time to eat, and it's probably in his excitement at being finished that the boy's hand hits the saw. In other words, the boy is just going about his daily routine—but one wrong move changes everything. Again, death is shown to be lurking in the everyday, a constant presence and threat.

It's in this brief moment that everything changes. The suddenness of what happens is portrayed in the boy's sense of surprise: his first instinct is to laugh, and then to hold his arm up to keep "the life from spilling." This laugh is an important moment, subtly expressing that life—for all its seriousness—can also be a kind of desperate comedy, in the way that it can be so instantly undone.

Indeed, the other characters in the poem find it hard to even believe what is happening. And then, almost as mundanely as he'd been going about his day's work, the boy is dead. Here, the poem seems to question the value of a life cut so tragically short—in turn asking the value of life in the first place (especially if it can be lost so abruptly). The poem offers no kind words or grand sentiments about the death, only that there's "No more to build on there." Death is final and irreversible, in whichever form it comes.

As if to further question the value of life, even the other characters in the poem don't seem to linger too long on the boy's death. Instead, "since they / Were not the one dead," they just go back to their routine lives. By the end of the poem, then, the overwhelming atmosphere is one of senselessness, subtly asking what the purpose of the boy's life actually was, and why he had to die. In turn, the poem asks these same questions of all human life, offering up no easy comforts to the reader.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9
- Lines 10-34

HUMANKIND AND TECHNOLOGY

"Out, Out" is a tale about people and the technology they use. Even in the poem's relatively rural setting, technology is a fundamental part of daily life. (The poem is in fact based on a true story—one of Frost's friends lost his son in a similar accident.) But just as technological advancement grants people increased control and power over their world, these same advances also bring an increased potential for accidents and violence. Though the boy is evidently used to working with the buzz saw, it's still this tool that brings about his sudden, unexpected, and wasteful death. The poem isn't anti-technology, but instead highlights what can happen when the relationship between people and technology goes wrong.

Frost makes the buzz saw a presence in the poem from the beginning, subtly hinting at the violence to come. Though it is a useful tool, it's also deadly—and requires appropriate knowledge, control, and experience to use it safely. The poem personifies the buzz saw from the beginning, indicating the threat that it poses. It "snarl[s]" as though it's angry about something, and is looking for a way to act on this anger. This harsh sound is contrasted with the idyllic peacefulness of the surrounding mountains, hinting at a division between nature and technology. However, the poem balances the threat of the saw with its portrayal as an everyday object—it *does* snarl and rattle, but that's also just the sound that it makes when used. And like most technology, it gets used frequently without incident.

But just as the day is drawing to a close, the boy is injured by the saw. The way in which the poem shows this grim event speaks to the poem's argument that technology, if treated with carelessness, is a danger as much as a help. The saw—as if trying to prove its own agency—seems to attack the boy just at the moment that he is supposed to be free from his work. It acts "as if to prove it knew what supper meant" ("Supper" is the call that the boy is responding too). It's "as if" the saw is resentful of the fact that the boy gets to go inside to his family.

That said, the poem seems to be aware that this personification of the saw is just an attempt to make sense of the tragic incident—the saw doesn't *really* hold any malicious thoughts. But it does hold an immense power that is essentially neutral, indifferent to whether it aids or injures people. And all it takes is for one slip—one misuse or accident—for technology to reveal its deadly power. And though the visiting doctor has his own tools and implements, he can do nothing to help the boy. The saw proves its might, and the helplessness of the people around the boy is matched only by the deadliness of the saw. The poem thus questions to what extent humanity is truly in control over its technological innovations, highlighting technology's often dormant but ever-present dangers.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.

The poem opens with a brief focus on its key object: the buzz saw. From the beginning, the buzz saw "snarls" and "rattles," hinting at the terrible tragedy that is to come. "Snarled" also implies anger and aggression, and accordingly is part of the way that the poem personifies the buzz saw—as though the saw's waiting for its moment to strike. The alliteration of "saw" and "snarled" combines with the /z/ sound in "buzz" to create a harsh opening sound (this is also known as sibilance). That said, the poem is careful not to overdo the menace of the saw: it *does* make a harsh sound, but that's only because it needs to in order to fulfill its function of cutting wood.

The consonance of /d/ sounds that run throughout the first line make the line itself "rattle" with that particular sound, as though hinting at the power of the saw and the potential for its human users to lose control. This /d/ sound is emphasized through alliteration and consonance in the second line too. Here are the first two lines:

> The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
> And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,

But as mentioned above, the poem doesn't go all out on setting up the saw as some kind of inanimate villain. The wood that gets chopped results in "Sweet-scented stuff" (more alliteration) carried on the "breeze." The mention of "breeze" opens up the poem's idyllic description of the setting: rural Vermont.

Lines 4-6 are pure pastoral poetry (that is, poetry that depicts the pleasures of rural life) deliberately luring the reader into a false sense of security after the vague opening threat of the buzz saw. Contrasting with the opening three lines, the poem uses much gentler /n/ consonance in these lines, also part of the way the first section disarms the reader:

> And from there those that lifted eyes could count
> Five mountain ranges one behind the other
> Under the sunset far into Vermont.

The enjambment between the three lines here creates a sense of bountiful beauty, the long sentence length conveying the way that this natural beauty seems to stretch as far as the eye can —indeed, *five* mountain ranges are visible all at once "under the sunset."

It's also worth noting that, for all the alliteration and consonance, the poem sounds distinctly prose-like too. The vocabulary in particular is deliberately plain, and the rhetorical devices are used subtly. This is in part about luring the reader into the false sense of security mentioned above, but it's also designed to paint the scene as relatively mundane and everyday. In other words, the poem tries to portray a *typical* day in this family's life—which will help create the element of surprise with what follows.

LINES 7-12

And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.

In line 7-12 of the poem, the speaker continues to build up the sense that this is just another regular day in rural Vermont, while at the same time hinting at the accident to come.

Lines 7-8 use repetition to underline the way that, though the buzz saw does have its menacing sound, this sound is just part of the daily fabric of life for this Vermont family. It "snarl[s] and rattle[s]," but does so to the point of mundanity. The caesurae in these lines create clauses of similar length, hinting at the saw's role in cutting "stove-length sticks of wood":

> And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
> As it ran light, or had to bear a load.

These lines also emphasize the physicality of the saw: it's a real tool, and a powerful one at that.

Line 9 is a key line, representing the point at which the poem seems most (deliberately) unremarkable. That is, it states clearly that "nothing happened." Indeed, the day is pretty much over.The end-stop at the end of the line seems to make this final, as though the poem could almost end here with nothing whatsoever having happened. But one key word in the line foretells the tragic accident that is to come: "day was all but done." This "but" indicates that some event is coming to contradict the apparently uneventful end to an uneventful day of work.

Then in line 10 the speaker makes a rare interjection in what is otherwise a relatively detached tone. The speaker wishes that the day's work really had ended there and then, but relays how the "boy" in the poem—only now introduced, as if he too is fairly insignificant—still has a small amount of wood to cut. The poem portrays the boy as a typical young man, doing the chores that are asked of him but, of course, looking forward to them being over. "Call it a day, I wish they might have said," says the speaker. The "might" here serves a similar function to the earlier "but," indicating that the boy was *not* able to "call it a day" there and then, and that some other significant event is to follow shortly.

LINES 13-18

> *His sister stood beside him in her apron*
> *To tell them 'Supper.' At the word, the saw,*
> *As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,*
> *Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—*
> *He must have given the hand. However it was,*
> *Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!*

It's at this point in the poem's unfolding narrative that the boy is summoned inside the home by his sister. It's time for "Supper," indicating that the day's work is truly over. Here, the poem reveals the role of the buzz saw in the narrative—and why the poem has devoted five of its fourteen lines so far to its presence. This is also the point at which the buzz saw becomes most fully personified, the simile in line 15 granting the saw a kind of agency as it responds to the word "Supper" "as if to prove" it knows the meaning of the word. The boy's hand meets the saw's sharp edge which almost, but not completely, severs his hand from his arm. The confused way with which this moment is presented helps convey the way that such accidents can happen in the blink of an eye—quicker than the brain can send a signal to the hand to get out of the way.

The boy, of course, would never *intentionally* put his hand to the saw—that's why the poem momentarily ascribes this intention to the saw itself. But because this intention is presented as a simile—it is only "as if" the saw acts deliberately—the incident is also depicted as a sheer chance event. This supports both of the poem's main themes: firstly, that death can strike at anytime and anyplace, and secondly that human technology holds a power that is sometimes difficult to control. Indeed, perhaps it's the boy's inexperience—combined with his eagerness to get inside the house—that causes the contact between hand and saw in the first place. That's why the poem clarifies the way in which it makes the saw act knowingly by saying that, in fact, the boy "must have given the hand."

It's worth noting also how often the word "hand" is repeated in this section, hinting at the way the hand is now a kind of alien object, suddenly behaving in a way completely out of the ordinary (it's barely attached to the boy's wrist and gushing blood). This repetition also shows the way in which everyone's attention is suddenly drawn to the hand, which is the site of the tragic accident.

There is also a breathless alliteration of /h/ sounds at work in line 17, suggesting the boy's own shortness of breath as he tries to process what has just happened to him—and how it happened completely unexpectedly:

> He must have given the hand. However it was

Line 18 then ends on another repetition of "hand": "But the hand!" The exclamation is a kind of lament, in which the narrator expresses sympathy for the boy. Again, this exclamation picks up on the breathless /h/ sounds, reaching a peak feeling of panic.

LINES 19-22

> *The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,*
> *As he swung toward them holding up the hand*
> *Half in appeal, but half as if to keep*
> *The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—*

Line 19 introduces the boy's immediate response to the accident. At first he is in shock, disbelieving the sight of his severed hand gushing blood. He laughs a "rueful laugh," which touches on the absurdity of the moment—absurd because just moments ago everything was as normal. Indeed, it's worth considering the title at this point. "Out, out" is a short quote from Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. The quote is spoken by Macbeth himself, and essentially expresses life's fundamental meaninglessness:

> Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.

The laugh made by the boy seems to connect the poem to the allusion in its title. Essentially, Macbeth is characterizing life as a kind of joke "signifying nothing," i.e. without meaning. And that idea is at the heart of this poem—how can life be significant if it can be taken away in such a brief moment, if it can be cut so short. In other words, what is the value of the boy's life, if he has to die so young? The laugh, then, hints at the way the poem presents this incident not just as a tragedy but as a kind of tragic comedy too.

Lines 20 to 21 show the boy's next actions, as he swings his hand "toward them." It's not clear who counts as part of this "them," but presumably it's the boy's family (his sister has already been mentioned). The lack of detail about the others focuses the reader's attention on the boy, rather than the fear or subsequent grief of his family. Just as in line 17, these two

lines use /h/ alliteration to indicate a kind of breathlessness, conveying the boy's shock:

> As he swung toward them holding up the hand
> Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
> The life from spilling.

It's also clear from the above that the gravity of the situation is starting to dawn on the boy instinctively. On the one hand (literally), he cannot believe what he's seeing—but he's also trying in vain to "keep / The life from spilling." He's trying to prevent his wrist from bleeding too much. The caesura here after spilling is important, representing the instant in which the boy starts to fear for his hand—and his life. The speaker, acting again as a distant storyteller, introduces the boy's dawning realization of his own mortality, the m-dash end-stop setting up what is to follow: "Then the boy saw all—"

LINES 23-28

> *Since he was old enough to know, big boy*
> *Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—*
> *He saw all spoiled. 'Don't let him cut my hand off—*
> *The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!'*
> *So. But the hand was gone already.*
> *The doctor put him in the dark of ether.*

The phrase between the second half of line 22 and the first half of line 25 offers a little more context to the boy's situation:

> Since he was old enough to know, big boy
> Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—

This explains that the boy is not far from manhood, making the sudden waste of his life seem all the more bitter. But it's also part of the poem's thematic discussion of technology, subtly suggesting that the boy was not yet experienced enough to be using the buzz saw, even if he was perfectly capable of doing so and found it easy. All it takes to cross the threshold from life to death—when in the presence of such powerful tools—is a moment's distraction or error.

In line 25, the speaker states that the boy "saw all spoiled." There's something almost grotesque and gruesome about the word "spoiled" here, combined with the consonance of /l/ and /s/ sounds. It's as if the sound itself is spoiling or going haywire, just like the saw. After line 25's caesura comes the poem's second instance of quoted speech (the first being the sister's one word in line 14). Here, the boy panics about losing his hand—but the franticness with which he tells his sister not to let the doctor cut his hand off also conveys a deeper fear of mortality and impending death.

The start of line 27 is one of the poem's most brutal moments. The single-word sentence—"So."—indicates a short passage of time but also conveys helplessness and desperation. There's nothing that the boy can do—and there's nothing that the doctor can do either. Indeed, the hand is already lost. It's worth reiterating the way that the poem mostly uses detached, prose-like language to describe what's happening. This ties in with the poem's deeper question about the meaningfulness/meaninglessness of life. And from hereon in, the poem mostly uses end-stops at the end of each line, foregrounding the slowing pulse of the boy has he nears death and capturing a sense of finality. The doctor then makes the boy unconscious with "ether," which is like a smaller version of death that anticipates the real thing.

LINES 29-34

> *He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.*
> *And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.*
> *No one believed. They listened at his heart.*
> *Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.*
> *No more to build on there. And they, since they*
> *Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.*

Lines 29 to 32 recount the young boy's final moments. He lies down, struggling for breath, with the doctor unable to do anything for him. The end-stops and multiple caesurae in this section slow the pace of the poem down, mimicking the boy's slowing heart. As with elsewhere in the poem, it's notable how deliberately prosaic the tone is here. The poem is on the one hand showing how death can strike at any time, but also the way that death itself is a kind of mundane experience, in the sense that it's always happening.

The short sentence in the first half of line 31 is significant: "No one believed." This expresses the shock of what's happened, the way death has come seemingly out of nowhere so that it's hard to believe (this moment is similar to the boy's laugh in line 19). But it also speaks to the senselessness of the boy's death, questioning the meaning of his life and thereby the meaning of life itself.

Line 32 uses asyndeton—a lack of conjunctions like "and" and "then"—to portray the boy's very final moments. His heart goes from "Little" to "less" and then, finally, to "nothing!" The lack of conjunctions shows how these are small, concentrated portions of time, everyone's attention fixed firmly on waiting for the next heartbeat—which, at last, no longer comes. The alliteration works cleverly here, the two /l/ sounds in "little" and the one in "less" functioning like heartbeats that are then made absent at the same time that the heart stops: "nothing!" The poem is then incredibly matter-of-fact: "and that ended it." This partly expresses the disbelief surrounding the boy's death; it seems so out of the blue that there isn't even room for any emotion yet.

Perhaps that's why the final two lines seem cold and removed—because no one present in the poem can actually come to terms with what has happened. On the other hand, perhaps these two lines just express a harsh truth about the way life moves on when someone dies, barely pausing before

everyday concerns take over once again:

> No more to build on there. And they, since they
> Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

This first sentence is especially bleak, underlining how the boy will not live to turn into a man—he won't have a chance build on the foundations of his youth and grow into adulthood.

The use of "they" here is similarly vague to the use of "them" in line 20. That is, the other people in the poem seem intentionally kept at a distance, emphasizing the boy's isolation through death and the fact that they are powerless to help him. Ultimately, then, the power in the poem—in terms of an ability to enact change in the world—rests with the buzz saw, the very object that the poem first focused on.

SYMBOLS

THE BUZZ SAW

The buzz saw is the most important object in "Out, Out." It symbolizes the dangers of technology if not handled properly. The poem focuses on the saw during the opening lines, discussing its harsh and almost violent sound, while also acknowledging its usefulness as a tool for chopping wood. The way the buzz saw "snarl[s] and rattle[s]" pre-empts the incident that leads to the boy's death later in the poem. On the one hand, the saw is just an everyday object, it's harsh sound a part of the environment of this particular Vermont home—on the other, it's a killer in waiting.

More generally, though, the saw represents technology. This isn't to paint technology as either bad or good, but more to show how entwined it is in daily life—even in rural Vermont—and how it carries power that can be difficult to harness and control. Technology can go badly wrong, in other words. Though it's not discussed explicitly, the saw is an important part of life for the family in the poem. It helps cut wood for the stove, which in turn heats the home. This showcases the usefulness of technology. But the saw also requires knowledge, expertise, and experience to use it properly and safely—one false move can prove deadly. So the saw *also* shows the deadly potential of technology if it isn't used correctly.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard / And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood, / Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it."
- **Lines 7-8:** "And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled, / As it ran light, or had to bear a load."
- **Lines 14-18:** " At the word, the saw, / As if to prove saws knew what supper meant, / Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap— / He must have given the hand. However it was, / Neither refused the meeting."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is one of the more prominent poetic devices in "Out, Out." Despite the poem's lack of overall rhyme scheme or structured form, the frequency of repeated sounds makes it still feel lyrical.

Alliteration is first used as a way to bring the threatening noise of the buzz saw to life: "The buzz saw snarled." Immediately, there's a hissing, menacing quality present that suggests the potential violence of the saw. The alliteration continues thickly into line 2:

> And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,

There's something almost methodical to the placement of these sounds across the line, suggesting the repetitive process of using the saw to cut equal pieces of wood. Line 3 also uses alliteration, meaning that the first three lines all use the device—creating an atmosphere thick with melody within an otherwise distinctly *un*poetic poem:

> Sweet-scented stuff ...

These three /s/ sounds (also known as sibilance) convey the sweetness of the woody smell as the buzz saw makes its cuts.

Another key use of alliteration comes when the boy's hand meets the saw. Here, breathy /h/ sounds in line 17 are used to indicate shock and shortness of breath as the boy realizes what's happened:

> He must have given the hand. However it was,

This same sound is then repeated in lines 20 and 21:

> As he swung toward them holding up the hand
> Half in appeal, but half as if to keep

Finally, it's important to note the alliteration that appears in line 32 (which also uses asyndeton):

> Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.

This line depicts the boy's fading heartbeat. Cleverly, the two /l/ sounds occur together to indicate when the boy's heart is—just

about—still beating. But once the pulse has entirely gone, the /l/ sound disappears: "nothing!"

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "s," "s"
- **Line 2:** "d," "d," "s," "t," "s," "t"
- **Line 3:** "S," "s," "s," "t"
- **Line 4:** "th," "th," "th," "c," "c"
- **Line 5:** "o"
- **Line 6:** "U"
- **Line 7:** "s," "s," "r," "s," "r"
- **Line 8:** "r," "l," "l"
- **Line 9:** "d," "d"
- **Line 11:** "b," "b," "h," "h"
- **Line 12:** "s," "w," "s," "w"
- **Line 13:** "s," "s"
- **Line 14:** "T," "t," "S," "s"
- **Line 15:** "s," "s"
- **Line 17:** "H," "h," "h," "H"
- **Line 20:** "h," "h"
- **Line 21:** "H," "h"
- **Line 23:** "b," "b"
- **Line 25:** "s," "s," "h," "h"
- **Line 28:** "d," "d"
- **Line 29:** "l," "l"
- **Line 30:** "th," "th"
- **Line 31:** "h," "h"
- **Line 32:** "L," "l"
- **Line 34:** "t," "t"

ALLUSION

The poem makes one allusion which can be easily missed, because it appears in the poem's title. "Out, out" is a reference to William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, when the title character responds to his wife's death. Here is the quote at a little more length:

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time;
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.

The quote expresses an attitude towards life that sees existence as fundamentally meaningless, a kind of unfortunate cosmic joke. Interestingly, Frost's poem seems to roughly mirror the form of the quote above. That is, the first chunk of both Shakespeare's passage and the poem outlines the mundanity of time's passing, and the repetitiveness of life (this can be seen in the first three lines above and the first nine or so of "Out, Out"). Then, both the speech and the poem focus briefly on death. In Macbeth's speech, "out, out, brief candle" expresses the shortness of life, while Frost's poem mentions the actual death of the young boy. Finally, both the quote and the poem end on a bleak and almost nihilistic note (which just means believing in nothing, or seeming to *not* believe in the value of life). The boy's death seems to be the event that ultimately signifies nothing in the poem—though the lack of emotional response could also be down to the fact that the others in the poem (who are barely mentioned) are unable to come to terms with it, and have pressing economic concerns to worry about.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton is used just once in "Out, Out," with "Little—less—nothing!" in line 32. First, though, it's worth noting the general tone and sound of the poem that leads up to this moment. Throughout, the poem sounds a lot like prose—that is, like the speaker is simply retelling a story rather than reciting a tightly structured verse. This is part of the way that the poem builds a kind of everyday, mundane atmosphere (in which death can suddenly strike). Accordingly, most of the poem makes regular use of conjunctions like "and" or "but," in keeping with that prose-like tone.

So it's significant, then, that the poem deviates from this in just one line—and this is the very moment when the boy dies. With everyone around the boy waiting for the next beat of his heart, people's attention to time has become minute and fragmented, each moment seeming to last a lifetime as they hope to hear signs of life. The asyndeton here, by breaking with the intentionally prose-like tone that the poem has used so far, signals the intensity of this moment: "Little—less—nothing!" It also emphasizes the way in which life and death co-exist in such close proximity, with death coming here just on the other side of an m-dash.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 32:** "Little—less—nothing!—"

CAESURA

Caesura is used frequently in "Out, Out," and is executed using m-dashes, commas, and full stops. Altogether, the caesuras add to the poem's prose-like tone—that is, the way that it feels more like a story being told rather than a strictly-formatted verse. The first examples are in lines 7 and 8:

And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.

Here, the poem is portraying the buzz saw both as an everyday object and as a potential violent threat. The use of caesura divides these lines into relatively equal clauses, just as the saw itself divides wood into relatively equal "stove-length[s]" (for use on the fire).

The caesura in the following line—line 9—slows the pace of the poem down, emphasizing the uneventfulness of the day:

And nothing happened: day was all but done.

The next significant caesura pops up in line 14. This comes just after the boy is called in for supper by his sister, part of the routine of everyday life. But it's after this that the accident happens, and using the caesura creates a little pause, allowing the sudden accident to come as more of a surprise to the reader.

Between lines 16 and 26 there are numerous caesuras. These mostly reflect the panicked state of the young boy, the sentences refusing to end in neat and orderly places. But the poem's most brutal caesura of all is in line 27. Here, the early full-stop caesura creates a one-word fragmented sentence: "So." This indicates a passing of time, but also captures the inevitability of the boy's death once his hand meets the saw. "So" seems to reflect the helplessness of the situation.

Later, in line 32, the caesura aids the asyndeton (which is a term for when a writer removes conjunction words like "and" or "but") in creating a feeling of intensity around the boy's final moments. Indeed, on one side of the second m-dash caesura is life, and on the other death, reflecting the close relationship of the two together:

Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.

The final two lines also make effective use of caesura:

No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

The first full-stop here has an air of finality about, like the earlier "So" (in line 27). In the last line, when the other people in the poem are depicted as going back to their business, it's interesting to note that the comma divides the line in a way similar to lines 7 and 8, when the poem was building a picture of the boy's mundane everyday routine. In those two lines, the caesuras seemed to convey the cutting of wood by the saw into relatively equal pieces—seemingly echoed here as a way of showing everyone "turn[ing] to their affairs" once more.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** “,”
- **Line 8:** “,”
- **Line 9:** “:”
- **Line 10:** “,”
- **Line 14:** “.,” “,”
- **Line 16:** “,”
- **Line 17:** “.”
- **Line 18:** “.”
- **Line 21:** “,”
- **Line 22:** “.”
- **Line 23:** “,”
- **Line 24:** “,”
- **Line 25:** “.”
- **Line 26:** “,” “.,” “,”
- **Line 27:** “.”
- **Line 30:** “—”
- **Line 32:** “—,” “—,” “—”
- **Line 33:** “.,” “,”
- **Line 34:** “,”

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used quite frequently in "Out, Out." Despite not having a specific form or rhyme scheme, the poem is still rich with sound; the consonance elevates its language, adding a sense of melody to the otherwise prose-like lines.

One of the important uses of sound in the poem early on relates to the buzz saw. The poem builds a sense of threat around the saw, and this is in part achieved by focusing on its sound:

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,

The /s/ consonance (also known as sibilance) plus the multiple /r/ and /t/ sounds gives the saw its growling, almost spitting quality. The use of /d/ sounds—also highlighted above—have a different effect. They are spread like wood dust throughout the line, and there is something methodical about the way they appear at semi-regular intervals—conveying the repetitive task of cutting wood.

After these lines, the poem intentionally draws the reader into a false sense of security by focusing on the idyllic countryside surroundings. Fittingly, lines 4 to 6 are overflowing with consonance—repeating /n/, /th/, /k/, and /t/ sounds which, when combined with the lines' use of assonance, imbue the poem here with a soothing sense of melody:

And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other

Under the sunset far into Vermont

Consonance also works to connect certain thematic ideas in the poem. Note, for example, the shared /l/ sounds in the phrase "life from spilling" in line 22, connecting the boy's life to the blood spilling out from his hand.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "s," "s," "r," "d," "d," "r," "d," "rd"
- **Line 2:** "d," "d," "st," "d," "d," "d," "st," "st," "s," "d"
- **Line 3:** "S," "t," "s," "t," "d," "st"
- **Line 4:** "th," "th," "th," "c," "c," "nt"
- **Line 5:** "nt," "n," "n," "n," "n," "th," "th," "r"
- **Line 6:** "n," "r," "s," "ns," "t," "r," "nt," "r," "nt"
- **Line 7:** "s," "s," "r," "l," "d," "d," "r," "l," "d," "s," "rl," "d," "d," "r," "l," "d"
- **Line 8:** "r," "l," "l"
- **Line 9:** "d," "d"
- **Line 11:** "b," "b," "h," "h," "h"
- **Line 12:** "c," "s," "wh," "s," "w," "k"
- **Line 13:** "s," "st," "st," "d," "s," "d," "h," "h," "r," "p," "r"
- **Line 14:** "T," "t," "S," "pp," "r," "r," "s"
- **Line 15:** "pr," "s," "w," "wh," "s," "pp," "r"
- **Line 17:** "H," "h," "H"
- **Line 19:** "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 20:** "h," "h"
- **Line 21:** "H," "f," "h," "f," "f"
- **Line 22:** "l," "f," "f," "ll," "Th," "th," "s," "ll"
- **Line 23:** "S," "n," "kn," "b," "b"
- **Line 24:** "h"
- **Line 25:** "H," "s," "s," "d," "D"
- **Line 26:** "d," "D," "s," "s"
- **Line 27:** "S"
- **Line 28:** "d," "c," "d," "k"
- **Line 30:** "th," "th"
- **Line 31:** "h," "h"
- **Line 32:** "L," "l," "l"
- **Line 33:** "th," "th," "th"
- **Line 34:** "n," "n," "d," "d," "t," "r," "n," "d," "t," "r," "r"

END-STOPPED LINE

There are a lot of end-stops in "Out, Out." Overall, they are an important tool in helping the poem to sound deliberately prose-like, rather than overly poetic. Indeed, this is a narrative poem that unfolds more like a story than a poem in places. This isn't, of course, an oversight on Frost's part—it's a deliberate choice. The poem seems to offer a comment on death, the way it can strike seemingly out of nowhere, in the most mundane and average of days. The sound of the poem is about luring the reader into a false sense of security, so that the boy's accident comes as more of a shock—and the end-stops are generally a key part of this.

The first two full-stops in the poem—at the end of line 3 and 6—both come after relatively pleasant descriptions (of the sweet smell of cut wood and the mountains of Vermont respectively). These end-stops have a quiet, almost meditative feel (part of the false sense of security). The end-stop in line 9 then has a gently tragic quality to it:

And nothing happened: day was all but done.

The full-stop represents the speaker's wish that the boy *had* been able to "call it a day" there and then. But the "but" just before "done" indicates that the full-stop offers false promise of rest and respite—something else *is* going to happen.

End-stops then play an important role in the final section of the poem's narrative, lines 27 till the end. In this section, almost every line is end-stopped. This slows the pace of the poem down, conveying the slowing heartbeat as the boy nears death.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "",
- **Line 3:** "."
- **Line 6:** "."
- **Line 7:** "",
- **Line 8:** "."
- **Line 9:** "."
- **Line 12:** "."
- **Line 14:** "",
- **Line 15:** "",
- **Line 16:** "—"
- **Line 17:** "",
- **Line 18:** "!"
- **Line 19:** "",
- **Line 22:** "—"
- **Line 24:** "—"
- **Line 25:** "—"
- **Line 26:** "!"
- **Line 27:** "."
- **Line 28:** "."
- **Line 29:** "."
- **Line 30:** "."
- **Line 31:** "."
- **Line 32:** "."
- **Line 34:** "."

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used relatively frequently in "Out, Out." The poem is a narrative story, and the natural-feeling use of enjambment and end-stops prevents the poem from feeling too poetic—sentences are allowed to run as long or short as they need to be, rather than being too strictly governed by line length.

Line 1 can be read as either end-stopped or enjambed; the line

contains a complete grammatical unit/thought, but lacks the punctuation that would indicate a pause at the end of the line. We've marked it as enjambed because this captures the sense of the way the buzz saw's sound echoes through the yard—and across the line break. More significant, though, is the enjambment in lines 4 to 6:

> And from there those that lifted eyes could count
> Five mountain ranges one behind the other
> Under the sunset far into Vermont.

These lines describe the way that the natural beauty of Vermont seems to stretch as far as the eye can see, particularly the mountains. The sentence itself stretches across the three lines, suggesting the grand scale of the scenery.

Later, lines 20 and 21—which come just after the boy's accident—use enjambment to convey panic and shock:

> As he swung toward them holding up the hand
> Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
> The life from spilling.

The enjambment here quickens the lines as the boy moves around frantically. The poem's final moment of enjambment is also quite evocative:

> No more to build on there. And they, since they
> Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

This suggests how smoothly people return to work after the boy's death—how little time others can afford to spend mourning or thinking about the tragedy before returning to their own concerns.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "yard / And"
- **Lines 4-5:** "count / Five"
- **Lines 5-6:** "other / Under"
- **Line 10:** "said"
- **Line 11:** "To," "hour"
- **Line 12:** "That"
- **Line 13:** "apron"
- **Line 14:** "To"
- **Line 20:** "hand"
- **Line 21:** "Half," "keep"
- **Line 22:** "The"
- **Line 23:** "boy"
- **Line 24:** "Doing"
- **Line 33:** "they"
- **Line 34:** "Were"

PERSONIFICATION

There is one element of personification in "Out, Out," tied specifically to the buzz saw. The saw is mentioned three times; line 7 is a close repetition of line 1, and in each of these the saw "snarled and rattled." These give the saw a sense of violent agency, but are also just ways of describing the sound. "Snarl" speaks to a more animalistic quality in the saw too, as if it were a hunter or predator.

The main instance of personification, though, appears in lines 14 to 18:

> ... At the word, the saw,
> As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
> Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
> He must have given the hand. However it was,
> Neither refused the meeting.

Here, the narrator tries to make some kind of sense of the tragic accident: how it happened so suddenly and unexpectedly. If the saw *did* have some kind of human-like aggression and animosity, that would help to explain the boy's death. Life might not seem quite so random and cruel if the saw had some agency.

But, as is shown above, the saw is never really fully personified. The speaker only personifies the saw through a simile, and even then seems to revise the accident as being the boy's fault. In the end, the speaker settles on it being a shared responsibility between the saw and the boy, still drawing on the personification to a degree in that saws are not capable of accepting nor refusing a "meeting." The wavering of the speaker suggests that personifying the saw is too simple—the accident isn't the result of an actively malevolent piece of technology, but rather the result of human error and a testament to the fragility of human life.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The buzz saw snarled"
- **Line 7:** "the saw snarled," "snarled"
- **Lines 14-18:** "the saw, / As if to prove saws knew what supper meant, / Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap— / He must have given the hand. However it was, / Neither refused the meeting."

REPETITION

One of the poem's main aims is to show the way that death can strike at any moment, even in the most seemingly mundane everyday situations. To do this, the poem uses prose-like language *and* makes effective use of repetition. For example, the repeat of "snarled and rattled"—which refers to the buzz saw's sound—both restates the potential violence of the saw and highlights how using the saw is a familiar and repetitive

task for the young boy. It may snarl and rattle, but that's just what it *does*—it doesn't *necessarily* actively signal the threat of violence. This also speaks to the way that the saw is used for chopping wood, itself a kind of repetitive labor.

Repetition is particularly striking in lines 16-18, of the words "leap" and "hand." These moments are technically examples of diacope, and they emphasize the suddenness with which the accident happens. It's as if the boy can't really believe what's happening, and must repeat it to convince himself that the "hand" is really gone:

> Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
> He must have given the hand. However it was,
> Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!

Another effective use of diacope appears with the words "half" in line 21:

> Half in appeal, but half as if to keep

The repetition signals the way that the boy is caught between disbelief and realization, amazed at what's happened but beginning to understand what it means. When the boy actually speaks for the first time in the poem, he again uses repetition. He tells his sister:

> 'Don't let him cut my hand off—
> The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!'

While the first phrase relates to his hand specifically, the second is a more general panicked cry for help. It could almost be addressed to the grim reaper, the boy imploring his sister not to let him die.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The buzz saw snarled and rattled"
- **Line 7:** "And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,"
- **Line 16:** "Leaped," "hand," "leap"
- **Line 17:** "hand"
- **Line 18:** "hand"
- **Line 21:** "Half," "half"
- **Line 22:** "all"
- **Line 25:** "all," "Don't let him"
- **Line 26:** "Don't let him"

SIMILE

The poem contains two similes. The first is in line 15, and is meant to try to make sense of the buzz saw's apparent actions:

> ... At the word, the saw,
> As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
> Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
> He must have given the hand.

The simile here—"As if"—is used to introduce the personification of the saw to this section. Essentially, the speaker tries to understand how this accident happened, and an initial theory is that the saw itself is evil and aggressive. It resents the word "supper" because it means that the boy can get away, and accordingly launches its attack. But this idea is intentionally weakened by the simile, underlining the fact the saw, of course, has no such motive or agency. Either it's just come loose—highlighting the threat that all technology poses when it goes out of control—or the boy has slipped in his excitement about going back into the house and being done with the day's work.

The other simile relates to the boy. Once the accident has happened, the narrator describes the boy's reaction:

> The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
> As he swung toward them holding up the hand
> Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
> The life from spilling.

The poem uses the same simile phrase—"as if"—drawing a kind of macabre parallel between the buzz saw and the boy. Indeed, while the other simile highlighted the inappropriateness of ascribing human emotion and intent to inanimate objects, this simile in a way has the opposite effect. That is, the boy's life really is "spilling" out from him, the loss of blood leading to the subsequent loss of life.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 15:** "As if"
- **Line 21:** "as if"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used frequently in "Out, Out." Together with Frost's frequent consonance and alliteration, this adds a sense of lyricism and melody to the poem despite the fact that it lacks any overarching rhyme scheme or stanza form. Assonance appears in the very opening line:

> The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard

There is a long /a/ sound shared between "snarled" and "yard," and a shorter /a/ between "and" and "rattled." This gives the line itself a kind of noisiness, the prominent assonance (again, together with alliteration and consonance) making the line feel brimming with similar sounds. This is like a kind of poetic volume, mirroring the loud and persistent noise made by the buzz saw.

Another example comes in line 3. Here, long /ee/ sounds give the line a relaxed feel, conveying the sweet-smelling dust of wood floating on the wind:

> Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.

This effect is picked up by the idyllic, almost pastoral description in the following lines, with assonance used to create a sense of gentle calm in line 6:

> Under the sunset far into Vermont.

Later, in lines 16 and 17, the long /ee/ sound reappears. But this time, it has more of a reaching quality, as though bringing to life the way that the saw *seems* to reach out and attack the boy:

> Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
> He must have given the hand.

Lines 22 and 25 then use assonance as part of their repetition of the phrase "saw all":

> The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
> [...]
> He saw all spoiled.

There's something slow and gloomy about these /aw/ sounds, especially given the way that they take the same word—"saw"—and use it to show how the boy's imminent death is suddenly dawning on him.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 2:** "A," "a"
- **Line 3:** "ee," "e," "e," "ee"
- **Line 4:** "ou"
- **Line 5:** "ou," "o"
- **Line 6:** "U," "u"
- **Line 7:** "A," "a," "a," "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 8:** "a"
- **Line 9:** "u," "o"
- **Line 10:** "a," "e"
- **Line 11:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 13:** "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 14:** "e," "e"
- **Line 15:** "o," "ew," "a," "u"
- **Line 16:** "ea," "ee," "ea"
- **Line 17:** "e," "a," "a"
- **Line 22:** "a," "a"
- **Line 23:** "o," "o"
- **Line 25:** "a," "a"
- **Line 34:** "ei," "ai"

VOCABULARY

Buzz saw (Line 1) - A big circular saw. A buzz saw can be hand-held or mounted on a table and is good for chopping wood.

Vermont (Line 6) - Vermont is a state in New England, on the border with Canada. It is known for its mountainous landscape and seasonal weather.

Rueful (Line 19) - This means with regret, but also with an element of humor too. The laugh pre-empts the boy's realization that his life is over.

Ether (Line 28) - Ether is an anaesthetic drug.

Affairs (Line 34) - This means everybody goes back to their daily business and immediate personal concerns.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Out, Out" consists of a long, single stanza, so in that sense doesn't follow a strict form. This big block of text—34 lines, to be exact—does contribute to the poem's tone, however. The lack of form makes sense because Frost deliberately avoids adding anything overly *poetic* throughout "Out, Out" (e.g., big rhymes or flowery metaphors). The poem aims to create a false sense of security, so that the death of the boy feels all the more random and shocking. Accordingly, this essentially *anti*-poetic chunk of text helps make the poem seem more like a piece of prose, an unfolding narrative that is keen to use simple words and diction.

The form at first seems to reflect the sentiment of line 9: that "nothing happened" on the particular day in question. This, of course, is not true—something eventful *does* happen. And when it does, the prose-like sound of the poem in turn makes the boy's death all the more impactful on the reader.

METER

"Out, Out" is a poem written in blank verse, which means unrhymed iambic pentameter. Each line—apart from those that vary the pattern—has five feet of unstressed-stressed syllables (da-DUM).

A good example of this basic pattern is line 9:

> And no- | thing hap- | pened: day | was all | but done.

It makes sense that this line conforms to the poem's metrical pattern. In doing so, it gives metrical representation to the idea that the day in this poem is just a typical day—until, of course, it all goes wrong. The regularity of the line reflects the regularity of the day, including the boy's use of the buzz saw (and its ominous sound).

There are many lines that vary the iambic pattern. Line 3, for example, is highly varied, conveying the "breeze" that drifts through the line and blows the meter out of its pattern:

> Sweet-scented | stuff when | the breeze | drew a- | cross it.

Line 32 also contains an interesting variation, using caesura and asyndeton to create a highly disjointed and abrupt sounding line:

> Little | —less—no- | thing!—and | that end- | ed it.

So, although the poem employs blank verse, it's not afraid to vary stresses to create powerfully expressive moments. In this way, it also mimics the way people add emphasis in everyday speech.

RHYME SCHEME

"Out, Out" is written in blank verse, which is means that it follows unrhymed iambic pentameter. There is a good reason for this avoidance of steady rhymes: part of the poem's strategy is to lure the reader into a false sense of security, before the shocking event of the boy's accident. Accordingly, it uses rather un-poetic language for most of its lines, and the lack of rhymes is part of this. If the poem were to have neat and tidy rhymes at the end of each line, it would probably sound too controlled and pretty, and indeed might even sound inappropriate for the subject matter. Instead, it remains unpredictable, as are life and death.

There are, however, some noteworthy, if subtle, internal rhymes created through assonance and consonance. This is clear in lines 5-7, where the assonant /ow/ and /uh/ sounds combine with the consonance of /n/ and /t/ sounds (plus the subtle slant rhyme here between "count" and "Vermont") to add a distinct sense of musicality to the serene natural scene:

> And from there those that lifted eyes could count
> Five mountain ranges one behind the other
> Under the sunset far into Vermont.

There's another striking internal rhyme in the poem's final two lines:

> No more to build on there. And they, since they
> Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

When read out loud, this single—though not perfect—rhyme is quite noticeable. It gives the poem an air of finality, as though the pages of a story book are being firmly shut.

SPEAKER

The speaker is an interesting presence in "Out, Out." For the most part, the poem aims for a detached narrative tone. Indeed, for the first nine lines there is nothing to suggest the presence of a first-person speaker at all. However, in lines 10-12 the speaker expresses an opinion on what is about to happen:

> Call it a day, I wish they might have said
> To please the boy by giving him the half hour
> That a boy counts so much when saved from work.

It's an intriguing intervention, almost as if the emotional shock of the boy's death overpowers the detachedness of the narrative voice. And it's to that more detached sound that the speaker then returns, with no more instances of the first-person pronoun cropping up throughout the rest of the poem.

This intervention suggests the speaker knows the family this has happened to, perhaps even knew boy. Additionally, as with many of Frost's poems, "Out, Out" captures the sound of the everyday speech of rural New England people. So, one could interpret the speaker as a neighbor of the family, or a nearby resident (in fact, this is something that really happened to the son of one of Frost's friends). Yet because the poem is written in blank verse and employs its distinctly detached tone, the reader never loses track of the fact that this is *a poem*. In fact, Frost's narrators often sound *both* like rural New Englanders and like accomplished poets. There's a sense of that combined quality in this poem as well.

SETTING

"Out, Out" has a distinctive and clear setting. It's told in the past tense throughout, lending its events an air of inevitability—no one can go back to save the boy who dies.

The geographical setting of the poem is Vermont. It's a rural environment, even pastoral, with the mountains looming large and beautiful in the background. The boy who dies seems to be from a typical family, and his role cutting wood seems to be part of his role in the family too. The poem is keen to point out how the day in question was just a typical day in this young boy's life—until, of course, it wasn't.

The action in the poem's narrative takes place largely over one single day. However, the poem seems to widen its timespan in the last couple of lines:

> No more to build on there. And they, since they
> Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

Here, the poem looks at the days ahead, in which the family must return to their daily rhythms. This relates to the almost

cruel way in which life goes on after the boy is dead.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Frost, one of America's most celebrated poets, lived from 1874 till 1963. Broadly speaking, Frost is considered one of the most important poets of the 20th century. Indeed, he was that rare thing: immensely popular with both the public *and* the critics. Such was his popularity that he was at one point dispatched to Russia by President Kennedy in an effort to ease tensions between the two countries. Together with Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot, he is one of the most read (and perhaps most misunderstood) poets of the age.

"Out, Out" is taken from the 1916 collection *Mountain Interval*, which opens with what is perhaps Frost's most famous poem, "The Road Not Taken." The collection's title is New England-speak for land in a valley, but also suggests a kind of pause. Indeed, this title relates nicely to "Out, Out" itself, in which the everyday lives of these Vermont inhabitants are suddenly interrupted by the boy's buzz saw accident. The poem shares two key traits with many of Frost's other poems: firstly, there is a focus on the natural world—used here as a way to lure the reader into a false sense of security. Secondly, the poem has a kind of fable-like quality to it, even if that is to ultimately question whether, in the light of such tragedies as the boy's young death, life actually has any meaning at all.

The title itself is also important to the literary context. "Out, out" appears in a speech by Macbeth in Shakespeare's play of the same name. It's a famous passage that characterizes life as a "tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing." The last two words are important to Frost's poem, as the narrator seems to deliberately avoid spelling out what—if anything—the boy's death signifies. Indeed, it might well be that the senselessness of his death demonstrates—proves, even—that Macbeth's view of the world is accurate.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Perhaps the most important part of the poem's historical context is that it is based on a true story. Frost's friend, Michael Fitzgerald, lost his young son in a buzz saw accident. Frost, an avid and remarkable reader of his own poetry, opted not to perform this poem in public, considering it "too cruel." Part of the poem's power, then, is that it is wholly realistic in the way that it depicts death as potentially sudden and surprising.

It's also worth noting the timing of the poem's publication. *Mountain Interval* was published during the First World War, one of humanity's most devastating and deadly conflicts. If the poem can be read as a parable about the dangers of technology when it slips beyond human control, the First World War embodies this idea in the cruelest, most horrific reality. New advances in weaponry and warfare meant that humans could kill each more efficiently and in greater number than ever—and they did.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Macbeth's Soliloquy — A fascinating insight into the Macbeth soliloquy from which the poem's title is taken. Ian McKellen analyzes the speech. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGbZCgHQ9m8)
- Raymond Tracy Fitzgerald — A link to a memorial page for Raymond Tracy Fitzgerald, the boy on whom Frost based the poem. (https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/62944052/raymond-tracy-fitzgerald)
- More Articles and Poems — A valuable resource from Poetry Foundation with Frost poems, analysis, and biographical information. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost)
- Mountain Interval — A link to the full collection from which this poem is taken. (http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/29345)
- An Insightful Interview with the Poet — In this video, Robert Frost is interviewed by author Bela Kornitzer in 1952. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qem3v0zvajQ)
- A Reading of the Poem — The poem read for the Librivox archive. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYKjcVigng8)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- Acquainted with the Night
- After Apple-Picking
- Fire and Ice
- Mending Wall
- Nothing Gold Can Stay
- Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
- The Road Not Taken

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