The Oven Bird

POEM TEXT

There is a singer everyone has heard,
Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.
He says the early petal-fall is past
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
On sunny days a moment overcast;
And comes that other fall we name the fall.
He says the highway dust is over all.
The bird would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

SUMMARY

The ovenbird is a songbird everyone's heard at some point. It's a loud bird, found in the middle of summer and in the middle of the woods. It makes the solid summer trees noisy again (as they were in spring). Its song says that the tree leaves have aged and that spring flowers are ten times better than summer flowers. It says the petal-showers of early spring are over, when pear and cherry blossoms would fall during days of near-total sunshine. It says another fall is coming: the one we call "fall." It says the whole landscape is covered with dust from the roads. The ovenbird would end its song and act like other birds, except that it knows not to make conventionally melodic music. It seems to ask, in all but words, how to handle decline and loss.

THEMES

TIME, LOSS, AND DISAPPOINTMENT

Robert Frost's "The Oven Bird" presents the title creature as a symbolic voice of change—specifically, change for the worse. The poem contrasts the ovenbird (a songbird with a "Loud," insistent cry heard in the middle of the summer) with "other," more melodic birds, such as those heard in springtime. The speaker interprets the ovenbird's cry as announcing the passage of the seasons, which transition from the beauty of spring to the faded glory of summer to the bleakness of fall. In other words, the speaker hears this song as a lament for the loss that time inevitably brings; it's as if the bird is wondering "what to make of" the world's "diminished" vitality.

The poem portrays the bird as an eloquent "singer everyone has heard," whose song illustrates the passage of time. Specifically, this "mid-summer" bird "says" out that leaves on the trees are no longer fresh and new and that flowers are nowhere near as lush and vibrant as they were back in springtime. The bird's arrival, then, signals that the seasons are changing—and, more specifically, that with this change the world is entering a period of loss and decline.

In fact, in saying that "leaves are old" and the beauty of spring "is past," the bird as seems to *criticize* summer, lamenting that it's far inferior to spring and will be followed by "that other fall we name the fall"—that is, by autumn, a time linked with harvesting *old* crops rather than growing *new* ones.

The mournful repetition of "fall" also brings to mind the "Fall of Man" (that is, when Adam and Eve got kicked out of the Garden of Eden) and thus hints at the movement from innocence to maturity. All this talk of changing seasons, then, evokes the sobering passage of life (from the "spring" of youth and the "winter" of old age). To that end, the mention of "dust" covering the land hints at the approach of death (as in the phrase "dust to dust"). Together, these details suggest that with time (and aging) comes diminishment and disappointment.

The bird's song thus raises a "question" vital to human beings: "what to make of a diminished thing," or how to handle the loss that comes with time. The ovenbird, for its part, "knows in singing not to sing." Unlike the cheerful tunes of other birds, the ovenbird's call seems to insist on acknowledging the pain of all this loss. Overall, though, the "question" that caps the poem is a rhetorical one; it's not meant to be answered directly. Instead, the poem suggests, it's something readers have to ask and answer for themselves.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

THE PURPOSE AND POWER OF ART

Written when Robert Frost was in his 40s, "The Oven Bird" can be read as an extended metaphor for the aging poet's attempt to navigate loss and disappointment through his art. The poem's closing question—"what to make of a diminished thing"—stems from the ovenbird's "singing," suggesting that it's important for *human* "singers" (that is, artists—and more specifically poets) as well. The poet hears in

the bird's singing—which seems to acknowledge loss frankly—a potential model for his poetry, and for moving forward in spite of his own decline.

The speaker's interest in this "mid-summer," "mid-wood bird" hints that he's in the middle of his own life's journey and coming to grips with age and loss. The middle of life is often metaphorically compared to summer, which falls between the "spring" of youth and the "winter" of old age. "Mid-wood," meanwhile, subtly alludes to the poet Dante, who famously compared his midlife crisis to finding himself lost in a dark wood. It seems, then, that this poet/speaker identifies with the ovenbird, seeing it as a reflection of his time of life and state of mind.

In fact, since birds don't express human ideas, everything the ovenbird "says" in the poem represents a projection of the *speaker*'s thoughts and feelings. Thus, the message that spring's beauty "is past," that summer isn't as beautiful, and that "fall" is approaching likely conveys the speaker's own anxieties about aging and death. Realistically, "the question" of "what to make of a diminished thing" doesn't trouble the bird so much as the *speaker*, whose sense of optimism seems to have "diminished" since spring (or youth). Moreover, this question could mean not only "how to understand a diminished thing" but also "what creative product [such as a work of art] can be made from a diminished thing."

As he identifies with the bird, then, the poet/speaker sees it as a symbol of the kind of artist he wants to be. The speaker notes that the ovenbird isn't "like other birds," suggesting that he admires its individuality. The speaker also praises the bird for "know[ing] in singing not to sing"— metaphorically, for making art that doesn't try too hard to be beautiful. The poet seems to prefer art that reflects loss, disappointment, etc. over art that prettifies and sentimentalizes.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

There is a singer everyone has heard,
Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,

The poem's opening lines describe the creature in its title: "The Oven Bird" (usually spelled as one word, *ovenbird*).

The speaker calls this bird "a singer everyone has heard," a hyperbolic phrase suggesting that it's both a loud and a common species. (It is, in fact, common throughout much of North America, including New England, where Frost lived for most of his adult life.) Since the poem will go on to interpret what the bird "says," this hyperbole might also suggest that its *message* resonates with "everyone"—that is, that its complaint about the passage of time has a universal quality.

The word "singer" is important, too. The ovenbird is defined by what it creates and expresses—much like human artists. In fact, the speaker may be drawing a *parallel* between birdsong and poetry, including this very poem. To that end, lyric poetry (like "The Oven Bird") has ancient roots in song. "The Oven Bird" is a sonnet, a poetic form whose name derives from an Old Provençal word meaning "little song." Thus, the word "singer" is an early clue that the poet may be writing about more than woodland noises; he may be commenting on poetry and art.

Notice that these opening lines form a rhymed couplet, which is an unusual choice in a sonnet:

- Some traditional sonnet types (including Shakespearean and Spenserian sonnets) *end* with a rhymed couplet, but there's no traditional model that *begins* with one.
- The poet thus seems to be messing with the conventions of his chosen form, making something odd and original out of it. In this way, he may be imitating his poem's subject, who doesn't sing like "other birds" (line 11).
- Rhymed couplets also have a crisp, emphatic sound, often used to end sonnets with a flourish. This poem, on the other hand, starts with "Loud" emphasis, but will end with a quieter "question."

Rhyme isn't the only device that makes these first lines attention-grabbing. The poem uses the iambic pentameter that's standard for sonnets, meaning that its lines generally contain ten syllables arranged in a "da-DUM, da-DUM" rhythm. (In other words, its lines typically contain five *iambs*, or metrical feet consisting of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable.)

But lines 1-2 include many variations on this rhythm. Line 1 starts with a stressed syllable, and line 2 contains six stresses (rather than five) arranged in an unusual pattern:

There is | a sin- | ger ev- | eryone | has heard,
Loud, a | mid-sum- | mer and | a mid- | wood bird,

Notice that the monosyllabic word "Loud" opens its line with a stressed syllable *and* is followed by a caesura (that comma, which creates a pause). These effects make it especially emphatic—or "loud," so to speak!

Lines 1-2 also contain lots of alliteration ("has heard," "mid-summer"/"mid-wood") and /d/ consonance ("heard"/"Loud"/"mid-summer and"/"mid-wood bird"), which add further emphasis. All told, these sound effects help evoke the noisy, insistent cry of the ovenbird.

LINE 3

Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.

Line 3 completes the poem's opening sentence, stating that the ovenbird "makes the solid tree trunks sound again."

There may be a pun on "sound" here: the word serves primarily as a verb, but it could have a secondary function as an adjective:

- As a verb, it means that the ovenbird makes the tree trunks *reverberate with sound* again. In other words, the woods have grown quiet since spring, but this summer bird fills them with song once more.
- As an adjective, "sound" means "sturdy," so it may be meant to pair with "solid" earlier in the line. Tree trunks that were newer—more fragile and flexible—in springtime may be solid and sound by summer. (Of course, the ovenbird doesn't *make* them that way, but according to the speaker, its song *reflects* the passage of the seasons.)

The heavy alliteration and consonance of the opening lines continues here, with "makes"/"trunks," "solid"/"sound," and "tree trunks." The metrical variations continue as well: the seventh syllable of an iambic line would normally be unstressed, but "trunks" is stressed, creating three resonant stresses in a row:

Who makes | the sol- | id tree | trunks sound | again.

All of these devices fill the line with emphatic sounds, much as the ovenbird fills the forest with its emphatic cry.

LINES 4-5

He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.

In lines 4-5, the speaker (or poet) begins to interpret the ovenbird's song. Since birdsong can't really be translated with such specificity, it's clear that this interpretation is fanciful, and it's almost certainly a projection of the *speaker's* thoughts and feelings.

The general sense of these lines (and the five lines following) is that the ovenbird, a summer bird, is singing about summer. Supposedly, it's lamenting the passage of time, especially the passing of spring. According to the speaker, the bird "says" that summer leaves are no longer as fresh and youthful as spring leaves, and that:

> [...] for flowers
> Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.

This simile could mean that, in terms of the quantity and/or quality of its flowers, mid-summer is only one-tenth as impressive as spring. Alternatively, it could mean that, *from flowers' perspective*, mid-summer is only one-tenth as glorious as spring. (This is a poem in which birds have a perspective, so why not flowers?) Either way, the point is clear: summer represents a decline, a falling-off, from spring's beauty and freshness.

What might this mean as a projection of the speaker's thoughts and feelings? Of course, the speaker might simply miss springtime himself. But seasons are also frequently used to symbolize phases of life: the springtime of youth, the winter of old age, and so on. In "translating" the ovenbird, then, the speaker might be channeling his own melancholy about aging, or expressing a general sense that the world has declined from a happier past.

Here as in the previous lines, alliteration ("for flowers," "Mid-summer"/"spring," "to"/"to ten") helps convey the emphatic or insistent quality of the ovenbird's song.

LINES 6-8

He says the early petal-fall is past
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
On sunny days a moment overcast;

Lines 6-8 continue to report what the ovenbird "says," expanding on the previous lines by adding details about the beautiful, lost springtime.

According to the speaker, the ovenbird's song signals (or mourns) the end of the spring "petal-fall," when "showers" of white pear blossoms and pink cherry blossoms would drop from the budding trees. These lovely events would happen "On sunny days a moment overcast"—in other words, on days of almost uninterrupted sunshine. (However, the mention of the few "overcast" moments—with "overcast" ending the line and thus receiving extra emphasis—reminds the reader that even spring days aren't perfect, and their beauty can't last forever. In fact, these overcast moments might be read as an omen of darker days to come.)

These lines are richly musical, reflecting the beauty of the season they describe. Notice the prominent alliteration of "petal-fall"/"past"/"pear" and the assonance in "down"/"showers" and "moment overcast"—all in addition to the end rhyme between "past" and "overcast."

By this point in the poem, too, the meter has smoothed out into a steadier iambic rhythm:

He says | the ear- | ly pet- | al-fall | is past

Once again, the bittersweet nostalgia of these lines captures the general *quality* of the ovenbird's song—at least as perceived by human ears—while expressing specific thoughts that almost certainly belong to the speaker.

LINES 9-10

And comes that other fall we name the fall.

He says the highway dust is over all.

Lines 9-10 form a couplet in the middle of the sonnet: "fall" rhymes with "all." The conventional English sonnet *ends* with a couplet; in this poem, couplets appear at the beginning and in the middle! Frost is thus playfully tweaking the conventions of the sonnet form as part of his portrait of an unconventional "singer," the ovenbird.

Since couplets in sonnets usually signal closure, Frost might also intend this couplet to evoke another kind of ending: the end of the warm, growth-filled seasons (spring and summer), which will soon yield to the cold seasons of decline and death (fall and winter). Again, these seasonal references may hint, symbolically, at the speaker's own aging, as he moves further and further away from the springtime of youth.

The ominous diacope of "fall" also hints at something more serious than a seasonal shift: a fall from grace or glory, a decline from previous heights. What's "com[ing]" is "*the* fall"—which means autumn, of course, but could also allude to "the Fall of Man," or Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden in the Bible. Autumn will finish off the paradise of springtime, leaving humanity and nature in the cold.

The mention of "highway dust" is ominous too. It's the one reference to human civilization in this nature poem, and it seems to suggest that humans are spoiling their environment—adding an extra, unnatural element to the natural, seasonal decline. (The dust "is over all"; it seems to have polluted everything in sight.) The weary melancholy that the speaker hears in the ovenbird's song might reflect his own weariness of humanity, or perhaps of life in general.

"Dust" can also symbolize decay and death (as in the phrase "dust to dust"), so the ovenbird's song—or the speaker's interpretation of that song—might also reflect a growing awareness of mortality.

LINES 11-12

The bird would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.

Lines 11-12 present a paradox that captures the essence of the ovenbird's song (or, at least, the poet/speaker's interpretation of that song—remember, it seems the speaker is projecting his own thoughts and feelings onto the bird):

> The bird would cease and be as other birds
> But that he knows in singing not to sing.

In other words, the ovenbird would hush up and act like other birds (those who were joyously loud in the spring, but have quieted in the summertime?), except that he knows how to make a song that doesn't really sound like a song. This might mean that, instead of being conventionally musical and pretty, the bird's song is a "Loud" outcry. It seems to express a realistic, even gloomy, sense of loss.

The fact that the ovenbird "knows" to sing like this suggests that he knows *better* than other birds. By implication, there's something naive or misleading about the cheerful birdsong of springtime. The ovenbird's cry may be less pleasant, but it seems to voice a kind of truth/wisdom. And since everything the bird says is really what the *poet's* saying, it's fair to guess that the poet, too, hopes to express such wisdom through his art. Recall that lyric poetry (of which "The Oven Bird" is an example) has its roots in song. Also, for poets, to "sing" can mean to celebrate in verse—but like the ovenbird, this poet seems to consciously avoid celebration.

The mix of alliterative sounds here—hard /b/ sounds in "bird"/"be"/"birds"; soft /s/ sounds in "cease"/"singing"/"sing"; nasal /n/ sounds in "knows"/"not"—adds musicality to these lines about singing, while drawing attention to one of the poem's key statements.

Line 11 also marks a transition from the "He says" anaphora of lines 4-10 into the poem's closing summary of the ovenbird. Sonnets often contain a prominent transition, or "turn," of this kind, but it conventionally occurs earlier, around lines 8-9. Once again, Frost is tweaking the usual structure of the sonnet, as if imitating the bird who doesn't sing like "other birds."

LINES 13-14

The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

Lines 13-14 pose a rhetorical question, which the speaker, of course, attributes to the ovenbird. But the question is really one that the *poem* is asking: "what to make of a diminished thing." This could have two meanings:

- How can we understand a diminished thing?
- What can we make (e.g., create as artists) out of a diminished thing?

"Diminished thing" refers mainly to the surrounding landscape, whose beauty has declined in the transition from spring to summer. More broadly, it could refer to the world whose natural beauty humans have spoiled (see "highway dust" in line 10), or to life itself, which can seem to lose its freshness in the transition from youth to age. The bird—and, by extension, the poem—is asking how to understand, cope with, or even make something redemptive out of loss.

Rhetorical questions are meant to provoke thought, not prompt a direct answer. The ovenbird "frames" this one "in all but words"; that is, the *sound* of its song (more an outcry than a cheerful melody) seems to raise a question that it can't put into human language. The poet is the one who supplies the "words" and leaves readers to answer the "question" for themselves. In fact, Frost's own poetry, including "The Oven Bird," might be read as his way of answering the question for himself.

SYMBOLS

THE SEASONS

"The Oven Bird" relies heavily on symbolism associated with the seasons. If the poem were just about the end of spring and the coming of fall, it might not resonate as much. But because spring, summer, and fall are traditionally associated with phases of life—youth, middle age, and old age—the poem is able to convey that it's really about aging and loss.

The speaker calls the ovenbird "a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird," linking it immediately with summertime. "Mid-wood" also subtly echoes the *Inferno*, by the Italian poet Dante, which famously begins: "In the middle of life's journey, / I found myself in a dark wood."

- By alluding to one of the best-known openings in literature—a metaphor for a kind of midlife crisis—the speaker hints that he may be undergoing such a crisis himself, or at least reflecting on time as he ages.
- If so, "mid-summer" represents the middle of life, not just the middle of the year.

The poem then attributes feelings of melancholy and disenchantment to the ovenbird, who "says" that "leaves are old," that summer flowers are inferior to spring flowers, and that fall is just around the corner. Symbolically, this suggests a feeling that the best of life is over, and further decline lies ahead. The speaker, who is really projecting his own voice onto the ovenbird, seems to be using seasonal imagery to express his feelings of lost youth and vitality, as well as his sense that life in general has "diminished."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Lines 4-10

DUST

The "highway dust" in line 10 carries symbolic weight, especially in the context of a poem about time and loss. Dust is symbolically associated with age, decay, and, often, death (as in the famous phrase "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," from the *Book of Common Prayer*).

Here, the ovenbird "says" that "the highway dust is over all": that is, roadside dust has settled over all the surrounding landscape. Symbolically, this image reinforces the idea that nature (and, apparently, the speaker's life) has lost the freshness of springtime (or youth). Even though it's still summertime (or the middle of the speaker's life), the landscape is starting to look dusty and dreary. The speaker is aware that he's not so young anymore; he's approaching his declining years and, ultimately, his death. The fact that this is *highway* dust also evokes the common metaphor of life as a journey—a journey whose first and livelier half, for the speaker, appears to be over.

In addition, roads are built by humans; the "highway" is the only sign of human civilization in this natural landscape. Thus, the highway dust might also symbolize the spoiling of the natural world by human beings, and by extension, the "diminish[ing]" of the world's beauty, freshness, innocence, etc. over time.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "He says the highway dust is over all."

SONG

Throughout the poem, "singing" can be read as a symbol of art and expression in general, or poetry in particular. Because the earliest poets in the Western tradition were "bards" who sung or recited their work with musical accompaniment—often played on a *lyre*, the source of the term *lyric poetry*—there's an ancient, conventional association between poetry and song. Frost is probably playing on that association in this (lyric) poem.

The speaker portrays the ovenbird as a "singer" who expresses thoughts about nature, time, and loss—just as poets do! But the ovenbird isn't a pretty, pleasing singer; he's a "Loud," insistent singer who knows "not to sing" in the expected fashion. His song is frank about loss and "question[ing]" rather than upbeat. These details hint that the ovenbird is a model of the kind of artist the poet admires—or the kind he strives to be.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "There is a singer everyone has heard, / Loud,"
- **Lines 11-12:** "The bird would cease and be as other birds / But that he knows in singing not to sing."
- **Lines 13-14:** "The question that he frames in all but words / Is what to make of a diminished thing."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"The Oven Bird" is full of alliteration, which heightens the poem's musicality, adds emphasis at important moments, and gives the verse an insistent quality that echoes the ovenbird's "Loud" song.

Line 3, for example, contains a cluster of initial /s/ and /tr/ sounds: "solid"/"sound"; "tree trunks." Such vivid sound effects

(heightened by /d/ consonance in "Loud"/"mid-summer and"/"mid-wood bird"/"solid"/"sound," as well as /ks/ consonance in "makes"/"trunks") seem appropriate to this description of a noisy bird. You can almost hear the ruckus he's making.

Heavy alliteration continues throughout the first half of the poem, as soft /f/ and /s/ sounds, mixed with plosive /t/ and /p/ sounds, keep the language resonant and lively: "for flowers"; "mid-summer"/"spring"; "to"/"to ten"; "petal-fall"/"past"/"pear."

The second half of the poem contains somewhat less alliteration (as well as fewer metrical irregularities). As such, the language seems to "diminish" into a quieter mode (in keeping with the poem's theme of decline). However, one especially notable alliteration occurs in line 12: "But that he knows in singing not to sing." Here, the density of shared /n/ and/s/ sounds draws the reader's attention to a crucial phrase in the poem: a seeming paradox that sums up the ovenbird's style, and possibly the poet's approach to his own art.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "has heard"
- **Line 3:** "solid," "tree trunks," "sound"
- **Line 4:** "for flowers"
- **Line 5:** "summer," "to," "spring," "to ten"
- **Line 6:** "petal-fall," "past"
- **Line 7:** "pear"
- **Line 8:** "overcast"
- **Line 9:** "comes"
- **Line 11:** "bird," "be," "birds"
- **Line 12:** "knows," "singing," "not," "sing"
- **Line 13:** "words"
- **Line 14:** "what"

ASSONANCE

"The Oven Bird" is a poem about "singing," and assonance, like alliteration and consonance, adds to its musicality.

In lines 7-8, for example, assonance ("down"/"showers," "moment overcast") creates a pleasing, harmonious sound. This euphony fits the pleasant image of pear and cherry blossoms falling on sunny spring days. (But it also draws a little attention to the one slightly ominous element: that "moment overcast.")

Assonance ("cease"/"be," "in singing"/"sing") also combines with alliteration ("bird"/"be"/"birds," etc.) to stress the thematically important statement in lines 11-12. Lastly, short /i/ assonance appears in the concluding words of the poem—"diminished thing"—as if to help them stick in the reader's mind.

Though this sonnet—unlike more traditional examples—doesn't end with anything as emphatic as a rhymed couplet or interlocking sestet, the final assonance provides a bit of extra emphasis, and hence an extra touch of closure.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "down," "showers"
- **Line 8:** "moment overcast"
- **Line 11:** "cease," "be"
- **Line 12:** "in singing," "sing"
- **Line 14:** "diminished thing"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is central to the structure of "The Oven Bird." Three out of the poem's six sentences begin with "He says" (lines 4, 6, and 10). More subtly, the last two sentences begin with "The" (lines 11 and 13).

Anaphora creates an easy-to-follow structure that helps guide the reader through the poem. More importantly, it creates a kind of insistent emphasis that matches the "Loud," insistent song of the ovenbird. By repeating "He says [...] He says [...] He says," the speaker reinforces the idea that the ovenbird has an urgent message to deliver. (Arguably, of course, that message is really the *speaker's*, projected onto the bird! At the very least, it's what the speaker *understands* the bird to be saying, even if humans can't literally translate birdsong into language.)

Notice, too, that anaphora provides another "diminish[ing]" effect in the poem. The repetition of "He says" across the beginnings of three sentences is much more noticeable than the repetition of "The" across the beginnings of two. As with metrical variation and other effects, anaphora fades from prominence as the poem goes along, so that the verse itself seems to diminish in intensity.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "He says"
- **Line 6:** "He says"
- **Line 10:** "He says"
- **Line 11:** "The"
- **Line 13:** "The"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The poem can be read as an extended metaphor in which the bird, a "singer," represents the poet. In some ancient cultures, lyric poems were sung to musical accompaniment, rather than read on the page or recited; as a result, there's a long literary tradition of poets comparing themselves to singers. (Both can still be called "bards"—a term for those ancient entertainers.) Also, "The Oven Bird" is a sonnet, a form whose name derives from an Old Provençal word meaning "little song," so in that sense, too, the poet writing this *particular* poem is a kind of "singer."

If the bird represents the poet, the bird's outcry against the passing of the seasons might represent the poet's dismay at the passage of time in general. The transition from spring to fall

might represent the transition from youth to age, since the seasons are conventional symbols for phases of life.

From there, it's easy to read figurative meaning into smaller details. For instance, those falling springtime petals (lines 6-8) might represent the fleeting beauty of youth. The "dust [...] over all" (line 10) might suggest the way the world loses its luster as we accumulate experience; or it might call to mind death, the "dust" of the grave.

Of course, it's possible to interpret "The Oven Bird" as a description of a literal bird. But the poet reads such an elaborate message into the ovenbird's song that the poem seems to leave the realm of the literal. The ovenbird seems to voice the poet's own thoughts and to become a metaphor for the poet who must respond to a "fall[en]" or "diminished" world. If nothing else, reading the poem this way opens up fascinating interpretive possibilities.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

SIMILE

The poem contains one simile, in lines 4-5:

> [...] for flowers
> Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.

This could mean one (or both) of two things:

- The flowers of spring are 10 times superior (in quantity and/or quality) to the flowers of mid-summer.
- From flowers' point of view, spring is 10 times better than mid-summer.

(If an ovenbird can have a point of view, so can flowers!)

In any case, the general point is clear: spring is far superior to summer. As the poem develops, the loss of beauty, freshness, and vitality in the transition from spring to fall seems to symbolize a similar loss in the transition from youth to age. Thus, the simile sets up the poem's main question: how to cope with decline.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "for flowers / Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten."

PARADOX

Lines 11-12 make a rather mysterious, seemingly paradoxical statement. According to the speaker, the ovenbird would stop making its distinctive cry—would act like "other birds" in the summertime (by quieting down? sounding more conventional?)—if not for the fact that "he knows in singing not to sing."

This paradox can be resolved by teasing out different shades of meaning for the word *sing*. The ovenbird is making a kind of song, but that song doesn't have many of the qualities one normally associates with singing. It's not sweet and melodic, like ordinary birdcalls. As the rest of the poem implies, it's more like a loud, mournful outcry.

Thus, the ovenbird doesn't need to act like those birds whose cheerful songs "cease," or at least fade in intensity, after springtime. Its song is *appropriate* to the middle of summer because it's not so cheerful. It recognizes and expresses the way things have "diminished."

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "The bird would cease and be as other birds / But that he knows in singing not to sing."

REPETITION

"The Oven Bird" uses several forms of repetition, including the special forms known as anaphora (discussed separately in this guide) and diacope.

Notice how often, in this short poem, syllables repeat exactly or almost exactly in the space of a single line: "mid-" in line 2, "fall" in line 9, "bird"/"birds" in line 11, and "singing"/"sing" in line 12. There's an insistent quality to these repetitions, which may be meant to evoke the insistence of the ovenbird's loud cry. The same could be said of the anaphora in lines 4, 6, and 10 ("He says [...] He says [...] He says").

Repetition also helps the poet/speaker tease out subtle distinctions. For example, the "petal-fall" in line 6 is contrasted in line 9 with "that other fall we name the fall." One could almost read this phrase as: "that *other* fall we name *the* fall." In other words, the petal-fall of springtime is beautiful, uplifting, but not terribly significant, except as an omen of what's to come. By contrast, the fall that's coming up is the one called "*the* fall"—another name for autumn, but also a name suggestive of disaster or serious decline.

Likewise, line 12 could be read as: "But that he knows in singing not to *sing*." Here, the repetition sounds paradoxical at first, but seems to imply a distinction between:

- making a song of some kind;
- and *singing* in the narrower sense of creating a beautiful, pleasing, or celebratory melody, or some other kind of pleasing expression. (Think of a metaphor like "His edits made that term paper sing!" For poets, to "sing of" something can also mean to celebrate or honor it in verse.)

The ovenbird technically does the first, but doesn't do the second: its vocalizations, as described by the speaker, sound more like an unhappy outcry than a pleasing tune.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "mid," "mid"
- **Line 4:** "He says"
- **Line 6:** "He says," "fall"
- **Line 9:** "fall," "fall"
- **Line 10:** "He says"
- **Line 11:** "The," "bird," "birds"
- **Line 12:** "singing," "sing"
- **Line 13:** "The"

IMAGERY

As a poem about birdsong and seasonal change, "The Oven Bird" contains plenty of auditory and visual imagery. It portrays the ovenbird as "a singer everyone has heard, / Loud [...] Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again." This phrasing suggests that its song resonates throughout the woods and is audible for miles around ("everyone" can hear it!). Later, more subtly, the speaker claims that the bird "knows in singing not to sing," and that:

> The question that he frames in all but words
> Is what to make of a diminished thing.

These descriptions imply that the ovenbird's cry isn't conventionally musical. It sounds harsh or melancholy—like a reaction to loss and disappointment—rather than sweet and joyful. It may even seem to have a "question[ing]" intonation.

The poem's visual imagery is even more evocative. Lines 4-10 depict nature's glory and decline in lush, concise detail, from the "old" mid-summer leaves to the remembered "petal-fall" of pear and cherry blossoms to the "highway dust" covering the landscape. In a few short phrases, the poem offers a glimpse into a world of faded beauty, *showing* rather than *telling* the reader why the ovenbird seems to be mourning.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Line 10
- Lines 12-14

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The bird in "The Oven Bird" is anthropomorphized; in other words, the poem gives this nonhuman creature human traits. This pattern begins in line 1, when the speaker labels the bird a "singer." Birds do sing, of course, but in defining this one by what's normally a human occupation, the speaker makes it seem a little bit human.

Then, in line 4, the speaker starts calling the songbird "he" (as opposed to "it") and interpreting what it "says." These details further humanize the bird, casting it not only as a singer but as one whose song has complex *meaning*. In fact, the poem frames the bird as a kind of artist, brooding on time, change, and loss—much like the poet himself. (Lyric poetry was originally sung to musical accompaniment, so the vocations of singer and poet have common roots.)

As the poem develops, it becomes even clearer that the feelings and concerns attributed to the bird heavily overlap with—and are probably projections of—the poet's own. By the final lines, it's clear that the "question" the bird is asking is also the question the *poet* is asking. The anthropomorphized bird serves as a vehicle for human expression.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 4-10
- Lines 13-14

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Though the poem doesn't contain any question marks, its final lines present a rhetorical question:

> The question that he frames in all but words
> Is what to make of a diminished thing.

The "bird's" question is really the poet's, or the poem's. It could imply two different meanings:

- How to understand a "diminished thing" (whether it be a deteriorated environment, a year that's declined from spring to fall, or a life that's declined from youth to age)?
- How to turn a "diminished thing" into a *made object*, such as a work of art?

Boiled down, it's about how to cope with age, change, and loss.

Rhetorical questions are designed to make a point or invite further contemplation. Frost's poetry may have been his way of addressing this question—his attempt to *make* something out of loss—and his poem challenges readers to address it in their own ways. (Of course, the question also raises the possibility that "a diminished thing" can't be understood or redeemed at all; it just has to be accepted.) By framing a difficult problem without trying to resolve it, the poem opens outward, leaving space for reader interpretation rather than delivering a simple "message."

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "The question that he frames in all but words / Is what to make of a diminished thing."

VOCABULARY

Mid-wood (Line 2) - Found primarily in the middle of the woods.

Sound (Line 3) - "Sound" here is a verb meaning "reverberate with sound." Frost may also be punning on a second, adjectival meaning of the word: "sturdy."

Petal-fall (Line 6) - A shower of petals from trees as they shed their spring blossoms.

Pear (Line 7) - Pear blossoms (white flowers from pear trees).

Fall (Line 9) - "That other fall we name the fall" refers to the falling of leaves in autumn. The poet is comparing the autumn leaf-fall with the springtime "petal-fall" (line 6). In context, "fall" also carries darker overtones, connoting decline, a fall from grace or glory, etc.

Cease (Line 11) - Stop doing something (in this case, singing).

Diminished (Line 14) - Reduced in size or scope; degraded in quality or worth.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Oven Bird" is a sonnet with a somewhat unusual structure. As in a conventional sonnet, it consists of 14 iambic pentameter lines (lines consisting of five *iambs*, or metrical feet made of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable).

However, its rhyme scheme doesn't fit any standard model, being quite different from both the Petrarchan and English (or Shakespearean) sonnet forms (more on that in the Rhyme Scheme section of this guide). In starting rather than ending with a rhyming couplet, it in fact flips the English sonnet on its head!

There are a few reasons Frost might have chosen this form, besides the fact that it gives a natural-seeming flow to his rhymes and ideas:

- Sonnets are particularly associated with romantic disappointment (famous sonneteers such as Shakespeare and Petrarch wrote many sonnets about unrequited love). Although "The Oven Bird" isn't explicitly about romance, it's definitely about disappointment—about coming to grips with "a diminished thing." And the speaker's references to springtime flowers suggest that love (however "diminished" at his age) might be part of what's on his mind. In these ways, Frost signals his awareness of the tradition behind his form.
- At the same time, through the unusual rhyme scheme, Frost *departs* from that tradition, making the form a little less conventionally musical. Thus, his poem resembles the unconventional song of the ovenbird, who isn't like "other birds" and who defies expectations of what birdsong sounds like. (The fact that "sonnet" comes from the Old Provençal word *sonet*—meaning "little song"—brings the parallel between the poem and the ovenbird's "singing" even closer.)

There's one other common feature of the Italian sonnet that Frost plays with here: the *volta*, or "turn." This refers to a significant transition (in terms of syntax and/or content) that often happens around lines 8 and 9. "The Oven Bird" does do something a little dramatic in line 9: "And comes that other fall we name the fall" is both an ominous-sounding phrase and the end of the poem's longest sentence. However, line 11 arguably contains a more notable transition. Once again, Frost is both honoring and straying from the conventions of his form.

METER

"The Oven Bird" uses the standard meter of the sonnet: iambic pentameter. That is, it consists of 10-syllable lines whose beats follow an unstressed-stressed ("da-DUM, da-DUM") rhythm. Each "da-DUM" unit is called an iambic foot. Some lines contain an extra, unstressed 11th syllable.

That's the basic pattern, at least—but meter almost always contains some variations, and in this case, the opening lines contain quite a few:

> There is | a sin- | ger ev- | eryone | has heard,
> Loud, a | mid-sum- | mer and | a mid- | wood bird,
> Who makes | the sol- | id tree | trunks sound | again.
> He says | that leaves | are old | and that | for flowers

Meter isn't an exact science; some readers might hear that first foot, for example, as "There is" or "There is." Regardless, there's clearly some erratic rhythm going on in these four lines. Line 2, for example, has an emphatically stressed first syllable (the word "Loud," fittingly enough) and seems to contain six stresses rather than five. These sound effects help convey the raucous insistence of the ovenbird's cry. The first completely regular line of iambic pentameter doesn't appear until line 4, so the opening lines, in general, evoke the strange, startling music of this mid-summer "singer."

Afterward, however, the meter settles into a more regular flow. There aren't many variations at all in the second half of the poem. In a way, the poem's music "diminishe[s]," like the landscape or world it describes—growing quieter and less vigorous as the end approaches.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a rhyme scheme that's unusual for a sonnet:

AABCBDCDEEFGFG

This pattern doesn't follow any of the standard sonnet models, such as the English or Italian (a.k.a. Shakespearean or Petrarchan) models. The English sonnet ends with a rhyming couplet, but "The Oven Bird" *starts* with one, suggesting that Frost is going out of his way to mess with sonnet conventions.

The word "sonnet" derives from the Old Provençal *sonet*, or "little song," which became the Italian word *sonetto*, meaning the same thing. By writing an unusual "little song," the poet is imitating the ovenbird, who doesn't sing like "other birds." Rather than using a closing couplet, which would end the poem with a flourish, Frost starts with a couplet and ends the poem with a less forceful rhyming quatrain (lines 11-14). By starting "Loud" (see line 2) and ending quietly, the poem itself seems to "diminish" in intensity, like the seasons it describes. At the same time, it's possible that Frost has used a new and unconventional rhyme scheme here as a way of signaling his own response to the changing world before him.

SPEAKER

"The Oven Bird" is written in the third person, as if presenting objective facts. Still, it provides hints of its speaker's character and concerns—or the poet's, since there's no first-person voice to establish any gap between speaker and poet.

The speaker claims that the ovenbird "is a singer everyone has heard," even though this can't literally be true. Ovenbirds are common in some parts of the world (including Frost's rural New England), but not everyone in the world lives near them, or even near woods. The speaker's hyperbole signals that there's a subjective—and perhaps not entirely reliable—point of view behind the poem's objective tone.

The speaker then purports to translate what the ovenbird "says." But this interpretation of the bird—who is reduced to the singular (as if standing in for its entire species), gendered as "he," and heavily anthropomorphized—seems to mainly reflect what the *poet himself* has to say. After all, human beings can only know so much about what birds are communicating, and it's not likely that their songs are meditations on the seasons. The "sayings" of this male bird, then, seem to be projections of the male poet's thoughts and feelings.

The collection containing "The Oven Bird," *Mountain Interval* (1916), was published when Frost was in his early 40s. It's entirely plausible that the poem conveys his own feelings about the "mid-summer" of life—also known as middle age.

SETTING

"The Oven Bird" describes a rural, natural setting of the kind closely associated with much of Robert Frost's poetry. Frost is especially linked with rural New England, where he lived for most of his adult life, and the ovenbird is, in fact, a common inhabitant of woods in that region. (It can be found throughout much of eastern North America in the warmer seasons, and in Central America and the Caribbean during the winter.) As is often the case in Frost's writing, an accurately observed feature of his natural environment—here, the loud call of the ovenbird—serves as the starting point for a broader statement.

Time is also a key element of the poem's setting. This is a poem about a "mid-summer" bird, one that supposedly laments the swift passage of the seasons. As the poem's symbolism develops, spring, summer, and fall appear to stand in for phases of human life (youth, middle age, and old age).

However, the poem keeps this symbolism grounded in a realistic landscape. The speaker describes springtime "petal-fall[s]" of "pear" blossom and "cherry bloom"—again, a sight one might actually see in Frost's region. The speaker also mentions "highway dust," suggesting that the presence of human civilization has intruded on, and "diminished," this beautiful natural landscape.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Oven Bird" appears in Robert Frost's third poetry collection, *Mountain Interval* (1916), which also includes such classic poems as "The Road Not Taken," "Out, Out—," and "Birches." The poem is a riff on the sonnet form, albeit with a non-standard rhyme scheme. In that way, it seems to play on the sonnet's origins as a "little song," consciously departing from the usual music of the form—much as the ovenbird departs from the usual sound of songbirds.

The poem was published during one of the most transformative decades in the history of English-language poetry. The years 1910-1920 saw the birth of literary modernism: a major wave of formal and thematic experimentation in literature and the other arts. Modernist poets such as Ezra Pound—whom Frost met during that decade, and who helped introduce Frost's work to the public—began rebelling against the use of standard poetic meter and traditional verse forms. Many turned primarily to free verse; all wrestled, in some way, with the social turmoil that accompanied World War I and the growth of modern technology.

Though a contemporary of the modernists, Frost is sometimes said to have remained a traditionalist, working in meter throughout his career. (He famously compared writing poetry

without meter to playing tennis without a net.) However, other critics group him with the modernists, noting his experimentation *within* traditional verse forms as well as his characteristically "modern" (i.e., 20th-century as opposed to 19th-century) skepticism and irony.

"The Oven Bird" reflects these qualities: it's a sonnet that breaks some conventions of the sonnet form, as well as a poem about coping with a world that seems "diminished" or decayed—a classic modernist theme.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Oven Bird" is a nature poem that makes no direct reference to contemporary or historical events. Its one sign of human civilization is the "highway" in line 10. But "highway" is a very old word for "main road"—it predates modern English!—so even this detail doesn't help establish a historical context.

Still, the poem was published in 1916, in the middle of World War I (1914-1918), and in an indirect way, it may reflect the spirit of its time. Frost and his family had been living in England from 1912 through 1915, so he was in Europe during the start of the war. Though he didn't witness the battlefield, he witnessed the profound social upheaval the war was starting to cause. He also turned 40 the year the war began, so this global disaster coincided with his passage into middle age.

These years brought some serious personal battles, too: by 1916, two of Frost's children had died very young, and Frost was coping with mental health struggles (as would more than one of his surviving children).

Thus, while "The Oven Bird" isn't an openly political *or* personal poem, it does express a melancholy that Frost may have felt at the time. Its theme of "mid-summer" decline seems to convey a mood of mid-life weariness. Its claim that "the highway dust is over all," along with its closing "question," may reflect a sense that human beings were spoiling the world around them, and that the world felt "diminished" as a result.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Frost Doc — Watch "A Lover's Quarrel Wit a 1963 documentary on Frost. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9jbV7knSH4)
- Interview with the Poet — Watch a 1952 interview with Robert Frost. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qwCEnkb2_E)
- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to a reading of "The Oven Bird," courtesy of The Frost Place. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zTsA_JQPaE)
- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a biography of Frost, along with other Frost poems, via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost)
- Frost at the Library — Explore the Robert Frost collection at the Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College. (https://archives-manuscripts.dartmouth.edu/repositories/2/resources/2234)
- The Ovenbird in Action — Watch a video of the ovenbird making its distinctive call. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNuDCkXitks)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- Acquainted with the Night
- After Apple-Picking
- Birches
- Dust of Snow
- Fire and Ice
- Home Burial
- Mending Wall
- Nothing Gold Can Stay
- Out, Out—
- Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
- The Road Not Taken
- The Sound of the Trees
- The Tuft of Flowers
- The Wood-Pile

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Allen, Austin. "*The Oven Bird*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 Sep 2021. Web. 27 Sep 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Allen, Austin. "*The Oven Bird*." LitCharts LLC, September 8, 2021. Retrieved September 27, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/robert-frost/the-oven-bird.