

The Sound of the Trees



POEM TEXT

1 I wonder about the trees.
 2 Why do we wish to bear
 3 Forever the noise of these
 4 More than another noise
 5 So close to our dwelling place?
 6 We suffer them by the day
 7 Till we lose all measure of pace,
 8 And fixity in our joys,
 9 And acquire a listening air.
 10 They are that that talks of going
 11 But never gets away;
 12 And that talks no less for knowing,
 13 As it grows wiser and older,
 14 That now it means to stay.
 15 My feet tug at the floor
 16 And my head sways to my shoulder
 17 Sometimes when I watch trees sway,
 18 From the window or the door.
 19 I shall set forth for somewhere,
 20 I shall make the reckless choice
 21 Some day when they are in voice
 22 And tossing so as to scare
 23 The white clouds over them on.
 24 I shall have less to say,
 25 But I shall be gone.



SUMMARY

I have some questions about the trees. Why do we prefer their constant noise over any other sounds so close to where we live? We put up with their noise daily until we lose all sense of time and certainty in our own happiness, and become mesmerized by listening.

Trees are the kind of things that talk about leaving but never actually go anywhere. They don't talk any less despite knowing full well, especially as they get wiser and older, that they will stay where they are.

Sometimes my own feet feel rooted to the floor and my head starts to sway as I watch the trees shift in the breeze, looking out from the window or door of my house.

I will go somewhere. I will make that irresponsible decision one

day when the trees are all talking and blowing in the wind as if trying to scare away the white clouds that pass overhead. On that day, I'll won't talk as much as the trees do, but I'll be gone.



THEMES



LIFE, LONGING, AND ACCEPTANCE

"The Sound of Trees" presents a speaker caught between two paths in life: packing up and leaving to start anew somewhere else, or accepting things as they are. The speaker projects this dilemma onto nearby trees, feeling that their *sound*—the restless noise of their rustling leaves—suggests they want to "get[] away" even as their roots keep them firmly in place. In [personifying](#) the trees, the speaker explores the conflicting emotions people feel when torn between staying put and the intense longing to leave—between the familiar tug of life as it *is*, and the pull of life as it *could be*.

At the same time, the poem suggests that people tend to *stick* with the lives they have instead of making the "reckless choice" to "set forth for somewhere" new. This might be because people feel tethered to one place by a sense of duty to those around them, or because it's just easier to accept one's lot than it is to risk everything to "get away."

The sound of the wind moving through the firmly planted trees mirrors the speaker's own internal debate over whether to stay grounded or to "uproot" everything and start a new life elsewhere. Like a tree with its roots, the speaker feels their feet "tug at the floor." The poem implies that the speaker is tempted to stay rooted to the spot (that is, to remain a part of their current community) because doing so is the safer option.

Perhaps this speaker feels a sense of duty toward their current community, or simply fears leaving the comfort of familiarity behind. But the speaker also has a strong desire to "make the reckless choice" and "be gone." Thus even as the speaker's feet seem rooted, a sense of duty or mere habit keeping them in place, their "head sways" while watching the trees: their thoughts pull them toward freedom and change.

Despite the insistence that the speaker "shall set forth" one day, however, the speaker's potential destination is described only as "somewhere." The speaker doesn't have a concrete plan for the future, itself—just an ill-defined longing to see what else is out there, to experience more than life as they currently live it. If the speaker *were* to leave, such a decision would put an end to all this talk of leaving ("I shall have less to say"). But the poem is just that—talk—and it seems unlikely that the day of departure, also vaguely defined as "some day," will ever come. This connects with the idea that trees, though they may *sway*

towards new horizons, are incapable of actually getting away.

The poem thus suggests that people often live their lives caught between the desire to act and the inability to do so. Like the wind blowing through the leaves, possible alternative futures drift through people's minds—but, most of the time, they stay firmly planted in the life they already have.

The poem implies that the tension between settling for life as it comes or taking a risk by trying to begin again from scratch is part of human nature. But generally speaking, the poem suggests, people are more likely to live within this tension—and talk about the *possibility* of leaving—than they are to take action.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

*I wonder about the trees.
Why do we wish to bear
Forever the noise of these
More than another noise
So close to our dwelling place?*

The poem starts with an expression of doubt and, perhaps, curiosity. The speaker "wonder[s]" about the trees—that is, the speaker has some thoughts or questions about them.

The speaker then poses a [rhetorical question](#): "why do we" put up with—even *desire*—the "noise" made by trees? Why is it that human beings prefer that noise (by which the speaker presumably means the rustling of the leaves in the wind) over any other noise? More specifically, the speaker wonders why people plant trees near where they live (or live near where there are trees).

It's a strange question, one that suggests that the sound of the trees is something people suffer ("bear") rather than enjoy. The speaker's gripe with the sound of the trees isn't yet clear, but it's obvious enough there is one!

Note how the opening five lines depict this "noise" through sound. The mixture of /w/ [alliteration](#) and [sibilance](#), for example, suggests the sound of rustling leaves, or of air whooshing through the trees in question:

*I wonder about the trees.
Why do we wish to bear
Forever the noise of these
More than another noise
So close to our dwelling place?*

There's a subtle [end rhyme](#) created through "trees" in line 1 and "these" in line 2 that creates a feeling of melody and momentum. That sense of melody, in turn, boosted by the [assonance](#) of long /oh/ sounds of "So close" (which also draws attention to just how "close" people tend to live to these). The [diacope](#) of "noise" (repeated in lines 3 and 4) also calls attention to the fact that this *particular* noise is special; people prefer the rustling trees to, say, the hum of cars on a highway.

And, finally, the intense [enjambment](#) from lines 1-5 pulls readers down the page until the firm end-stop after "place." This movement, in turn, evokes the movement of the trees' branches themselves.

LINES 6-9

*We suffer them by the day
Till we lose all measure of pace,
And fixity in our joys,
And acquire a listening air.*

The speaker sets out a case, rather unusually, *against* trees. While most people might like trees, the speaker thinks that "we suffer them by the day." "Suffer" here picks up on "bear" in line 2 and portrays these trees as a burden, as something that people don't enjoy but rather must deal with.

The speaker feels that trees have a negative effect on humanity (which is why the speaker has shifted from "I" to "We") which can be broken down into three parts:

1. The sound of the trees makes human beings "lose" their "measure of pace," by which the speaker means that this sound disrupts people's sense of time (line 7). Trees here are like some kind of gateway drug to nature and contemplation.
2. Trees make people lose the "fixity in [their] joys" (line 8), meaning they make people feel less secure of or fixed in the things that make them happy.
3. The sound of trees grants "a listening air." In other words, it mesmerizes or transfixes people (line 9).

These points could be interpreted in two different ways. The speaker might be saying that the sound of the trees keeps people in *place*. Hearing those rustling leaves fills people with a sense of meditative contemplation; they lose touch with time and their sense of urgency. People grow content to just be among nature, rather than, perhaps, making the most of their lives or exploring alternative lives altogether.

But these lines can also be read as implying just the *opposite*: that the restless rustling of the trees makes people *themselves* feel restless. This feeling of restlessness unmoors people, making them lose their sense of time and place and even feel detached from the things that make them happy, so focused are they on what *else* might be out there.

Notice how the [end-stop](#) after "air" performs the act of

listening, providing the reader with a brief pause in which to reflect—to listen to—what has come before.

LINES 10-14

*They are that that talks of going
But never gets away;
And that talks no less for knowing,
As it grows wiser and older,
That now it means to stay.*

The speaker begins to explicitly [personify](#) the trees here—so much so that readers might start to suspect that the speaker is talking about *people* rather than actual trees! In trees, the speaker sees the perfect [symbol](#) of a certain *type* of person: the one who keeps talking about chucking it all and starting over elsewhere, despite knowing full well that they'll never leave.

On the surface, then, the speaker doesn't like trees because they are "that that talks of going/ But never gets away." Trees, through their rustling leaves and swaying branches, keep announcing their departure—and then they never go! Trees, of course, don't talk in the human sense, nor do they make plans, fulfilled or otherwise, to "get[] away." People, on the other hand, tend to do just that. Again, then, readers should start to realize that the speaker isn't talking just about trees here.

The [enjambment](#) between lines 10 and 11 captures this idea perfectly, with line 10 running into the white space of the page only to snap to a halt with the firm [end-stop](#) after "away." It's as though the poem's lines themselves talk of leaving, but don't:

They are that that talks of **going**
But never gets away;

Trees, the speaker says, talk about going even as they grow "wiser and older" and know full well that they "mean[] to stay." The speaker seems frustrated by this hypocrisy, implying that trees/people should mean what they say and say what they mean.

The wording here also suggests that the desire to get away is rather naive or childish. The trees, the speaker says, keep yammering about leaving even as they get "wiser and older," which implies that they should be smart and mature enough to know better by now. After all, the longer people stay in one place, the less likely they are to leave everything they know behind.

And yet, the speaker says, the trees' noise doesn't stop; they're like a person who "talks no less for knowing [...] That they mean to stay." In other words, they're like people who refuse to outwardly acknowledge reality, and instead keep giving voice to their restless desires.

LINES 15-18

*My feet tug at the floor
And my head sways to my shoulder*

*Sometimes when I watch trees sway,
From the window or the door.*

Having just [personified](#) trees, granting them human qualities, the speaker now takes on some *tree-like* qualities. While looking at the trees, the speaker's own feet feel rooted to the floor.

This might represent the tug of responsibility. That is, maybe the speaker feels rooted in place by a sense of duty to the community in which the speaker lives. The daily responsibilities of work, family, and so forth keep the speaker's feet on the ground. The speaker might also feel stuck in place because it's simply easier to stay in this world. There's comfort in familiarity, and perhaps fear of the unknown is what keeps the speaker's feet "tug[ging] at the floor."

At the same time, the speaker's head "sways" from side to side, just like the trees do in the wind. This suggests that the speaker longs to leave, to set off into the world—to step beyond that "window" or "door" through which they see the trees.

The window and door here can be thought of as [symbolic](#) of opportunity or a different life path. To that end, notice how the speaker watches from the door or window but doesn't actually step outside. This section thus reveals that the speaker is also caught between action and inaction, movement and stasis. Like [Hamlet](#), the speaker is trapped by indecision—wanting to change things up, yet tethered to the ground.

The rhyme between "floor" and "door" in lines 15 and 18 captures this strange feeling, with the "floor"—representing staying put and accepting life as it is—pitched against the "door," which offers a portal to a new start, and, a new life.

This section's use of [end-stop](#) and [enjambment](#) also captures the conflict between staying rooted in place and taking flight. The enjambment between lines 15 to 17 suggest movement and dynamism (in a word, action), but this is brought to a sudden halt by the end-stop in line 18. It's no coincidence that the end-stop comes on the word "door," either, suggesting that, for now, the metaphorical door of a new life remains unopened and unexplored.

It's also worth noting how "sways" from line 16 reappears as "sway" in line 17. This [repetition](#) has a kind of swaying motion because the words fall in two different places in their respective lines, as if the poem is rocking from side to side:

And my head **sways** to my shoulder
Sometimes when I watch trees **sway**,

Finally, the [sibilance](#) of "sways," "shoulder," and "sometimes" provides a rustling-like effect that echoes the sound of the trees.

LINES 19-20

*I shall set forth for somewhere,
I shall make the reckless choice*

Lines 19 to 23 mark an important and revealing twist in the poem. Despite having just revealed that the speaker's feet "tug at the floor," the speaker now insists that "I shall set forth for somewhere."

Unlike the hypocritical trees who say they will leave but never do, the speaker intends to actually make good on this longing. The speaker will "make the reckless choice" to pack up and leave to start a new life. The [anaphora](#) of "I shall" in lines 19 and 20 is an attempt to show conviction and determination (and, perhaps, suggests that the speaker is trying very hard to convince *themselves* that they will make good on their promise):

I shall set forth for somewhere,
I shall make the reckless choice

The fact that this choice is "reckless" means that it's irresponsible, and the sharp /k/ [consonance](#) of "make" and "reckless" suggests the destructiveness inherent to starting over. After all, starting a new life somewhere new entails leaving one's current life behind.

With the word "responsibility," the speaker might be referencing the fact that they're leaving behind duty and responsibility to their current community, or simply the fact that they're leaving behind the comfort and safety of a predictable life. Right now, the speaker knows what to expect of life, and there's no promise that the new path the speaker undertakes will be a happy or a fruitful one. The pull of possibility, however, is stronger than that of familiarity.

But to what extent the reader really *believes* the speaker will "set forth" is another question. The speaker's potential destination—"somewhere"—is vague, hinting that the speaker perhaps entertains these thoughts only to leave them unrealized, which is exactly what everyone else does.

LINES 21-23

*Some day when they are in voice
And tossing so as to scare
The white clouds over them on.*

The speaker has decided to "set forth for somewhere"—a vague location that suggests the speaker doesn't really know where they're going. What matters is leaving, more than an actual destination.

The chosen day of this departure is also ill-defined, the speaker just saying they're set off "Some day." The speaker has this longing to "set forth," but no concrete plan. Perhaps, then, the speaker *is* just like the trees—all sound, no action!

This longed-for but ill-defined escape will supposedly happen when the trees "are in voice." That is, when the leaves are rustling in the wind, a sound in which the speaker hears an unfulfilled and ultimately insincere desire to get away.

In a striking bit of [imagery](#), the speaker says the trees "toss[]"

and turn in order to scare away the "white clouds." In other words, their branches and leaves sway so forcefully that it appears as though the trees themselves are trying to frighten the clouds passing up above. In addition to simply painting a vivid scene for the reader, this moment might be [symbolic](#):

- The trees act as protectors of their place here, whereas it's the *clouds* that actually travel. The trees, never having really planned to leave their home, scare away the markers of movement floating past them overhead. Seeing the clouds move might only remind the trees that they're stuck in one place.

Sound patterning in this section captures the speaker's fraught state of mind. The [sibilance](#) in lines 21 and 22 once again recreates the sound of the rustling trees:

Some day when they are in voice
And tossing so as to scare

Of course, none of this *really* happens—this is the speaker's instinct for [personification](#) talking. The trees and clouds are acting out the twin, competing impulses that are causing the speaker distress: the longing to start life over in a new place as a stranger to the world, and the less exciting but more likely scenario of staying put.

LINES 24-25

*I shall have less to say,
But I shall be gone.*

The speaker contrasts themselves with the trees a final time. Whereas the trees will make a ruckus ("in voice") yet stay put, the speaker will "have less to say" and actually go. The trees are all talk; the speaker is all action. Unlike the trees, the speaker won't make others "suffer" the noise of restlessness.

The poem offers very little about why the speaker feels this urge to leave so strongly. The poem implies that the speaker is dissatisfied with life as it stands, but doesn't really say why. What's clearer is that the speaker seems to take pride in the idea of *not* being one of those people who talks about doing something but never actually does it.

That said, there's a bit of [irony](#) at work here: the poem is itself *all talk*. And in the end the speaker still hasn't gotten "away"; the speaker has only talked about one day doing so. The poem thus ends on a mysterious cliffhanger, leaving the reader none the wiser about what troubles the speaker, nor whether the speaker will actually make that "reckless choice."



SYMBOLS



THE WINDOW AND DOOR

The window and door to the speaker's home [symbolize](#) the choice between accepting life as it is and setting "forth" to start over elsewhere. These objects create a *literal* boundary in the poem that represents the *symbolic* boundary between staying and leaving.

Note how the speaker looks at the trees "From the window or the door," which implies that the speaker is still firmly *inside* a house when observing the world beyond. Even as the speaker's "head sways" in a motion that suggests the desire to leave, the speaker remains firmly in place, feet "tug[g]ing at the floor" of this home. Actually stepping *through* this door (or climbing through the window) would represent the speaker leaving their current life behind. The fact that the speaker remains on one side of these objects by the poem's ends indicates that, for all their talk of leaving, the speaker remains right where they started.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-18:** "Sometimes when I watch trees sway, / From the window or the door."



THE CLOUDS

Towards the end of the poem, the speaker envisions the trees moving so violently in the wind that it looks as though they're trying to frighten away the "white clouds" that pass overhead. These clouds [symbolize](#) movement and change.

Whereas the trees talk of leaving but never take any action, the clouds, by their very nature, are constantly in motion. Perhaps, then, the trees want to "scare" off the clouds because they don't want reminders of the world beyond their own little plot of land; maybe the sight of the passing clouds reminds the trees of everything they can't have. Whereas the trees are stuck in place, the clouds can freely fly all over the world. In this reading, then, the clouds symbolize not just movement and change but also a life unencumbered by duty, responsibility, or roots.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-23:** "Some day when they are in voice / And tossing so as to scare / The white clouds over them on."



THE TREES

The [personified](#) trees represent human beings themselves, and more specifically those who talk of leaving their current situations but never follow through. The

trees' "noise," which represents the longing to "get[] away," seems to irk the speaker because it's just that: noise, all "talk" and no action. The trees keep on talking even as they get "wiser and older," which reflects the way that that people keep dreaming of starting over even as they get old enough to know better.

The trees' roots, meanwhile, represent the ties that bind people to their circumstances—things like family, community, jobs, history, and so forth. Despite people's intense longing to see what other possibilities are out there, their roots keep them tethered to the world they know.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 10-14
- Line 17
- Lines 21-23



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The speaker uses [alliteration](#) sparingly to dramatize images and ideas, or to simply suggest noise. In line 2, for example, alliteration raises the poetic volume to match the focus on the noise made by trees. The /w/ sounds here suggest the whoosh of air that would move through the trees and make their leaves rustle:

I wonder about the trees.
Why do we wish to bear

Later, alliteration helps to highlight to conflict between action and inaction. In line 15, the speaker says, "my feet tug at the floor"; the two /f/ sounds link these words, and in doing so suggest that the speaker's feet are *inseparable* from the floor (like a tree and its roots). Rooted to the floor in this way, the speaker feels unable to actually go anywhere.

In another striking moment, the speaker comically depicts trees as trying to scare clouds away: "tossing so as to scare / The white clouds." The /t/, hard /c/, and /s/ sounds here are the equivalent of the poem jumping out at the reader from a hiding place, mirroring this apparent attempt by the trees to seem terrifying to the clouds up above.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "wonder"
- **Line 2:** "Why," "we wish"
- **Line 10:** "They," "that that," "going"
- **Line 11:** "gets"

- **Line 15:** “feet,” “floor”
- **Line 19:** “forth for”
- **Line 22:** “tossing so,” “to scare”
- **Line 23:** “clouds”

SIBILANCE

The speaker uses [sibilance](#) to conjure the “sound” of the trees—which makes sense, given that this “sound” is right there the title of the poem!

This is clearest towards the end of the poem. In lines 16-17, for instance, sibilance pops up as the speaker describes watching the trees from “the window or the door.” The /s/ and /sh/ sounds of “sway,” “shoulder,” and “Sometimes” suggests the whispered hush of the wind in the trees, and in doing so emphasizes the connection between the speaker and those trees. Like the trees, the speaker feels rooted in one place yet filled with the desire to leave.

More sibilance pops up in the following lines as well, again bringing the rustling sound of the trees into the poem. The hush and hiss of lines 19-24 makes it feel almost like listening to the trees themselves!

I shall set forth for somewhere,
I shall make the reckless choice
Some day when they are in voice
And tossing so as to scare
[...]
I shall have less to say,

All this sibilance also evokes the *relentlessness* of the trees' noise, which the speaker says people would prefer to listen to (“bear”) more than any other near their homes. The noise is nearly non-stop as the poem reaches its ending. Given that this noise represents the trees' desire to get away, the fact that it builds towards the poem's end suggests the speaker's *own* increasing desire to get away.

But remember that the speaker thinks this noise is hypocritical; the trees make all this noise about leaving but stay put. It's a bit [ironic](#), then, that the speaker's declaration of leaving is itself so sibilant—in other words, that this declaration itself *sounds so much like the sound of the trees*. “I shall have less to say” than the trees, the speaker says, in a line that is filled with the very “sound of the trees” that the speaker finds so hypocritical. Perhaps this suggests that the speaker won't end up leaving after all—that the speaker, too, is won't make good on all this restless noise.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** “sways,” “shoulder”
- **Line 17:** “Sometimes,” “sway”

- **Line 19:** “shall,” “somewhere”
- **Line 20:** “shall,” “reckless choice”
- **Line 21:** “Some,” “voice”
- **Line 22:** “tossing so,” “scare”
- **Line 24:** “shall,” “less,” “say”

END-STOPPED LINE

[End-stops](#) work together with [enjambment](#) to control the poem's pacing. In doing so, they reflect the idea that the speaker is torn between action and inaction—between staying in one place, or leaving to start a new life elsewhere. The end-stops here usually create a brief pause that suggests inertia and/or the inability to take action.

For example, both line 14 and line 18 have end-stops that represent stasis, coming after the word “stay” and “door” respectively. *Staying* is exactly what the speaker rallies against, even though there is no proof that the speaker will behave any differently to the trees. The full-stop after “door” shows that the portal to a new life is always waiting right there but so far remains unexplored. (Also note that the door here is a [symbol](#) of the boundary between the speaker's two choices—staying or leaving; more on that in the Symbols entry of this guide.)

Later, the end-stops after lines 23 and 25 give the poem's extra drama to the rhyme between “on” and “gone.” This heavy emphasis on the last word of the poem highlights both the speaker's desire to leave *and* the fact that, as yet, the speaker hasn't gone anywhere.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “trees.”
- **Line 5:** “place?”
- **Line 7:** “pace,”
- **Line 8:** “joys,”
- **Line 9:** “air.”
- **Line 11:** “away;”
- **Line 12:** “knowing;”
- **Line 13:** “older,”
- **Line 14:** “stay.”
- **Line 17:** “sway,”
- **Line 18:** “door.”
- **Line 19:** “somewhere,”
- **Line 23:** “on.”
- **Line 24:** “say,”
- **Line 25:** “gone.”

ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) works with [end-stops](#) to vary the poem's pace. The poem carefully constructs tension between two possibilities: leaving and starting a new life, or staying put in the old one. Enjambment creates a sensation of movement and

dynamism throughout the poem that evokes the first of these possibilities.

Lines 2-5, for example, are all enjambed. The lines move swiftly down the page, and in doing so suggest the restlessness of both the speaker's mind and of the rustling trees. The end-stop then brings this dynamism to a crashing halt with the question mark at the end of line 5.

A similar thing happens across lines 10 and 11:

They are that that talks of going
But never gets away;

The white space after "going" offers a brief moment of freedom and excitement, which is then quickly squashed by the bite of reality in line 11. The firm stop after "away" reflects the idea that all these trees (and, by extension, the people they [symbolize](#)) aren't going to get "away" at all. All their "talk[]" of going" introduces a moment of imaginative possibility that quickly comes crashing back down to earth.

The enjambment intensifies lines 15 to 23, as the speaker insists that one day they *will* "set forth for somewhere [else]." It's up to the reader, of course, to decide if this is all talk, but it's worth noting how the flow of enjambment is cut abruptly by the end-stops at line 18 and 23. It's as though the poem is struggling to escape its roots on the page, but, like the speaker, hasn't yet made that first move.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "bear / Forever"
- **Lines 3-4:** "these / More"
- **Lines 4-5:** "noise / So"
- **Lines 6-7:** "day / Till"
- **Lines 10-11:** "going / But"
- **Lines 15-16:** "floor / And"
- **Lines 16-17:** "shoulder / Sometimes"
- **Lines 20-21:** "choice / Some"
- **Lines 21-22:** "voice / And"
- **Lines 22-23:** "scare / The"

PERSONIFICATION

The [personification](#) of trees is integral to this poem and suggests that the speaker is projecting their own feelings and emotions onto the natural environment. Trees can't literally talk, nor do they dream of getting away. But the speaker uses this personification to make a point about human beings themselves.

Put simply, the speaker's argument goes like this:

- Trees are always chatting away with each other, making bold statements about how they are going to get away from it all. The speaker hears this

chatter in the rustling sound of the leaves.

- But the trees, of course, are rooted to the spot, so they never actually head off to start new lives.
- Trees *keep* doing this annoying habit even though they supposedly grow older and wiser, and are in full knowledge that they never actually plan to take action.

Of course, all of these thoughts and feelings belong to the human world, and the speaker is *really* talking about other people here (and, crucially, reflecting on their own situation). As if exasperated by the trees' idle promises, the speaker resolves to "set forth" one day and "be gone"—in other words, to take the action that the trees/other people only talk about.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-14:** "They are that that talks of going / But never gets away; / And that talks no less for knowing, / As it grows wiser and older, / That now it means to stay."
- **Lines 21-23:** "Some day when they are in voice / And tossing so as to scare / The white clouds over them on."

REPETITION

[Repetition](#) occurs throughout the poem. Note, for example, the repeated "noise" in lines 3 and 4 (which is specifically [diacope](#)). This repetition enacts the word itself—that is, it makes more noise! The speaker finds trees annoying, especially their sound, and having the same word occur twice is the equivalent of the poem turning up its own volume.

Lines 8 and 9 then use [anaphora](#), and the effect is subtle:

And fixity in our joys,
And acquire a listening air.

The speaker lists some of the reasons why the noise of trees is a bad influence on people, and the double "And" suggests both the speaker's frustration ("*And another thing!*") and the fact that the speaker has been thinking about this for a while. That is, the speaker has reasons pre-prepared as to why trees are something that people "suffer."

The repeated "that talks" in lines 10 and 12 has a similar effect as the diacope mentioned above. Repetition in poetry often draws attention to what's being repeated, making it more prominent or, in other words, *noisier*. It's all talk, this repetition seems to say—trees, and people, never actually take the drastic action they promise to.

The speaker, however, seeks to break the chain by "set[ing] forth" one day to start a new life. Unlike the trees, or the tree-like people, the speaker intends to uproot his or her life and go off elsewhere. The speaker especially feels this when watching

the trees, taking on the swaying motion that they display. The [polyptoton](#) of "sways" and "sway" in lines 16 and 17 captures this perfectly, placing a near-identical word in different parts of their respective lines and thereby performing a visual swaying motion on the page:

And my head **sways** to my shoulder
Sometimes when I watch trees **sway**,

Then, throughout the end section, the speaker repeatedly affirms this intention to go off and start again, saying "I Shall" not once but *four* times. It's open to interpretation, but each "I shall" seems to *weaken* the speaker's resolve, rather than prove it.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "noise"
- **Line 4:** "noise"
- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "that that," " talks"
- **Line 12:** "that talks"
- **Line 16:** "sways"
- **Line 17:** "sway"
- **Line 19:** "I shall"
- **Line 20:** "I shall"
- **Line 24:** "I shall"
- **Line 25:** "I shall"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem features one [rhetorical question](#), found in lines 2 to 5. This clarifies what it is exactly that the speaker "wonder[s] about the trees." While most people—and most poems—are pretty positive about trees, the speaker thinks they are something that humanity has to "bear" (that is, tolerate/put up with). The rhetorical question introduces an unusual sentiment, as the speaker wonders why people decide to live near trees. The speaker thinks people could just as easily have some other noise filling the air surrounding their homes (or "dwelling place[s]"). In the rest of the poem, the speaker implicitly answers this question: people live near trees, because the restlessness of their leaves mirrors people's *own* restlessness.

It's worth noting how the speaker frames this in universal terms, switching from "I" in the first line to "we" in the rhetorical question. This forces the reader to consider their own response to the speaker's question, rather than passively accepting it as the individual thoughts of one person. Immediately, then, the poem draws the reader in to find out what the speaker is *really* talking about.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-5:** "Why do we wish to bear / Forever the noise of these / More than another noise / So close to our dwelling place?"



VOCABULARY

Bear (Line 2) - Tolerate.

Dwelling place (Line 5) - Home, the place where people live.

Measure of pace (Line 7) - Sense of time/urgency.

Fixity (Line 8) - Certainty.

Air (Line 9) - Manner.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Sound of the Trees" is 25 lines long and appears on the page as a single block of text. It doesn't conform to any established poetic form, but is fairly typical of Frost's poems of this period. In a sense, the looseness of the form matches with the poem's opening statement: "I wonder about the trees." The speaker is in the process of thinking about something, rather than presenting a carefully scripted set of ideas.

The single block of text also subtly reflects the poem's subject. Trees are taller than they are wide, and the shape of the poem on the page thus recalls the trunk of a tree. The form also makes the poem *feel* heavier (imagine how different it would be if there were stanza breaks between every couple of lines). This, in turn, ties in with the poem's focus on being stuck—or rooted—to one place or way of life.

METER

"The Sound of the Trees" uses what is best described as loose [iambic](#) trimeter. Frost actually coined the term "loose iambs" in part to describe the kind of meter at work in this poem. This meter keeps things feeling conversational, as though readers are getting a look at the speaker's free-flowing thoughts.

Pure iambic trimeter means each line has three iambs, feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da-DUM). There are plenty of lines like that in the poem. Take line 11:

But nev- | er gets | away;

Or line 14:

That now | it means | to stay.

Again, though, the meter is *very* loose. There are lots of variations in the amount of syllables in the line, but that the

amount of *stresses* tends to stay the same. Take line 7, for example:

Till we lose | all meas- | ure of pace,

This line uses an [anapest](#), an iamb, and then another anapest (anapests are feet with *three* syllables that go da-da-DUM). In this line, the anapests perform the "loss" of "pace" (urgency) that the speaker says people suffer because of the noise of the trees. The meter quite literally changes the "measure" of the poem's own pace.

Generally speaking, that's the kind of effect achieved by the loose meter. It generates tension between stability and freedom.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Sound of the Trees" doesn't have a regular [rhyme scheme](#), but it does use plenty of rhyme. Initially, this goes:

ABACDEDCB

As readers can see from just these few lines, there are many [end rhymes](#) in the poem—it's just that there's no real *pattern* to them. This gives the poem the sense of being caught between two possible worlds: rhyme and non-rhyme. This is no accident; it represents the speaker's *own* dilemma, between staying put and accepting life as it is or leaving to starting a new one "somewhere" else, between structure and freedom.



SPEAKER

Though it uses a first-person perspective throughout, the poem doesn't give much away about its speaker. Perhaps there is an element of autobiography in the poem, with Frost himself reflecting on his various life choices.

What is definitely clear is that the speaker feels in some way dissatisfied with their current life. It is really the speaker—not any tree—who is torn between accepting things as they are and escaping to start over again. The speaker *projects* this feeling onto the sound of the trees, hearing in their rustling leaves a familiar and frustrating restlessness.

The reader is none the wiser at the end of the poem whether the speaker really means it when saying in line 19 "I shall set forth for somewhere." The speaker has an ill-defined longing to get away, but it's not clear whether the speaker has the conviction to follow through on it.



SETTING

The poem seems to take place in the speaker's home (their "dwelling place"), which is situated nearby trees that rustle in the wind. The speaker observes these trees from inside, looking

through a "window" or "door" that takes on [symbolic](#) meaning. These objects can be thought of as representing the boundary between the speaker's options: staying put or leaving. Beyond this, the setting remains vague, which is part of the point. Keeping things vague means the poem's message of restless longing can resonate with people in all different circumstances.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Sound of the Trees" appears in Robert Frost's third collection of poetry, *Mountain Interval*. First published in 1916, this collection features what would go on to become some of Frost's best-known poems, including "[The Road Not Taken](#)," "[Out, Out—](#)," and "[Birches](#)."

Frost's poetry is often associated with rural life in New England, and the poet spent many of his early years working on a farm. Though the poem doesn't refer directly to New England, the presence of the trees does suggest a rural setting. Its focus on the natural world is also typical of Frost, who's often described as a kind of nature poet in the vein of 18th-century Romantics.

Unlike the Romantics, however, who celebrated the beauty and wisdom of nature, Frost often treats the natural world as a complex and ambiguous force. Here, the speaker presents the trees as rather obnoxious, and they act more as a backdrop onto which the speaker's own psychological troubles are projected.

This is also a poem about choices. The speaker stands on a kind of crossroads, wondering whether to stay put and accept life as it is, or simply "set forth for somewhere" and start anew. The difficulty of such choices—of not knowing the right path through life—is a common theme in Frost's poetry, with "The Road Not Taken" representing the most famous example.

Frost wrote during a literary period known as Modernism, which saw many poets shifting away from more traditional poetic forms and experimenting with language, form, and [meter](#). Frost's accessible, [colloquial](#) language and focus on the ordinary concerns of everyday people fits right in with Modernism, though he still used meter in many of his poems and said that he was more focused on content than formal innovation. He even famously compared [free verse](#) poetry to playing tennis without a net.

In a way, this poem itself subtly reflects that tension between the comforting but restrictive confines of the past and the exciting but destabilizing possibilities of the future.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem was published during the First World War, one of the most deadly and destructive conflicts in human history. The

early 20th century in general was also a time of immense technological change, including the introduction of mechanized weaponry that made armed conflict more deadly than ever before. Modernism was in large part a reaction to all this, as artists sought to create works that better reflected their rapidly shifting world.

That said, not much of this outside context finds its way into Frost's poetry (a fact for which he has sometimes been criticized). Readers are more likely to find a horse than an automobile in a Frost poem!

Frost spent a great deal of time living on a farm in New Hampshire, a state renowned for its natural beauty. In fact, New Hampshire is the second most forested state in the country—which might explain the speaker's fixation on trees in the poem!



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Out Loud](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9wjUjaUdnM) – Listen to a reading of the poem (accompanied by the actual sound of trees!). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9wjUjaUdnM>
- [Frost's Biography](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost) – Learn more about Frost's life and work courtesy the Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost>
- [Mountain Interval](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/29345) – Check out the full collection in which this poem appears. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/29345>
- [Frost on Frost](#) – An interview with the poet at his home in

the 1950s. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qwCEnkb2_E

- [The Sound of Trees](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98j0V5ftlpE) – A recording of the kind of sound that Frost probably had in mind when writing this poem. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98j0V5ftlpE>

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- [Acquainted with the Night](#)
- [After Apple-Picking](#)
- [Birches](#)
- [Fire and Ice](#)
- [Home Burial](#)
- [Mending Wall](#)
- [Nothing Gold Can Stay](#)
- [Out, Out—](#)
- [Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#)
- [The Road Not Taken](#)



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