

# Teachable MOMENTS

NUMBER 2, OCTOBER 24, 2006

## Unknown Frost Poem Discovered

### To the Teacher

Eighty-eight years after it was written, a poem by Robert Frost was recently discovered by a graduate student at the University of Virginia. The poem, entitled “War Thoughts at Home” reflects Frost’s contemplation of World War I. What an opportunity to show students the ongoing

relevance and universal themes of literature! Take advantage of this “teachable moment” by engaging your middle or high school students with this poem; ask them to explore its structure and poetic devices and to reflect on its topic and meaning today.

### National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards Addressed

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

### Suggestions for Using the Student Worksheet

(found on page 4)

- Worksheet includes two stanzas of the poem, available via the mass media. In order to obtain the full text, you may purchase the October 2006 edition of the *Virginia Quarterly Review* ([www.vqronline.org](http://www.vqronline.org)). *Note:* The lesson can be completed based only on the two stanzas provided.
- Consider allowing students to work in pairs or small groups.
- Consider assigning a second Frost poem for the “optional” comparison, and make it a mandatory part of the lesson. These might include Frost “classics” such as “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” “The Road Not Taken,” “Bending Birches,” “The Gift Outright,” and so forth.
- Consider asking students to compare this or other Frost poems to poetry from other poets or to contemporary song lyrics.
- Consider collaborating with a social studies colleague to provide students with information about World War I to help them understand the specific context of the poem. Or, if you have time to undertake a more extensive project, work with your social studies colleague to engage students in a broader study of war and the literature of war. (Civil War and *The Red Badge of Courage*, World War II and *Catch 22*, Vietnam and *The Things They Carried*)

## Background Information on Robert Frost

Robert Frost was born in San Francisco in 1874. He moved to New England at the age of eleven and became interested in reading and writing poetry during his high school years in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He was enrolled at Dartmouth College in 1892, and later at Harvard, but never earned a formal degree. Frost drifted through a string of occupations after leaving school, working as a teacher, cobbler, and editor of the Lawrence *Sentinel*. His first professional poem, "My Butterfly," was published on November 8, 1894, in the New York newspaper *The Independent*.

In 1895, Frost married Elinor Miriam White, who became a major inspiration in his poetry until her death in 1938. The couple moved to England in 1912, after their New Hampshire farm failed, and it was abroad that Frost met and was influenced by such contemporary British poets as Edward Thomas, Rupert Brooke, and Robert Graves. While in England, Frost also established a friendship with the poet Ezra Pound, who helped to promote and publish his work. By the time Frost returned to the United States in 1915, he had published two full-length collections, *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*, and his reputation was established. By the nineteen-twenties, he was the most celebrated poet in America, and with each new book—including *New Hampshire* (1923), *A Further Range* (1936), *Steeple Bush* (1947), and *In the Clearing* (1962)—his fame and honors (including four Pulitzer Prizes) increased.

Though his work is principally associated with the life and landscape of New England, and though he was a poet of traditional verse forms and metrics who remained steadfastly aloof from the poetic movements and fashions of his time, Frost is anything but a merely regional or minor poet. The author of searching and often dark

meditations on universal themes, he is a quintessentially modern poet in his adherence to language as it is actually spoken, in the psychological complexity of his portraits, and in the degree to which his work is infused with layers of ambiguity and irony. Robert Frost lived and taught for many years in Massachusetts and Vermont, and died on January 29, 1963, in Boston.

Found at <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/192>



### Other Robert Frost Web Sites



<http://www2.bartleby.com/people/Frost-Ro.html>

<http://www.online-literature.com/frost/>

### Online Links to Articles and Opinions

– [Robert Frost Poem Discovered Tucked Away in Book](#)

– [Robert Frost poem discovered by U.S. student](#)

## Newly Discovered Frost Poem

Recently, a poem written by Robert Frost in 1918 was discovered in a collection of documents at the University of Virginia. It was published for the first time ever in the October 2006 issue of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. “War Thoughts at Home” was probably inspired by the death in World War I of Frost’s friend and fellow poet.

The poem is 35 lines long and includes the following two stanzas. In the poem, a woman at home alone on a snowy day thinks of soldiers in France as she watches some blue jays fighting outside her window.

And one says to the rest  
“We must watch our chance  
And escape one by one—  
Though the fight is no more done  
Than the war is in France!”

Than the war is in France!  
She thinks of a winter camp  
Where soldiers for France are made.  
She draws down the window shade  
And it glows with an early lamp.

Consider these lines (or the entire text if your teacher provides it) and complete the worksheet on the next page.

## “War Thoughts at Home” by Robert Frost

1. Write the rhyme scheme (the pattern established by the arrangement of rhymes in a stanza or poem, generally described by using letters of the alphabet to indicate the pattern of rhyming lines, e.g., ababcdcd) next to the lines of the poem.
2. What time of day do you think it is and why? What significance does that time of day have?
3. It is winter in the poem. What significance do you think the season has?
4. Describe a symbol (an image that stands for or represents something else) in the poem.
5. What line is repeated? Why do you think Frost chose to repeat that line?
6. Robert Frost is famous for using nature themes in his poetry. Is this an example of a nature poem? Why or why not?
7. Robert Frost typically wrote on two levels—the narrative and images of the poem and the ideas, feelings, and situations that they represent. Describe the two levels in this poem.
8. Does this poem about war have any relevance to the current war in Iraq? Why or why not?

### Optional

Select another poem by Robert Frost. Write a brief essay explaining the ways in which this poem and the poem you choose are similar and different. Your comparisons may address the structure of the two poems and their uses of language, images, themes, ideas, and so forth.

and/or

Consider Frost as a poet and his whole body of work. Does he have a consistent point of view? A consistent style? Consistent themes? Where does “War Thoughts at Home” fit in? Is it consistent with the point of view in Frost’s other poetry? Style? Theme?

## Suggested Answers

1. abccb
2. Student responses will vary but might include the impression that it is late afternoon or early evening because the woman “draws down the window shade” and lights a lamp. The approaching darkness of the evening might suggest the darkness of war and of death.
3. Student responses will vary but might include the idea that winter is the season of death, which makes it relevant to war. Also, the image of soldiers in a winter camp suggests some of the physical difficulties endured by soldiers. These physical challenges may represent more abstract emotional and philosophical difficulties.
4. Student responses will vary but might include the following: blue jays representing soldiers (fighting, looking for a chance to escape); winter representing death; darkness/evening representing death or sadness; the glow of a lamp representing hope and/or home
5. Student responses will vary. The repeated line is “Than the war is in France!” This may show the reader that the woman, and perhaps the country at that time, was always thinking about the war in France—even when looking at or talking about other things.
6. Student responses will vary but might suggest that it is a nature poem because of the image of the blue jays fighting. On the other hand, there are many direct references to soldiers, camps, and the war in France and fewer images of nature than in some other Frost poems.
7. Student responses will vary but might describe the two levels as the view out the window—the blue jays fighting and the war in France—and/or the themes of death and destruction associated with war.
8. Student responses will vary but might include the idea that there are people looking for a chance to escape this war, although the fight is not done. Students might also discuss the fact that families at home are thinking of soldiers far away, just as this woman is thinking of the soldiers in winter camps.

Student responses to the essay question will vary but should include descriptions of the similarities and differences in rhyme scheme, imagery, theme, and so forth.