**“Out, Out -” by Robert Frost**

**Background Information**

This poem is based on a real incident that happened in New Hampshire in 1910, although Frost didn’t write this poem until 1915. The story involved a boy, 16-year-old Raymond Fitzgerald. He was helping saw wood outside when he accidentally hit the loose pulley which caused the saw to come down on his hand, nearly cutting it off. Suffering from shock, Raymond was taken into the house and a doctor was summoned immediately. Unfortunately Raymond died quickly afterward, from heart failure due to shock. Frost and his family met the Fitzgeralds during one summer. Obviously the poem explores more than the death of Raymond – Frost gives a disturbing insight into the way society thinks about this type of accident.

The poem’s title is an allusion to Shakespeare’s famous lines from Macbeth:

Out, out, brief candle!

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,

And then is heard no more; it is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.

The title is a clue that the poem is about a life cut short, literally, in this case. In Macbeth we also have Lady Macbeth rubbing ‘blood’ off her hands after she thinks she can murder someone and not have guilty feelings about it. This eventually drives her insane.

As it’s a tragedy, Frost refused to recite the poem as part of his public readings.



**Commentary**

* The narrative style of the poem has an objective tone nearly like the newspaper where the story first appeared. The boy has been working all day and, so far, things have been uneventful.
* The imagery and sight of the sawdust make the setting very vivid. The use of alliteration and sibilance [the ‘s’ sound in the first few lines] suggest the dust in the air and it smells delightful – ‘sweet-scented’ if there was a ‘breeze’ which makes the workplace seem wonderful. The repetition of the saw that ‘snarled and rattled’ – three times – has a wonderful onomatopoeic quality and reminds us that snarling is like a dangerous animal, a lion possibly, and rattled is also like a poisonous snake – whichever way, the saw is compared to something dangerous. The repetition of snarled and rattled shows us also that the work is monotonous and when you do monotonous work your mind tends to drift. The five Vermont mountain ranges remain stately in the distance beneath the setting sun. The quiet rural countryside is disturbed by the sounds of the saw. It has been a long day of work. The boy wanted to finish work half an hour early so that he might enjoy the last part of the day, but that was not to be. ‘Day was all but done’ – the word ‘but’ here is very important. The day is about to become very important for the boy. The speaker actually wishes, in retrospect, that they might have stopped work early to not only ‘please the boy’ and mean he was ‘saved from work’ but the few minutes would have saved his entire life. He keeps working until his sister comes out of the house to call them in for supper. At the surprise of her words over the sound of the saw, the saw ‘leaped out’ for the boy’s hand, nearly cutting it off. The saw here seems personified; it comes alive to attack the boy. It’s also personified in the way that the boy and the saw seem to greet each other, is if they’re about to shake hands. When you offer your hand to someone in greeting, the normal response is for the other person to offer theirs.
* ‘But the hand!’ – the short sentence followed by an exclamation mark makes the reader feel the pain, as if we are watching it.
* The boy’s first response is to laugh – however, it is a laugh of terror. He is holding up the hand, ‘Half in appeal’ – when you need help you hold up your hand; he needs help *for* his hand. The word ‘half’ emphasises his hand is half off. Then his life flashes before his eyes, and he imagines what life would be like for a man without a hand as a farmer in New England. The repetition of ‘saw all’ obviously plays with the word ‘saw’ as a homonym – by having his hand chopped off by the saw he has gained knowledge of a man’s world. As an adolescent, he has a child’s heart living inside a man’s body, and he cries for his sister not to let the doctor cut off his hand. He knows how important his hand will be in this community, that even if he survives he will be a liability. By quoting his words Frost makes the scene much more dramatic. There is an interesting word by itself – ‘So.’ What effect does this have? It seems colloquial, as if the speaker is talking to us. His hand is already gone, however, and the boy slips into unconsciousness when the doctor uses anaesthetic (ether). The one watching over him at his bedside suddenly notices his pulse weakening and then his heart slowly beats to ‘Little – less – nothing!’ The words and dashes almost mimic the failing heartbeat. After the boy dies, those who remain simply go back to their affairs – either they go back to work or prepare for another day of work tomorrow.
* The boy has died – does he deserve more than ‘that ended it’? If it is the episode being described, the boy dying, normally it is the beginning of grief and sadness. If it describes the boy’s entire life, then there is something sad in that there is nothing else to be said, isn’t there? ‘No more to build on there’ – the line is one not only of work (building) but of putting effort into something. As something that is not living any more the boy is useless to this community. It would be the same for any of them.
* Frost’s conclusion to the poem stands in stark contrast to the anticipation of sentiment. Instead of showing a grieving family crying (as you might expect), Frost portrays the family (and community) going about their own affairs since they weren’t the ones who died. Survival in those days and that part of the world meant that working long hours and using your hands.
* In one reading, the poem may be interpreted as a cautionary tale against industrialization, or the dangerous power of machines in conflict with nature. All is not well in rural life, Frost seems to be saying. In a twist on pastoral poetry, Frost is saying the countryside is not to be idealised; it can be a dangerous, tragic, and unforgivable place, just like the city.
* Some readers interpret the end of the chilly end of the poem as a negative comment on the Puritan work ethic of New England. Other readers see the ending as a truthful statement that honours the tragedy of the event and the family’s grief by describing their initial response matter-of-factly, and not wrapping it in sentimentality, by dramatizing it. The family are a worker down; it means more work for the rest if they are to survive.

**Discussion Points**

* In what ways does Frost seem to be attacking the idea for people working for too long, or that communities in which this boy was living needed boys to work to supplement the family income?
* What is your response to the ending of this poem? Do you feel that once life is over you should move on? Or do you feel that the people in the poem are too cold, too stoical?
* What do you notice about the caesura from ‘So.’ to the end? Why do you think Frost has these short sentences in this section?

**Essay questions**

1. Do you feel that child labour, which goes on in many parts of the world, is always a terrible thing?
2. Discuss how Frost describes the death of the boy and discuss how effective the ending is.
3. Write a story called ‘The Accident’.