

## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

*Introduction to Literary Context: American Poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* is the newest title in Salem's *Introduction to Literary Context* series. Other titles in this series include *American Post-Modernist Novels*, *American Short Fiction*, *English Literature*, *World Literature*, and *Plays*.

This series is designed to introduce students to the world's greatest works of literature – including novels, short fiction, novellas, plays, and poems – not only placing them in the historical, societal, scientific and religious context of their time, but illuminating key concepts and vocabulary that students are likely to encounter. A great starting point from which to embark on further research, *Introduction to Literary Context* is a perfect foundation for *Critical Insights*, Salem's acclaimed series of critical analysis written to deepen the basic understanding of literature via close reading and original criticism. Both series – *Introduction to Literary Context* and *Critical Insights* – cover authors, works and themes that are addressed in core reading lists at the undergraduate level.

### SCOPE AND COVERAGE

*American Poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* covers 34 poems written by American poets who represent a variety of ages, life styles, and political beliefs, including those whose work has been banned, burned, and revered. Their work is based on personal experiences and struggles, as well as societal issues of the time.

With in depth analysis of works by the likes of Edgar Allen Poe, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, and Langston Hughes, *Introduction to Literary Context: American Poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* offers students the tools to grasp more firmly and dig deeper into the meanings of not only the works covered here, but literature as it has been created around the world.

### ORGANIZATION AND FORMAT

The essays in *American Poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* appear alphabetical by title of the work. Each is 6-8 pages in length and includes the following sections:

- Content Synopsis – summarizes the poem, describing the main points and prominent characters in concise language.
- Historical Context – describes the relevance of the moods, attitudes and conditions that existed during the time period that the poem was written.
- Societal Context – describes the role of society in relation to the content of the poem, from the acceptance of traditional gender roles to dealing with mental illness.
- Religious Context – explains how religion – of the author specifically, or a group generally, influenced the poem.
- Scientific & Technological Context – analyzes to what extent scientific and/or technological progress has affected the writing of the poem.
- Biographical Context – offers biographical details of the poet's life, which often helps students to make sense of the work.
- Discussion Questions – a list of 8 – 10 thoughtful questions that are designed to develop stimulating and productive classroom discussions.
- Essay Ideas – a valuable list of ideas that will encourage students to explore themes, writing techniques, and character traits.
- Works Cited

*Introduction to Literary Context: American Poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* ends with a general Bibliography and subject Index.

## ABOUT THIS VOLUME

Poetry was the dominant form of creative writing for several centuries and was one of the barometers used to measure a civilization's artistic merit, as poets often reflected a people's social conscience. Alas, that has all but faded from view in the 21st century (some scholars will argue the songwriters have become the poets of our age). Poetry comes in all shapes and sizes—there are ballads, odes, sonnets, poems of only a few words to book-length Goliaths and can rhyme or be presented in free verse. One size does not fit all, but there's enough variety in the works presented here to please a wide array of tastes.

Reading poetry can be daunting to the inexperienced but as the numerous works in this collection illustrate, simple analysis of the imagery presented by the poet often can unlock the work's true meaning and greatly enrich the reading experience. Poems that on the surface differ greatly in construction and form with no visible similarities on closer inspection can reveal themselves to be quite alike in theme and emotion. Several of the works in this collection concern the ailments that plagued the world, i.e., the disintegration of society, gender inequality, and racism to name a few. Some are general commentaries on humanity while others are personal reflections of the author's singular experiences.

Poetry should be read in the same fashion as a novel; the author is presenting characters and situations for the reader to discover, and like in prose, a first-person narrator should not be construed as being the author—one should not read *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* while picturing Robert Frost mounted on a horseback watching snow falling on another's field. Some of these poems, however, are personal reflections: Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* is the poet directly expressing his feelings.

### American Roots

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* was published in *The American Review* in 1845, immediately catapulting the 36-year-old Poe from relative obscurity to national fame in a matter of weeks. *The Raven* subsequently was republished in numerous international newspapers, periodicals, and poetry anthologies, generating not only fame but adequate financial success to allow Poe to write full time without supplementing his income through other means. A fortunate occurrence, since in his brief life Poe became one of our nation's most influential writers.

Poe's biography is an inventory of failures and disappointments. After an aborted military career, including enrollment at West Point, Poe journeyed down other career paths but met a dead end at every turn. When writing *The Raven*, Poe purposely designed it to appeal equally to critics and lay readers. Poe languished in obscurity—and poverty—and needed a hit to grant him admission into the ranks of popular American literature's inner circle and put money in his pocket. The 18-stanza poem had substance for scholars to chew on while its amazing rhyme scheme dazzled and delighted working-class readers. The poem also features a man mourning for the loss of "Lenore," the love of his life, an experience shared by many. The heartbroken first-person narrator is home alone on a "bleak December" night with only his books for company—a familiar image to many critics that surely would meet their approval.

While the man seeks solace in his texts, a visitor wraps at his door, which is opened to reveal not a fellow human but a raven. Poe sets an eerie almost supernatural tone to the opening of the poem with "midnight dreary," "bleak December," "fantastic terrors," and "rustling curtains" in the early stanzas. He introduces the human and spiritual elements

and the addition of the raven brings the symbol of nature for the perfect triumvirate. The use of a black bird also encompasses all three symbols: ravens and crows feature in mythology as bringers of prophecy (both evil and divine); as birds they are within the realm of nature, but their ability to speak, however, elevates them to more of a human scale than another animal could, e.g., a black cat, which Poe utilizes in his fiction, also is traditionally associated with witches and dark magic but its inability to speak limits its use as a literary symbol. Poe chose wisely.

“Nevermore,” the bird’s single utterance, also is ambiguous. At its core, *The Raven* concerns a man lamenting for lost love, *but* is Lenore alive and simply has rejected him, is she dead and impossible to possess, or was the man’s heart destroyed by her—alive or dead—to the point where he’ll never love again? We don’t know. After losing Lenore, the narrator has secluded himself, but a tapping at his door is met with excitement rather than fear or rejection. The creature at the door isn’t human and perhaps not even a bird but a messenger from the dead (maybe Lenore herself). Poe could be construed as being a progenitor of American noir, as his characters seem doomed and without hope from the start.

Robert Frost’s (1874–1963) *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* is a forward step in the development of American poetry. Although Frost’s work isn’t derivative of Poe’s stylistically, they both incorporate nature imagery, but to vastly different ends. Again readers encounter a man alone on “the darkest evening of the year.” But the darkness is not foreboding. The narrator is mounted on a horse watching snow fall and enjoying the simple beauty of the scene. The speaker believes he knows the woods’ owner, which labels him a local man either in the past or present.

The traveler’s origins are unknown. He could be returning from a long period away, perhaps a soldier returning from war, and remembers these

woods from playing there as a child so they conjure the joys of home and family. The image is positive; the sight of the woods filling with snow generates joy. The woods are unspoiled, the snow is clean, and new life will come in spring. The rider, however, cannot linger; he has “promises to keep” and must attend to his responsibilities. The scene easily could be construed as melancholy—it’s cold, dark, empty, the lone rider has only his “little horse” for companionship—but the emotion is positive. The silent rider is happy upon entering a familiar setting and expresses neither sorrow nor loneliness and will move forward in his life.

Frost’s *Birches* interestingly employs many of the same images but with the opposite message. Here trees make the narrator long for the irresponsibility of boyhood. The poems share the lure of nostalgia but to different ends. The narrator desires not only the freedom of youth, but its solitude as well. He doesn’t want to play baseball with other boys but wants to climb trees alone to commune with nature and ascend to the heavens. He appears to be a man whose life has gone astray. Perhaps he has not lived up to his responsibilities and desires to turn back time for a second chance at setting a straighter course. His longing to climb a tree to its snowy peak can be viewed as wanting to ascend to heaven to “leave earth awhile” and experience a metaphorical rebirth by bowing the tree limbs to return back to the ground to start life anew.

### Society in Ruins

T. S. Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915) elevated the author to the Olympus of American artists. Eliot is among the modernists group of writers, but this work as well as his epic, *The Waste Land*, however, foreshadows the themes championed by the later post-modernist school. Eliot was heavily influenced by European writers, especially the French, in his use of symbols, making his work often difficult to interpret. Prufrock is an anxiety-riddled man seemingly reflecting on his life while

in conversation with a woman he is wooing. He knows that he is not an attractive or desirable man; he is aging, his hair is thinning and has “seen the moment of [his] greatness flicker” and has been afraid. He already has had many women and has “measured out his life in coffee spoons” the mornings after, but in reflecting on his life he knows that he has misjudged and misunderstood many things, especially women, and doesn’t want to rush the moment and make another error. Although he is attracted to women and polite society, he also has felt “pinned and wriggling on the wall” like an insect and he must put on a false front by preparing “a face to meet the faces that you meet.” Prufrock’s “love song” is satirical; it’s not about love at all but a society that has become an obstacle course, especially in terms of gender relations.

Published in 1922, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is among the seminal works of American poetry and is to that form what James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is to the novel. Eliot takes the idea of society gone astray presented in *Prufrock* to the extreme in this poem. Presented in five sections, the poem is more disjointed and difficult than *Prufrock*. The sense of societal decay that permeates *Prufrock* is extended beyond interactions between the sexes to envelop all of society. In the wake of the first world war, the world has become broken.

Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* is his signature work and arguably the most noted poem produced by the group of writers known as the Beats. The motivation of the Beat writers, which include Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder, William Burroughs, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, often has been misinterpreted and misunderstood. The Beats of the 1940s and 1950s often are viewed as a sort of vanguard for the hippies of the 1960s, but not so. While the hippies had a more revolutionary mindset bordering on anti-Americanism that demanded societal change often through violence, the Beats were the product of a tainted society. Ginsberg, Kerouac, and company, who were steeped in the

work of 19th century Goliaths like Whitman and Melville on up to modernists Proust and Hemingway, went in search of the America of their forefathers only to discover that it had vanished in the smoke of two world wars and the Depression. Their disillusionment manifested itself in alcohol and drugs. *Howl* sports many of the trappings of the post-modernist movement expressed in verse form but also adds heavy images of homosexuality and drug use, which was socially unacceptable at the time (not to mention illegal), another factor in the Beats often being misconstrued as deviants.

Like many Beat writers, Ginsberg’s work is heavily autobiographical and incorporates his circle of friends into his works sometimes even using their actual names. Kerouac did this as well in the first draft of his signature novel, *On the Road* (fictional names later were introduced prior to publication).

## Love and Death

Anne Sexton’s *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) like Ginsberg’s *Howl* is a first-person narrative that expresses the author’s feelings. The poem is Sexton’s admission of the trouble she experienced in coming to terms with her parents’ deaths within a short period of each other (Sexton’s mother and father both passed away in 1959). This poem finds the narrator examining her father’s possessions soon after his demise, discarding the important items that were the keepsakes of his life but are meaningless to her. There are boxes of photos of long-gone relatives and friends and a scrapbook with news clippings recalling historic moments of the 20th century including Prohibition, the *Hindenburg* crashing, Herbert Hoover’s presidential election, and war, none of which relate to her own life experiences.

These items could be the trappings of many lives, but as the narrator turns the pages of the book images from her lifetime—her sister, family dogs—appear and Sexton adds more personal notes in revealing that her father apparently had

gone broke and that he planned to remarry very soon after his wife's death but she convinced him not to. The most startling admission is that her father was an alcoholic. In the fourth stanza, the narrator calls her father "my drunkard" and in the fifth refers to his "alcoholic tendency" noted in her mother's diary.

At first glance, the poem may seem a depressing inventory of human faults, but the piece ends on a positive note. After listing the man's numerous shortcomings, the narrator says she will "bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you." She understands and accepts that her father was a deeply flawed man but her love for him surpasses his human frailties.

### Race, Religion, and Gender

Langston Hughes' *I, Too* (1926) is an assault on the blatant racism that afflicted society for centuries. Here, the narrator is "the darker brother," the black race. The use of the word brother is expertly chosen as it places the narrator on an equal level, which another word like "son" would not. The darker brother is hidden away when company—presumably white—comes to visit. The narrator does not fight his seclusion knowing that he will eat in solitude today but not tomorrow. His time is coming quickly when he will sit at the white table because, when they see that he will not be separated and they are forced to look at him, they will understand that he is equal and will be ashamed of their treatment of him and shuck the yoke of blind ignorance that has separated them.

He is not bitter because he believes with full confidence that his equality will be recognized. The poem's last line solidifies the point while mimicking the opening line to show progress. In the poem's first line, the narrator says "I, too, sing America," meaning that he praises and loves his country as much as others. In the closing line, "sing" is replaced with "am," an affirmation of equality. Hughes presents his declaration without

anger or resentment, stating it simply as fact that will become undeniably clear.

Claude McKay's *America* (1921) is a forerunner to Langston Hughes' *I, Too*. The narrator of this 14-line poem is a black man lamenting the prejudice that stares him in the face from every direction. Despite being fed the "bread of bitterness" and having the "tiger's tooth" of injustice sunk into his throat, the narrator expresses neither fear nor anger. Instead, he stands within America's "walls without a shred of terror, malice, not a word of jeer." Like Hughes' "dark brother," the narrator knows that he will triumph over time. Whereas Hughes' speaker will force others to accept him now, McKay's narrator understands that much time will have to pass before racial equality is achieved, and he must wait.

Marge Piercy's *My Mother's Body* (1985) echoes many of the identical emotions presented by Hughes and McKay years earlier only in regard to gender and the suppression of women. In this work a young woman physically feels the pain of her mother's death miles away while her father hears the crash of the woman's fall to the floor but ignores it and continues to nap while his wife lies in pain that's like "a knife tearing a bolt of silk." The poem's opening stanzas present the clear message of women's suffering. Like Hughes's "dark brother" in *I, Too*, women are treated like a minority. She extends the metaphor to include religion, describing the trappings of Chanukah—candles, latkes, a dreidel—while Christmas lights twinkle on palm trees in Florida. Like women are treated as inferior, so are Jews in a Christian-dominated society. Jews certainly know that it's the Christmas season, but are Christians equally aware that it's also Chanukah?

Piercy incorporates a series of images of laundry, dresses, curtains—all things associated with women—as metaphors for the female body. An angel folds up her dead mother like laundry/her mother's clothes hung on her body like window

curtains. These unimportant items also can be put away, replaced by new, or simply discarded. Her mother's body, like her mother's mother and so on has been little else than a machine for giving birth. Whatever dreams they might have had beyond the prospects of motherhood never were allowed to come to fruition. The narrator, however, refuses to accept the fate of women past and is determined to break the cycle and live the life she desires, a life of equality and fulfilled dreams.

The narrator contends that in the past, a woman was just a mother and wife and when the physical possibility of child bearing ended she became an empty useless vessel. She will not allow that for herself and rebels against that mindset and will have what her mother and all women before her could not. She is a rebel *with* a cause. Although the poem relates the narrator's personal experience, Piercy gives the work a universal appeal by extending the sentiments beyond this particular mother and daughter to include all women.

Sylvia Plath composed the vitriolic *Daddy* shortly before committing suicide, and if this work epitomizes her state of mind it's not hard to imagine why she ended her life. Like Marge Piercy, Plath's narrator comes to terms with a parent's

death. Plath, however, is as hateful and poisonous as Piercy is forgiving. Plath generally is considered a member of the confessional school of poets, but this work probably is not intended to be read as autobiographic—at least one hopes not. In portraying her father, the narrator employs the most nightmarish imagery possible.

In the poem's opening stanzas, the narrator claims to have wanted to kill the man but he died naturally first. He was German, and the poem is heavy with Nazi imagery while the daughter likens herself to a Polish Jew destined for the death camps in "Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen." Plath also associates the father with the Luftwaffe, and he is a "Panzer-man" in black "with a Meinkampf look" and a "love of the rack and the screw." Later in the poem, daddy is a vampire who drank the narrator's blood but now has "a stake in [his] fat black heart."

From the melancholy to hope to social decay to racial injustice to forgiveness, the poems discussed in this collection provide a vast array of themes presented in a variety of styles for a rich vein of study.

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Robert Frost, pictured above, wrote "Birches," featured opposite. Two other works by Frost appear in this volume: "Acquainted with the Night," page 1; "The Road Not Taken," page 165; and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," page 181. Photo: Library of Congress



# Birches

by Robert Frost

## Content Synopsis

Speaking directly to the reader, the poet begins by relating what he imagines when he looks at white birch trees in the midst of a field of other, straight-standing, dark, trees: how they have come to be bent in their great down-swooping arches because a boy has been swinging on them. Once this thought is out, however, the poet immediately returns, in the fourth line, to the world of factuality from his reverie. He explains the actual cause of their permanent stoop: ice storms and the weight of the glassy ice casing that encrusts and weighs them down. He then describes how the ice falls from the branches like clinking pieces of glass on the crust of the snow beneath the trees and notes that it appears, in his imagination as if the inner dome of heaven, an imaginary crystal sphere had fallen. After noting how the ice must be cleared away, he returns to the birch branches.

The pronoun “They” beginning the fourteenth line does not refer to the last-mentioned plural noun in line twelve, the “heaps of broken glass,” but to the birch branches. This referential ambiguity reinforces the colloquial quality of the poet’s language. The poet notes that once they have been bent, the birches stay bent and concludes his discourse on the phenomenon with a metaphor, comparing the bent branches throwing their foliage on the ground to girls on all fours tossing their hair over their heads for it to dry in the sun.

The use of metaphor apparently reminds him, at line twenty-one, that he is not intent on giving a disquisition on birch trees but using them to write a poem, to express the kind of truth derived from fancy rather than from facts.

He returns to his reverie, which he prefers to the facts, and embroiders a story about a solitary boy living too far away from a populated town to learn games like baseball, who plays by himself as he goes about his daily farm chores, primarily swinging on birch branches and causing their permanent arching. The poet thinks of it as a process of the boy’s subduing his father’s wishes. The poet thinks of the branches as stiff at first but that the boy conquers them by his swinging, softens them, and makes them hang limp. The swinging is described as a process of learning the right way to launch himself and to maintain his poise.

At line forty-two, the speaker turns back from metaphor and his mediation on branch swinging and recalls his own youth when he would swing on branches. He speaks about his longing to return to his youth, to the time before the stresses of life assault and pain him, which he conveys in the painful image of a twig having lashed across an open eye, reprising and revising the image of a swung and bent branch but in a new context.

This experience of life as a stab of pain brings the poet to confess that there are times, like a boy flying above the ground when swinging on a birch

branch that he would like to get away from earth, but only for a while, so that the experience is not death but a transcendental joy. He expresses a desire to experience a realm beyond life that is a fundamental experience of being alive followed by its complement, the joyful experience of coming back to earth. Following the colloquial attitude of the poem, the poet returns from his transcendental reflections with the homespun phrase that ends the poem and shows him solidly a denizen of the earth.

### **Symbols & Motifs**

The principal motif of the poem involves the act of bending the facts of the world to one's own needs, of taking the matter of the world and using it as the material whereby one can express oneself, of making one's own mark on the world and deflecting tradition so that it flows through the channel that one devises. For the boy, the authority that he challenges and bends to his own will is his father's as represented by his birches. For a poet the authority to be challenged is the authority of the precursor poets, as he bends tradition to his expressive needs. They are his father figures who have left him woods and trees that he must refashion and make his own through the exercise of his own vitality, bending the past to his practice and forming a new configuration.

Since this is a poem and its writer is a poet, it is reasonable, from the way Frost describes swinging on the branches to think that the description of swinging and of mastering its art can be read metaphorically as an individual learning the poet's craft through practice.

### **Historical Context**

First published in *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine in August 1915, "Birches" stands somewhat outside history, set, as it is, in a peaceful wood. Only ice storms or an unexpected lashing of the eye by a wayward twig disturbs it, and by the transcendental ruminations of memory, longing, and melancholy,

far from the battlefields of Europe, where Frost had lived in England until the very year in which the poem first appeared. The war and the madness of governments, nations, and men are present only to the reader aware of their absence in the poem.

The poem also represents a historical movement in poetry away from the trappings that had defined poetry in the late nineteenth century. The poets of the early twentieth century, Frost one of the principals in this movement, shifted the diction of poetry away from the formality of late nineteenth-century decorum. They wrote verse freer of the constraints by which poetry had been defined in the preceding century. Rhyme, meter, and formal diction were made to give way to the looser rhythms and accents of colloquial and even common speech. Unlike his contemporaries, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, rebellious in their own ways against the past, Frost did not demand great classical learning or familiarity with the body of western and eastern literature, philosophy, and anthropology in order to enter the world of his poetry. His was the poetry of an individual man as he experienced that part of the earth upon which he lived a life.

### **Societal Context**

"Birches" is the poem of a solitary man, one who imagines a boy living on a farm away from any populous town. He is an isolated boy who must invent his own games, unable to learn social games, like baseball. . In the same way that it is outside history, it is outside society. Even as a grown-up, the speaker's society is his environment rather than any human community.

### **Religious Context**

"Birches" celebrates an unformulated and informal religion of nature. In it, the poet conceives of swinging on birches as a means of achieving a state of transcendental exaltation. Swinging the body heavenward on their branches is an exercise that frees the spirit from the absolutes of gravity and

permits a safe encounter with the anxious giddiness of death without abandoning the stability of rootedness in life.

### Scientific & Technological Context

The poet contrasts truth or factuality, as in his disquisition on ice storms and their effects on birch trees, with poetry and imagination. Poetry and its essential component, imagination, as they are presented in “Birches” represent the mental technology for realizing truth that is not bound to or limited by factuality. Through the imagery of a boy swinging on birches, the poet comes to the needs of the soul to shuttle between the grounded and the transcendental realms of experience.

### Biographical Context

Frost was one of the best-known American poets of the twentieth century. Many of his poems, like “Fire and Ice,” “The Road Not Taken,” “Mending Wall,” “Birches,” “Death of A Hired Man,” “Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening,” and “Mending Wall,” or phrases from them, have entered the mainstream of American culture and discourse. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry four times. He often appeared on television programs and read an inaugural poem at the inauguration of John Kennedy.

Despite his apparently bucolic poetry, Frost lived a difficult life, enduring financial hardship and mental turmoil, as well as earning fame and

success. He worked as a farmer, but rather unsuccessfully, and as a schoolteacher. As a poet, he was a gentleman farmer, working his land but not dependent upon it. He married Elinor White in 1894. In 1937, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and died of heart failure in 1938. Of their six children, their son committed suicide and their daughter suffered an emotional collapse. American as he was as a poet, Frost lived during the early years of the twentieth century, his formative years as a poet, in London.

Frost was born in San Francisco, California, on March 26, 1874. Frost’s father was a teacher and newspaper editor, but he died when Frost was eleven, leaving his family penniless. Frost’s mother moved the family, Frost and his younger sister, to New England, a part of the country with which Frost and his poetry were strongly associated. He was a founder of the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference at Middlebury College, in Vermont, in 1921. His mother died of cancer in 1900 and his sister died in a mental hospital in 1909.

Frost died on January 29, 1963 in Boston, Massachusetts.

*Neil Heims, Ph.D.*

### Works Cited

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### Discussion Questions

1. What do you think is the poet's sense of the relationship between sons and their fathers? Why? From what in the poem do you get that idea?
2. What is Frost's attitude toward youth? What is it toward adulthood? What is the difference?
3. Is the figure of swinging on birches an open symbol? What are all the things it can signify? What are its limits?
4. How important is solitude for the poet? What are his feelings about solitude? Is the poet a happy man?
5. How does Frost convey the greater cosmic world in a poem in which his focus seems to be only a forest of predominantly birch trees? What is the sense of the cosmos that he imparts?
6. Contrast the images used to convey the activities of boys and of girls? How do they differ? Do you feel that there is there a significance in this difference? What seems to be the relationship between boys and girls in the poem?
7. What is the significance of "the pathless wood" to which the poet refers?
8. What does "Birches" tell you about the poet's attitudes towards life and death?
9. In what way can "Birches" be said to be a poem about writing poetry?
10. Where does the poet of "Birches" locate himself in relation to the history of poetry? How does he accomplish this?
11. Can you think of examples from your own experience of situations and feelings comparable to the ones Frost describes in "Birches?" Discuss them and describe similarities, differences, and their effects on you.

### Essay Ideas

1. Describe the poet's character.
2. Analyze the way the speaker thinks about things.
3. Discuss the poet's relation to nature.
4. Analyze the poem as an expression of the poet's desire for excitement and his sense of anxiety.
5. What does the diction of "Birches" tell you about the character of the speaker?