



# Robert Frost

(1874-1963)

## Life and works

Robert Lee Frost was born in San Francisco in 1874. His parents both came from New England and at the age of 11 Robert returned there with his mother after his father's death. In 1895 he married Elinor White, a high-school friend who was to bear him six children. **He began studying at Harvard but left without taking a degree and supported himself and his family with various jobs**, including farming, teaching and journalism. In 1912 the Frosts **moved to England**, where the poet **met Ezra Pound**, who helped him make his poetry known and introduced him to W.B. Yeats and Edward Thomas. With the latter he formed a deep, long-lasting friendship.

Frost's first collection of poems, *A Boy's Will*, was published in 1913 to great acclaim and was followed by *North of Boston* in 1914. The following year, he returned to the United States, bought a farm in New Hampshire and devoted himself to farming and writing. His reputation as a poet was now established and he could make a living by writing poetry and giving seminars and lectures at various universities as a 'writer in residence'. He published several volumes of poems including *New Hampshire* (1923), *Collected Poems* (1930), *A Further Range* (1936), *A Witness Tree* (1942), which were **all awarded the Pulitzer Prize**. Frost was widely popular and **became America's official Poet Laureate**; he spoke at Kennedy's inauguration ceremony and, in 1961, went to the USSR on a cultural mission. He died in 1963.

## Theme

All of Frost's poems are linked to a region of **New England**. Unlike contemporary Modernist poets, like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (who claimed that 'all great art is born of the metropolis'), who were interested in such exotic subjects as Eastern philosophy and Japanese verse forms, Frost chose American rural and provincial life as the subject matter of his poetry. Frost's approach **to nature** was **Romantic**, since he used it to reflect man's inner thoughts and emotions. He was particularly fond of wintry settings, which enabled him to express the harshness of man's life and the eternal presence of death in it.

## Style

Frost was **a conservative as well as an experimenter**. He achieved great subtlety, carefully choosing the sound of words, exploiting the language of sense impressions, taking the traditional verse forms, such as the sonnet and blank verse, and developing them to his own ends into **a blend of colloquial and traditional features**. His **dramatic monologues and pastorals** were especially popular. Frost managed to create apparently simple poetry, highly meditative in tone, which becomes a metaphor for human life and provides **sudden revelations about universal issues**; poetry which, as Frost once said, 'begins in delight and ends in wisdom'.

### Key idea

#### The poet's task

Frost thought that his task as a poet was to reach the general reader and remind him of the values of simple life and ordinary things, such as a wood under a snowfall. In his poetry he pointed out how the pressure of everyday responsibilities and the shallowness of urban life lead man to forget his feelings.

Frost conveyed his message through implication and symbolism. A moment of life involving man and nature in what to most people would be a routine and meaningless act becomes a complete symbol of truth in his poems. The emotion is intense but controlled, the speaker makes each word count, amid intervals of silence.

## COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

### 1 READ the texts and answer the following questions about Robert Frost's life and works.

- 1 When did Frost's reputation as a poet start?
- 2 Which are his most famous collections of poems?
- 3 What is the subject matter of Frost's poetry?
- 4 What was his approach to nature like?
- 5 What are the most important features of his style?
- 6 What is the poet's task according to Frost?
- 7 How did he convey his message?



## The Road Not Taken

*This is one of Frost's most famous poems, probably inspired by a friend of his, the poet Edward Thomas, who he had met in England and was later killed in World War I.*

Robert Frost  
*Mountain Interval*  
(1916)

Two roads **diverged** in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveller, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
5 To where it **bent** in the undergrowth<sup>1</sup>;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better **claim**,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear<sup>2</sup>;  
Though as for that the passing there  
10 Had worn<sup>3</sup> them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had **trodden** black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
15 I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence<sup>4</sup>:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
I took the one less travelled by,  
20 And that has made all the difference.

1 **undergrowth.** Sottobosco.

2 **grassy ... wear.** Erbosa e poco battuta.

3 **worn.** Consumato.

4 **hence.** Da adesso.

### LITERARY COMPETENCE

#### > VOCABULARY

**1 READ** the poem and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- 1 right .....
- 2 walked .....
- 3 moved into different directions .....
- 4 curved .....

#### > COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

**2 READ** the poem again and describe the situation in which the poet found himself.

**3 SAY** what decision he made and why.

**4 EXPLAIN** how his choice affected his life.

#### > COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

**5 DESCRIBE** the layout of the poem: is there a rhyme scheme? Find examples of assonance and alliteration.



- 6** **DEFINE** the season portrayed by the poet. Justify your answer by quoting from the text.
- 7** **EXPLAIN** what the road is traditionally a symbol of. State how the two roads of the poem differed. What did each of them represent?
- 8** **SAY** what tone the words 'sorry' (line 2) and 'sigh' (line 16) give to the poem.
- 9** **DEFINE** the language of the poem.
- 10** **IDENTIFY** the theme of the poem.

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➤ **COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

- 11** **DISCUSS.** Describe the steps that lead you to make important decisions in life. What is in your opinion the way in which man can fulfil himself?