

Explication of design essay



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“ Design”, by Robert Frost, contemplates fate and the role it plays on the lives of every living thing, regardless of size. By definition, design is the purposeful or inventive arrangement of parts or details (Webster).

The poem starts with the description of an observation made of a spider that has caught a moth on top of a flower. It then transitions to a related discussion concerning the role fate had in bringing those three objects together. “ Design” is a traditional Italian, or Petrarchan, sonnet consisting of fourteen lines, starting with an octave and ending with a sestet. Frost places a volta between the octave and the sestet to introduce the change in feeling and thought that the poem takes in the sestet. This is evident by the physical white spaced gap located between the octave and the sestet.

The octave is written with a regular abba rhyme scheme, and describes the observation that Frost makes about nature and the cycle of life. The sestet appears to be broken up into three couplets, representative of the three questions that Frost poses to the reader. The rhyme scheme for the couplets is ac, aa, cc, respectively. It is written in the first person point of view, Robert Frost being the speaker. The setting is sometime during the morning hours of the day.

The octave describes a “ dimpled spider, fat and white” (1) sitting “ on a white heal-all, holding up a moth” (2). All three of the poem’s main characters are derived from these first two lines; the spider, the flower, and the moth. It is important to note that all three are described as being white. Spiders are typically a dark color, perhaps black, and personify evil.

The fact that this spider is white is important because it makes the spider appear pure and good. The flower is a heal all, a low growing, spreading, perennial of the mint family, with purple 'pineapple-shaped' flowers. Again, it is important to note that this heal all is white, probably an oddity in nature, and metaphorically carries a tone of good and innocence. Lastly the moth is also described as being white.

Through the use of a simile, Frost compares the moth to a "white piece of rigid satin cloth" (3). Unlike the other characters, the color of the moth seems normal; moths are usually white. It sets the scene for what appears to be a normal aspect of nature. Even the structure of the octave contributes to the natural cycle it describes. This is exemplified when Frost writes "Mixed together to begin the morning right" (7).

Frost uses the whole first octave to convey this brilliant white scene of innocence. However, this innocent feeling starts to disappear in the second half of the octave. Through the use of a simile, Frost compares these characters "of death and blight" (4) to "the ingredients of a witch's broth" (6). Obviously death carries a negative connotation and is implicated with darkness. Likewise, blight refers to a specific symptom affecting plants in response to infection, often leading to the death of plant tissues such as leaves or flowers.

The white heal all has been blighted by the actions of the spider. Historically, witches and anything associated with witches also maintains this association of being evil or dark natured. So there are these three characters which all exist, to some degree, naturally. They are all white which symbolizes purity

and innocence. However, when they are all mixed together, like the ingredients in a witch's stew, they manifest into this object of evilness and disease.

Transitioning from the octave into the sestet, Frost starts to question the implications that fate has had in his observations. Such a transition is often expected in an Italian or Petrarchan sonnet, and helps to exemplify the poem's shift from description to question. Frost poses three questions to the reader, the last being a conclusion. The first question asks "What had the flower to do with being white..

..?" (9). If that flower had been its natural color of purple, the spider would not have been attracted to it for reasons of camouflage. The second question, "What brought that kindred spider to that height.

..?" (11) suggests that something other than the spider's own free will directed it to that particular flower. Likewise, something other than the moth's own free will directed it to that specific flower. The last question makes an indirect statement that "design" is dark to the point of being appalling, if it is even present in "things so small" (14), which we, the reader, know it is.

I believe that the "design" that Frost refers to in this poem is similar to fate, or the force which acts on everyone, influencing our decision making.

Christians believe that God has a plan for everything, a "design" for the universe. After reading the sestet, it appears that Frost is taken back by the fact that a great and wonderful God could allow such an atrocity to occur.

Considering the attack on the world trade center, I often ask myself, why

those people; why did they have to die that way? It seems unfair, but in the grand scheme of things, through God's eyes, that's just how it was supposed to be.

Everything happens for a reason and we are just the pawns in this game called life.