

Out, out. by robert  
frost



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The Snuffing of a Brief Candle in “ Out, Out” Robert Frost’s poem “ Out, Out” is structured as a short narrative poem. In a mere thirty-two lines, it depicts the tragic death of a young boy at the hands of a chainsaw. The narrator—who we presume to be the poet himself—tells the boy’s story with a sense of mourning. The poem ends with the witnesses to the death merely going about their business afterward, “ since they/Were not the one dead” (Frost, 31-32). Frost uses the poem both to make a statement about the preciousness of life, indicating that the reaction to the child’s death is callous, and also to memorialize the boy, whose short, innocent life was nonetheless as important and meaningful as every human being’s life. The title of the poem, “ Out, Out,” is derived from a line in William Shakespeare’s play Macbeth: “ Out, out, brief candle!” (Shakespeare, 1993, 5. 5. 23), spoken by Macbeth upon hearing the news of his wife’s death. Frost’s use of the phrase as his title seems to be ironic. In the play, Macbeth laments his wife’s passing and reflects that life is ultimately meaningless: “ it is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/Signifying nothing” (Shakespeare, 1993, 5. 5. 26-28). But Frost does not agree that life has no meaning. He uses the poem as a way to record the boy’s existence, to show that even though his candle has been snuffed way too soon, his life was still significant. The poem begins just before the tragedy occurs, and sets the tone from the first line. Frost uses personification to describe the chainsaw as it “ snarled and rattled in the yard” (1). This line foreshadows the upcoming accident, but it is important to note that Frost does not depict the tragedy as an accident—he instead frames it as a deliberate act of malice on the part of the saw. The inanimate saw is given life through Frost’s words—he describes it as deliberately turning on the boy, “[a]s if it meant to prove

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saws know what supper meant" (15). The poet claims that the saw "leaped" (Frost 16) at the boy, painting the usually lifeless object as a living weapon. In this way, the saw becomes the antagonist of the poem, leading to the destruction of the unwitting protagonist. There is a sense of irony to the setting of the poem as well, as Frost initially describes the scene as being somewhat idyllic. The buzzed wood is alliteratively labeled "[s]weet-scented stuff" (Frost 3), and the backdrop is framed by a series of mountain ranges stretching "[u]nder the sunset far into Vermont" (Frost 6). The workday, which had gone by without incident as "nothing happened" (Frost 9), is almost done. When reading these lines, the reader almost forgets the sense of foreboding elicited by the first line. Frost lulls the reader into a sense of security that is quickly dashed when blood is shed soon after. When the boy dies at the end of the poem, the witnesses are at first disbelieving: "No one believed. They listened to his heart./Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it" (Frost 29-30). But as soon as they realize there is nothing left for them to do for the boy, the witnesses to the death "turned to their affairs" (Frost 32). This indicates that the onlookers probably went back to practical affairs, finishing up the day's work and taking care of their all-too-human needs, like supper. In a sense, the people are doing what they must to survive and continue their way of life. But the tone of these final lines indicates that Frost sees this behavior as being heartless and inconsiderate of the life that has just been lost: of course they could continue on with their lives, since they were not the ones lying immobile on the ground! In "Out, Out," Robert Frost tells a definitive, sad story of a young man's unfortunate death. The story of the poem is ultimately about the loss of innocence: the boy loses his life while "[d]oing a man's work, though a child at heart" (Frost 22),

compounding the tragedy of his early death. By narrating the boy's inopportune passing, Frost permanently memorializes the boy's story in print, thus highlighting the importance of the young man's brief life—and, by extension, the importance of every human life, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. Works Cited Frost, R. Shakespeare, W. (1993). Macbeth. In *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Retrieved April 25, 2011, from <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/index.html>