

Death as a theme in out, out-



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Death is all around, yet very few people notice it. The poem “ Out, Out-”, by Robert Frost, is about a boy that is cutting wood and due to a momentary concentration lapse, chops off his hand and bleeds to death. The people around him are at first startled by what had happened, but immediately continue with their daily lives. Robert Frost uses illusion, structure, and imagery to make his poem convey criticism to how little humans pay attention to the dead.

Robert Frost cleverly named the poem “ Out, Out-” as an allusion to the verse in Shakespeare’s play, Macbeth, “ Out, out brief candle” (5. 5. 23). The poem reflects the mood of the Macbeth’s quote. In the play, Macbeth hears about the death of his wife and responds coldly, “ She should have died hereafter./ There would have been a time for such a word” (5. 5. 17-18). Robert Frost writes this poem in reaction to that uncaring response. He portrays the onlookers of the boy as uncaring, “[...] And they, since they/ Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs” (31, 33-34). This paints them in a very negative light. The onlookers should have been more concerned with what happened to this boy, just as Macbeth should have cared more about what had happened to his wife. This poem also sets up a very similar scenario to that of Macbeth. In both pieces of literature, the victims are seen as innocent and their deaths not truly their fault. In Macbeth, the wife becomes crazy and in the poem, the boy plays with tools that he really should not be using. The poem describes the action as “[...] big boy/ Doing man’s work, though a child at heart-” (23-24). The boy was not old enough to be using the saw. He was not a man yet. Robert Frost’s allusion to the Macbeth story creates a dynamic twist to his criticism of human carelessness to death.

Robert Frost structures his poem using a blank verse form and placing punctuation throughout the poem in key points to enhance the way the criticism is transferred to the reader. The poem is blank verse since the vast majority of the verses are ten syllables long and follows an iambic pattern. This can be seen very clearly in the verse, " Call it a day, I wish they might have said" (9). This verse has both 10 syllables and every other one is accented. This poem uses blank verse structure since it sounds the most to regular speech and gives the poet more freedom to express his ideas to the reader. Robert Frost also uses punctuation to stop the reader at certain points to stress specific ideas and to create suspense. A main example from the text where Robert Frost both stresses an idea and creates suspense through punctuation is right after the hand is chopped off, "[...] But the hand!/ The boy's first outcry" (18). The exclamation mark after " hand" makes the reader both understand that the boy's hand was severed from the arm as well as creates a sense of suspense as to how the boy will react. If Robert Frost had not places an exclamation mark there, the reader would have moves straight to the next verse without comprehending and feeling the severity of the situation. Towards the end of the poem, when the boy is dying, the situation is shown is fragments, " And then - the watcher at his pulse took fright./ No one believed. They listened to his heart./ Little - less - nothing! - and that ended it" (30-32). The en dashes create much suspense within this section of the poem. Although there is not much emotion, the stress is still there. This helps engage the reader and lets the reader understand the criticism this poem is bringing against the uncaring ways of our society.

The imagery is a key component of “ Out, Out-”’s criticism how people react to a death, since it is used to foreshadow the future, personify the saw, and set the tone. Towards the beginning of the poem, imagery is used as a method of foreshadowing the future. As the boy is chopping wood, “[...] those that lifted eyes can count/ Five mountain ranges one behind the other” (4-5). At first glance, this verse seems to be discussing the chopped wood, yet a closer reading will show otherwise. This verse is paralleled later, “[...] Then the boy saw all-” (22). The beginning of the poem foreshadows the boy’s hand being chopped off. The person “ lifting his eyes to count” is that of the boy’s (4). The five mountain ranges are the boy’s fingers, with the knuckles forming the peak of the mountains (5). The poem continues by describing the scenery as a “[...] sunset far into Vermont” (6). The author uses a sunset since sunsets symbolize the end of the day and this event is going to be the end of this boy’s life. By foreshadowing the horrible event through beautiful scenery, Robert Frost creates irony to make the reader care more about this innocent young boy. Throughout the poem, the saw is personified as having a mind of its own. When the sister tells them to come eat supper, “[...the saw,/ as if to prove saws knew what supper meant,/ leaped out of the boy’s hand,” (14-160). The saw is portrayed as a hungry being that feels as if no one understands him and therefore wants to prove himself. The fact that the saw leaped out, seemingly to eat dinner, shows that the saw is hungry. This is interesting since the saw just “ ate’ wood, which one would assume is a saw’s diet, yet this shows that a saw’s food is really body parts. This paints the saw in a very sinister and evil light and makes the reader want to blame the saw for what happened. The tone within the poem is emotionless and disrespectful to the dead due to the lack of

imagery that the poem uses. After the boy's hand is severed from his arm, "The doctor put him in the dark of ether" (28). Robert Frost uses very basic and simple diction to show minimal emotion from the onlookers. The doctor seems to be acting robotically, doing what should be done to boy, but not actually caring about him. Moreover, moment the child dies, the onlookers respond, "No one believed", but they stop to care right afterwards, "[...]And they, since they/ Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs" (31, 33-34). This does not only convey an emotionless feeling to the dead boy, but also shows disrespect. At first the onlookers are startled, just as most people are when such news is discovered, but that feeling does not last long, and the people continue with their day-to-day lives without caring an iota about what happened. They are portrayed as walking away from the problem since "[...] they/ Were not the ones dead," and therefore it was not their problem to deal with (33-34). The tone of the poem allows the poem to more strongly criticize the fact that when a death happens, people only care for the first few moments, but after a while, it becomes old news, and people forget about it.

Robert Frost expresses his criticism of human's reaction to death expertly in his poem "Out, Out-" through his use of imagery, structure, and imagery. The poem brings the reader to understand how little humans remember or care about the dead, by giving the poem very little emotion, but much suspense. Robert Frost wants the reader not to react to deaths the same way Macbeth reacted to his wife when he said, "Out, out brief candle" (5. 5. 23).

Works Cited:

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