ROBERT FROST (1874-1963)

POETRY SET TEXT

AS-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE

DIRECTIONS: For each poem in the packet, complete the following steps.

STEP 1: Read and annotate the poem using the #123SPLITT method.
STEP 2: Draw the poem.
STEP 3: Paraphrase the poem in 1-2 sentences.
STEP 4: Make connections to other poems in the packet by topic or theme.

ASSESSMENT/GRADING:

• Students with completed packets may use them as a resource on timed writing assessments.
• Timed writing assessments will be graded using the Cambridge AS-Level English Literature rubric.
• Listed below are sample essay questions of the type that will appear on your timed writing assessment:

1. Discuss ways in which Frost explores grief and death in two poems.
2. With reference to two poems, discuss ways in which Frost presents the relationship between man and nature.
3. In what ways, and with what effects, does Frost use dialogue in two poems?

The Pasture

I’m going out to clean the pasture spring;
I’ll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I shan’t be gone long.—You come too.

I’m going out to fetch the little calf
That’s standing by the mother. It’s so young
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I shan’t be gone long.—You come too.

The figure (of a poem) is the same as for love, it begins in delight and ends in wisdom.
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**Published Volumes:**

BW: *A Boy’s Will*, 1913  
NB: *North of Boston*, 1914  
MI: *Mountain Interval*, 1916  
NH: *New Hampshire*, 1923  
WRB: *West-Running Brook*, 1928  
FR: *A Further Range*, 1936  
SB: *Steeple Bush*, 1947
There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound—
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT

Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
Mending Wall (1914)

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,

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Step One: Annotate using #123SPLIT
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Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."
The Death of the Hired Man (1914)

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table  
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,  
She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage  
To meet him in the doorway with the news  
And put him on his guard. ‘Silas is back.’  
She pushed him outward with her through the door  
And shut it after her. ‘Be kind,’ she said.  
She took the market things from Warren’s arms  
And set them on the porch, then drew him down  
To sit beside her on the wooden steps.

‘When was I ever anything but kind to him?  
But I’ll not have the fellow back,’ he said.  
‘I told him so last haying, didn’t I?  
If he left then, I said, that ended it.  
What good is he? Who else will harbor him  
At his age for the little he can do?  
What help he is there’s no depending on.  
Off he goes always when I need him most.  
He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,  
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,  
So he won’t have to beg and be beholden.  
“All right,” I say, “I can’t afford to pay  
Any fixed wages, though I wish I could.”  
“Someone else can.” “Then someone else will have to.”  
I shouldn’t mind his bettering himself  
If that was what it was. You can be certain,  
When he begins like that, there’s someone at him  
Trying to coax him off with pocket-money,—  
In haying time, when any help is scarce.  
In winter he comes back to us. I’m done.’

‘Sh! not so loud: he’ll hear you,’ Mary said.  
‘I want him to: he’ll have to soon or late.’

‘He’s worn out. He’s asleep beside the stove.

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT

Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
When I came up from Rowe's I found him here,
Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep,
A miserable sight, and frightening, too—
You needn't smile—I didn't recognize him—
I wasn't looking for him—and he's changed.
Wait till you see.'

'Where did you say he'd been?'

'He didn't say. I dragged him to the house,
And gave him tea and tried to make him smoke.
I tried to make him talk about his travels.
Nothing would do: he just kept nodding off.'

'What did he say? Did he say anything?'

'But little.'

'Anything? Mary, confess
He said he'd come to ditch the meadow for me.'

'Warren!'

'But did he? I just want to know.'

'Of course he did. What would you have him say?
Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor old man
Some humble way to save his self-respect.
He added, if you really care to know,
He meant to clear the upper pasture, too.
That sounds like something you have heard before?
Warren, I wish you could have heard the way
He jumbled everything. I stopped to look
Two or three times—he made me feel so queer—
To see if he was talking in his sleep.
He ran on Harold Wilson—you remember—
The boy you had in haying four years since.
He's finished school, and teaching in his college.
Silas declares you'll have to get him back.
He says they two will make a team for work:
Between them they will lay this farm as smooth!
The way he mixed that in with other things.
He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft
On education—you know how they fought
All through July under the blazing sun,
Silas up on the cart to build the load,
Harold along beside to pitch it on.'

'Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot.'

'Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream.
You wouldn't think they would. How some things linger!
Harold's young college boy's assurance piqued him.
After so many years he still keeps finding
Good arguments he sees he might have used.
I sympathize. I know just how it feels
To think of the right thing to say too late.
Harold's associated in his mind with Latin.
He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying
He studied Latin like the violin
Because he liked it—that an argument!
He said he couldn't make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong—
Which showed how much good school had ever done him.
He wanted to go over that. But most of all
He thinks if he could have another chance
To teach him how to build a load of hay—'

'I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment.
He bundles every forkful in its place,
And tags and numbers it for future reference,
So he can find and easily dislodge it
In the unloading. Silas does that well.
He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.
You never see him standing on the hay
He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself.'

'He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be
Some good perhaps to someone in the world.
He hates to see a boy the fool of books.
Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
And nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different.’

Part of a moon was falling down the west,
Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it
And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
As if she played unheard some tenderness
That wrought on him beside her in the night.
‘Warren,’ she said, ‘he has come home to die:
You needn’t be afraid he’ll leave you this time.’

‘Home,’ he mocked gently.

‘Yes, what else but home?
It all depends on what you mean by home.
Of course he’s nothing to us, any more
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.’

‘Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.’

‘I should have called it
Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.’

Warren leaned out and took a step or two,
Picked up a little stick, and brought it back
And broke it in his hand and tossed it by.
‘Silas has better claim on us you think
Than on his brother? Thirteen little miles
As the road winds would bring him to his door.
Silas has walked that far no doubt today.
Why didn’t he go there? His brother’s rich,
A somebody—director in the bank.’
'He never told us that.'

'We know it though.'

'I think his brother ought to help, of course. I'll see to that if there is need. He ought of right To take him in, and might be willing to— He may be better than appearances. But have some pity on Silas. Do you think If he'd had any pride in claiming kin Or anything he looked for from his brother, He'd keep so still about him all this time?'

'I wonder what's between them.'

'I can tell you. Silas is what he is—we wouldn't mind him— But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide. He never did a thing so very bad. He don't know why he isn't quite as good As anyone. Worthless though he is, He won't be made ashamed to please his brother.'

'I can't think Si ever hurt anyone.'

'No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back. He wouldn't let me put him on the lounge. You must go in and see what you can do. I made the bed up for him there tonight. You'll be surprised at him—how much he's broken. His working days are done; I'm sure of it.'

'I'd not be in a hurry to say that.'

'I haven't been. Go, look, see for yourself. But, Warren, please remember how it is: He's come to help you ditch the meadow. He has a plan. You mustn't laugh at him. He may not speak of it, and then he may.
I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud
Will hit or miss the moon.'

   It hit the moon.
Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.

Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her,
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.

'Warren,' she questioned.

   'Dead,' was all he answered.
Home Burial (1914)

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
She took a doubtful step and then undid it
To raise herself and look again. He spoke
Advancing toward her: ‘What is it you see
From up there always—for I want to know.’
She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,
And her face changed from terrified to dull.
He said to gain time: ‘What is it you see,’
Mounting until she cowered under him.
‘I will find out now—you must tell me, dear.’
She, in her place, refused him any help
With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
She let him look, sure that he wouldn’t see,
Blind creature; and awhile he didn’t see.
But at last he murmured, ‘Oh,’ and again, ‘Oh.’

‘What is it—what?’ she said.

‘Just that I see.’

‘You don’t,’ she challenged. ‘Tell me what it is.’

‘The wonder is I didn’t see at once.
I never noticed it from here before.
I must be wonted to it—that’s the reason.
The little graveyard where my people are!
So small the window frames the whole of it.
Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?
There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
Broad-shouldereded little slabs there in the sunlight
On the sidehill. We haven’t to mind those.
But I understand: it is not the stones,
But the child’s mound—’

‘Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t,’ she cried.
She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm
That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;
And turned on him with such a daunting look,
He said twice over before he knew himself:
‘Can’t a man speak of his own child he’s lost?’

‘Not you! Oh, where’s my hat? Oh, I don’t need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air.
I don’t know rightly whether any man can.’

‘Amy! Don’t go to someone else this time.
Listen to me. I won’t come down the stairs.’
He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.
‘There’s something I should like to ask you, dear.’

‘You don’t know how to ask it.’

‘Help me, then.’

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

‘My words are nearly always an offense.
I don’t know how to speak of anything
So as to please you. But I might be taught
I should suppose. I can’t say I see how.
A man must partly give up being a man
With women-folk. We could have some arrangement
By which I’d bind myself to keep hands off
Anything special you’re a-mind to name.
Though I don’t like such things ’twixt those that love.
Two that don’t love can’t live together without them.
But two that do can’t live together with them.’
She moved the latch a little. ‘Don’t—don’t go.
Don’t carry it to someone else this time.
Tell me about it if it’s something human.
Let me into your grief. I’m not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there
Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.
I do think, though, you overdo it a little.
What was it brought you up to think it the thing
To take your mother-loss of a first child
So inconsolably—in the face of love.
You’d think his memory might be satisfied—’

‘There you go sneering now!’

‘I'm not, I’m not!
You make me angry. I’ll come down to you.
God, what a woman! And it’s come to this,
A man can’t speak of his own child that’s dead.’

‘You can’t because you don’t know how to speak.
If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;
I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought, Who is that man? I didn’t know you.
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.
Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice
Out in the kitchen, and I don’t know why,
But I went near to see with my own eyes.
You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave
And talk about your everyday concerns.
You had stood the spade up against the wall
Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.’

‘I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.
I’m cursed. God, if I don’t believe I’m cursed.’

‘I can repeat the very words you were saying:
“Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.”
Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
What had how long it takes a birch to rot
To do with what was in the darkened parlor?
You couldn’t care! The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all.
No, from the time when one is sick to death,
One is alone, and he dies more alone.
Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand.
But the world’s evil. I won’t have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won’t, I won’t!’

‘There, you have said it all and you feel better.
You won’t go now. You’re crying. Close the door.
The heart’s gone out of it: why keep it up.
Amy! There’s someone coming down the road!’

‘You—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—
Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you—’

‘If—you—do!’ She was opening the door wider.
‘Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.
I’ll follow and bring you back by force. I will!’
The Black Cottage (1914)

We chanced in passing by that afternoon
To catch it in a sort of special picture
Among tar-banded ancient cherry trees,
Set well back from the road in rank lodged grass,
The little cottage we were speaking of,
A front with just a door between two windows,
Fresh painted by the shower a velvet black.
We paused, the minister and I, to look.
He made as if to hold it at arm’s length
Or put the leaves aside that framed it in.
“Pretty,” he said. “Come in. No one will care.”
The path was a vague parting in the grass
That led us to a weathered window-sill.
We pressed our faces to the pane. “You see,” he said,
“Everything’s as she left it when she died.
Her sons won’t sell the house or the things in it.
They say they mean to come and summer here
Where they were boys. They haven’t come this year.
They live so far away—one is out west—
It will be hard for them to keep their word.
Anyway they won’t have the place disturbed.”
A buttoned hair-cloth lounge spread scrolling arms
Under a crayon portrait on the wall
Done sadly from an old daguerreotype.
“That was the father as he went to war.
She always, when she talked about war,
Sooner or later came and leaned, half knelt
Against the lounge beside it, though I doubt
If such unlifelike lines kept power to stir
Anything in her after all the years.
He fell at Gettysburg or Fredericksburg.

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT

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Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
I ought to know—it makes a difference which:
Fredericksburg wasn’t Gettysburg, of course.
But what I’m getting to is how forsaken
A little cottage this has always seemed;
Since she went more than ever, but before—
I don’t mean altogether by the lives
That had gone out of it, the father first,
Then the two sons, till she was left alone.
(Nothing could draw her after those two sons.
She valued the considerate neglect
She had at some cost taught them after years.)
I mean by the world’s having passed it by—
As we almost got by this afternoon.
It always seems to me a sort of mark
To measure how far fifty years have brought us.
Why not sit down if you are in no haste?
These doorsteps seldom have a visitor.
The warping boards pull out their own old nails
With none to tread and put them in their place.
She had her own idea of things, the old lady.
And she liked talk. She had seen Garrison
And Whittier, and had her story of them.
One wasn’t long in learning that she thought
Whatever else the Civil War was for
It wasn’t just to keep the States together,
Nor just to free the slaves, though it did both.
She wouldn’t have believed those ends enough
To have given outright for them all she gave.
Her giving somehow touched the principle
That all men are created free and equal.
And to hear her quaint phrases—so removed
From the world’s view to-day of all those things.
That’s a hard mystery of Jefferson’s.
What did he mean? Of course the easy way
Is to decide it simply isn’t true.
It may not be. I heard a fellow say so.
But never mind, the Welshman got it planted
Where it will trouble us a thousand years.
Each age will have to reconsider it.
You couldn’t tell her what the West was saying,
And what the South to her serene belief.
She had some art of hearing and yet not
Hearing the latter wisdom of the world.
White was the only race she ever knew.
Black she had scarcely seen, and yellow never.
But how could they be made so very unlike
By the same hand working in the same stuff?
She had supposed the war decided that.
What are you going to do with such a person?
Strange how such innocence gets its own way.
I shouldn’t be surprised if in this world
It were the force that would at last prevail.
Do you know but for her there was a time
When to please younger members of the church,
Or rather say non-members in the church,
Whom we all have to think of nowadays,
I would have changed the Creed a very little?
Not that she ever had to ask me not to;
It never got so far as that; but the bare thought
Of her old tremulous bonnet in the pew,
And of her half asleep was too much for me.
Why, I might wake her up and startle her.
It was the words ‘descended into Hades’
That seemed too pagan to our liberal youth.
You know they suffered from a general onslaught.
And well, if they weren’t true why keep right on
Saying them like the heathen? We could drop them.  
Only—there was the bonnet in the pew.  
Such a phrase couldn’t have meant much to her.  
But suppose she had missed it from the Creed  
As a child misses the unsaid Good-night,  
And falls asleep with heartache—how should I feel?  
I’m just as glad she made me keep hands off,  
For, dear me, why abandon a belief  
Merely because it ceases to be true.  
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt  
It will turn true again, for so it goes.  
Most of the change we think we see in life  
Is due to truths being in and out of favour.  
As I sit here, and oftentimes, I wish  
I could be monarch of a desert land  
I could devote and dedicate forever  
To the truths we keep coming back and back to.  
So desert it would have to be, so walled  
By mountain ranges half in summer snow,  
No one would covet it or think it worth  
The pains of conquering to force change on.  
Scattered oases where men dwelt, but mostly  
Sand dunes held loosely in tamarisk  
Blown over and over themselves in idleness.  
Sand grains should sugar in the natal dew  
The babe born to the desert, the sand storm  
Retard mid-waste my cowering caravans—

“There are bees in this wall.” He struck the clapboards,  
Fierce heads looked out; small bodies pivoted.  
We rose to go. Sunset blazed on the windows.
After Apple-Picking (1914)

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.
Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear.
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound
Of load on load of apples coming in.
For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth.
One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.
The Wood-Pile (1914)

Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day,
I paused and said, 'I will turn back from here.
No, I will go on farther—and we shall see.'
The hard snow held me, save where now and then
One foot went through. The view was all in lines
Straight up and down of tall slim trees
Too much alike to mark or name a place by
So as to say for certain I was here
Or somewhere else: I was just far from home.
A small bird flew before me. He was careful
To put a tree between us when he lighted,
And say no word to tell me who he was
Who was so foolish as to think what he thought.
He thought that I was after him for a feather—
The white one in his tail; like one who takes
Everything said as personal to himself.
One flight out sideways would have undeceived him.
And then there was a pile of wood for which
I forgot him and let his little fear
Carry him off the way I might have gone,
Without so much as wishing him good-night.
He went behind it to make his last stand.
It was a cord of maple, cut and split
And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.
And not another like it could I see.
No runner tracks in this year's snow looped near it.
And it was older sure than this year's cutting,
Or even last year's or the year's before.
The wood was gray and the bark warping off it
And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT

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Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
What held it though on one side was a tree
Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,
These latter about to fall. I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.
The Road Not Taken (1916)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn 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,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT
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Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
**Birches** (1916)

When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay
As ice-storms do. Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust—
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
So low for long, they never right themselves:
You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.
But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm
I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows—
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.
One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left

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**Step One:** Annotate using #123SPLITT

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**Step Four:** Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
For him to conquer. He learned all there was
To learn about not launching out too soon
And so not carrying the tree away
Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.
So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.
I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.
The Cow in Apple Time (1916)

Something inspires the only cow of late
To make no more of a wall than an open gate,
And think no more of wall-builders than fools.
Her face is flecked with pomace and she drools
A cider syrup. Having tasted fruit,
She scores a pasture withering to the root.
She runs from tree to tree where lie and sweeten
The windfalls spiked with stubble and worm-eaten.
She leaves them bitten when she has to fly.
She bellows on a knoll against the sky.
Her udder shrivels and the milk goes dry.

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT
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Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
An Encounter (1916)

Once on the kind of day called “weather breeder,”
When the heat slowly hazes and the sun
By its own power seems to be undone,
I was half boring through, half climbing through
A swamp of cedar. Choked with oil of cedar
And scurf of plants, and weary and over-heated,
And sorry I ever left the road I knew,
I paused and rested on a sort of hook
That had me by the coat as good as seated,
And since there was no other way to look,
Looked up toward heaven, and there against the blue,
Stood over me a resurrected tree,
A tree that had been down and raised again—
A barkless spectre. He had halted too,
As if for fear of treading upon me.
I saw the strange position of his hands—
Up at his shoulders, dragging yellow strands
Of wire with something in it from men to men.
“You here?” I said. “Where aren’t you nowadays
And what’s the news you carry—if you know?
And tell me where you’re off for—Montreal?
Me? I’m not off for anywhere at all.
Sometimes I wander out of beaten ways
Half looking for the orchid Calypso.”

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT
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Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
“Out, Out—”

The buzz saw snarled and ratted in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and ratted, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside him in her apron
To tell them 'Supper.' At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. 'Don't let him cut my hand off—
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!'
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT

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Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
The Sound of Trees (1916)

I wonder about the trees.
Why do we wish to bear
Forever the noise of these
More than another noise
So close to our dwelling place?
We suffer them by the day
Till we lose all measure of pace,
And fixity in our joys,
And acquire a listening air.
They are that that talks of going
But never gets away;
And that talks no less for knowing,
As it grows wiser and older,
That now it means to stay.
My feet tug at the floor
And my head sways to my shoulder
Sometimes when I watch trees sway,
From the window or the door.
I shall set forth for somewhere,
I shall make the reckless choice
Some day when they are in voice
And tossing so as to scare
The white clouds over them on.
I shall have less to say,
But I shall be gone.

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT

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Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
The Ax-Helve (1923)

I've known ere now an interfering branch
Of alder catch my lifted ax behind me.
But that was in the woods, to hold my hand
From striking at another alder's roots,
And that was, as I say, an alder branch.
This was a man, Baptiste, who stole one day
Behind me on the snow in my own yard
Where I was working at the chopping-block,
And cutting nothing not cut down already.
He caught my ax expertly on the rise,
When all my strength put forth was in his favor,
Held it a moment where it was, to calm me,
Then took it from me—and I let him take it.
I didn't know him well enough to know
What it was all about. There might be something
He had in mind to say to a bad neighbor
He might prefer to say to him disarmed.
But all he had to tell me in French-English
Was what he thought of—not me, but my ax,
Me only as I took my ax to heart.
It was the bad ax-helve someone had sold me—
"Made on machine," he said, plowing the grain
With a thick thumbnail to show how it ran
Across the handle's long-drawn serpentine—
Like the two strokes across a dollar sign.
"You give her one good crack, she's snap raght off.
Den where's your hax-ead flying t'rough de hair?"
Admitted; and yet, what was that to him?

"Come on my house and I put you one in
What's las' awhile—good hick'ry what's grow crooked.

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT

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Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
De second growt' I cut myself—tough, tough!"

Something to sell? That wasn't how it sounded.

"Den when you say you come? It's cost you nothing. Tonaght?"

As well tonight as any night.

Beyond an over-warmth of kitchen stove
My welcome differed from no other welcome.
Baptiste knew best why I was where I was.
So long as he would leave enough unsaid,
I shouldn't mind his being overjoyed
(If overjoyed he was) at having got me
Where I must judge if what he knew about an ax
That not everybody else knew was to count
For nothing in the measure of a neighbor.
Hard if, though cast away for life 'mid Yankees,
A Frenchman couldn't get his human rating!

Mrs. Baptiste came in and rocked a chair
That had as many motions as the world:
One back and forward, in and out of shadow,
That got her nowhere; one more gradual,
Sideways, that would have run her on the stove
In time, had she not realized her danger
And caught herself up bodily, chair and all,
And set herself back where she started from.
“She ain't spick too much Henglish—dat's too bad.”
I was afraid, in brightening first on me,
Then on Baptiste, as if she understood
What passed between us, she was only feigning.
Baptiste was anxious for her; but no more
Than for himself, so placed he couldn't hope
To keep his bargain of the morning with me
In time to keep me from suspecting him
Of really never having meant to keep it.

Needlessly soon he had his ax-helves out,
A quiverful to choose from, since he wished me
To have the best he had, or had to spare—
Not for me to ask which, when what he took
Had beauties he had to point me out at length
To insure their not being wasted on me.
He liked to have it slender as a whipstock,
Free from the least knot, equal to the strain
Of bending like a sword across the knee.
He showed me that the lines of a good helve
Were native to the grain before the knife
Expressed them, and its curves were no false curves
Put on it from without. And there its strength lay
For the hard work. He chafed its long white body
From end to end with his rough hand shut round it.
He tried it at the eye-hole in the ax-head.
"Hahn, hahn," he mused, "don't need much taking down."
Baptiste knew how to make a short job long
For love of it, and yet not waste time either.

Do you know, what we talked about was knowledge?
Baptiste on his defense about the children
He kept from school, or did his best to keep—
Whatever school and children and our doubts
Of laid-on education had to do
With the curves of his ax-helves and his having
Used these unscrupulously to bring me
To see for once the inside of his house.
Was I desired in friendship, partly as someone
To leave it to, whether the right to hold
Such doubts of education should depend
Upon the education of those who held them?

But now he brushed the shavings from his knee
And stood the ax there on its horse's hoof,
Erect, but not without its waves, as when
The snake stood up for evil in the Garden,—
Top-heavy with a heanness his short,
Thick hand made light of, steel-blue chin drawn down
And in a little—a French touch in that.
Baptiste drew back and squinted at it, pleased;
“See how she's cock her head!”
Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening (1923)

Whose woods these are I think I know. 
His house is in the village though; 
He will not see me stopping here 
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer 
To stop without a farmhouse near 
Between the woods and frozen lake 
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake 
To ask if there is some mistake. 
The only other sound’s the sweep 
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep, 
But I have promises to keep, 
And miles to go before I sleep, 
And miles to go before I sleep.

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT

Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
Two Look at Two (1923)

Love and forgetting might have carried them
A little further up the mountain side
With night so near, but not much further up.
They must have halted soon in any case
With thoughts of a path back, how rough it was
With rock and washout, and unsafe in darkness;
When they were halted by a tumbled wall
With barbed-wire binding. They stood facing this,
Spending what onward impulse they still had
In One last look the way they must not go,
On up the failing path, where, if a stone
Or earthslide moved at night, it moved itself;
No footstep moved it. 'This is all,' they sighed,
Good-night to woods.' But not so; there was more.
A doe from round a spruce stood looking at them
Across the wall, as near the wall as they.
She saw them in their field, they her in hers.
The difficulty of seeing what stood still,
Like some up-ended boulder split in two,
Was in her clouded eyes; they saw no fear there.
She seemed to think that two thus they were safe.
Then, as if they were something that, though strange,
She could not trouble her mind with too long,
She sighed and passed unscared along the wall.
'This, then, is all. What more is there to ask?'
But no, not yet. A snort to bid them wait.
A buck from round the spruce stood looking at them
Across the wall as near the wall as they.
This was an antlered buck of lusty nostril,
Not the same doe come back into her place.
He viewed them quizzically with jerks of head,
As if to ask, 'Why don't you make some motion?
Or give some sign of life? Because you can't.
I doubt if you're as living as you look."
Thus till he had them almost feeling dared
To stretch a proffering hand -- and a spell-breaking.
Then he too passed unscared along the wall.
Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.
'This must be all.' It was all. Still they stood,
A great wave from it going over them,
As if the earth in one unlooked-for favour
Had made them certain earth returned their love.
Gathering Leaves (1923)

Spades take up leaves
No better than spoons,
And bags full of leaves
Are light as balloons.

I make a great noise
Of rustling all day
Like rabbit and deer
Running away.

But the mountains I raise
Elude my embrace,
Flowing over my arms
And into my face.

I may load and unload
Again and again
Till I fill the whole shed,
And what have I then?

Next to nothing for weight,
And since they grew duller
From contact with earth,
Next to nothing for color.

Next to nothing for use.
But a crop is a crop,
And who's to say where
The harvest shall stop?

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT
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Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
A Soldier (1928)

He is that fallen lance that lies as hurled,
That lies unlifted now, come dew, come rust,
But still lies pointed as it ploughed the dust.
If we who sight along it round the world,
See nothing worthy to have been its mark,
It is because like men we look too near,
Forgetting that as fitted to the sphere,
Our missiles always make too short an arc.
They fall, they rip the grass, they intersect
The curve of earth, and striking, break their own;
They make us cringe for metal-point on stone.
But this we know, the obstacle that checked
And tripped the body, shot the spirit on
Further than target ever showed or shone.

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT

Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
There Are Roughly Zones (1936)

We sit indoors and talk of the cold outside.
And every gust that gathers strength and heaves
Is a threat to the house. But the house has long been tried.
We think of the tree. If it never again has leaves,
We'll know, we say, that this was the night it died.
It is very far north, we admit, to have brought the peach.
What comes over a man, is it soul or mind—
That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?
You would say his ambition was to extend the reach
Clear to the Arctic of every living kind.
Why is his nature forever so hard to teach
That though there is no fixed line between wrong and right,
There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed?
There is nothing much we can do for the tree tonight,
But we can't help feeling more than a little betrayed
That the northwest wind should rise to such a height
Just when the cold went down so many below.
The tree has no leaves and may never have them again.
We must wait till some months hence in the spring to know.
But if it is destined never again to grow,
It can blame this limitless trait in the hearts of men.

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT

Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
An Unstamped Letter in Our Rural Letter Box (1947)

Last night your watchdog barked all night,
So once you rose and lit the light.
It wasn’t someone at your locks.
No, in your rural letter box
I leave this note without a stamp
To tell you it was just a tramp
Who used your pasture for a camp.
There, pointed like the pip of spades,
The young spruce made a suite of glades
So regular that in the dark
The place was like a city park.
There I elected to demur
Beneath a low-slung juniper
That like a blanket on my chin
Kept some dew out and some heat in,
Yet left me freely face to face
All night with universal space.
It may have been at two o’clock
That under me a point of rock
Developed in the grass and fern,
And as I woke afraid to turn
Or so much as uncross my feet,
Lest having wasted precious heat
I never should again be warmed,
The largest firedrop ever formed
From two stars’ having coalesced
Went streaking molten down the west.
And then your tramp astrologer
From see this undoubted stir
In Heaven’s firm-set firmament,
Himself had the equivalent,

Step One: Annotate using #123SPLITT

Step Two: Draw the poem

Step Three: Paraphrase poem

Step Four: Connect to other poems by topic/theme (include page numbers)
Only within. Inside the brain
Two memories that long had lain
Now quivered toward each other, lipped
Together, and together slipped,
And for a moment all was plain
That men have thught about in vain.
Please, my involuntary host,
Forgive me if I seem to boast.
'Tis possible you may have seen,
Albeit through a rusty screen,
The same sign Heaven showed your guest.
Each knows his own discernment best.
You have had your advantages.
Things must have happened to you, yes,
And have occurred to you no doubt,
If not indeed from sleeping out,
Then from the work you went about
In farming well—or pretty well.
And it is partly to compel
Myself, in forma pauperis,
To say as much as I wrote you this.