

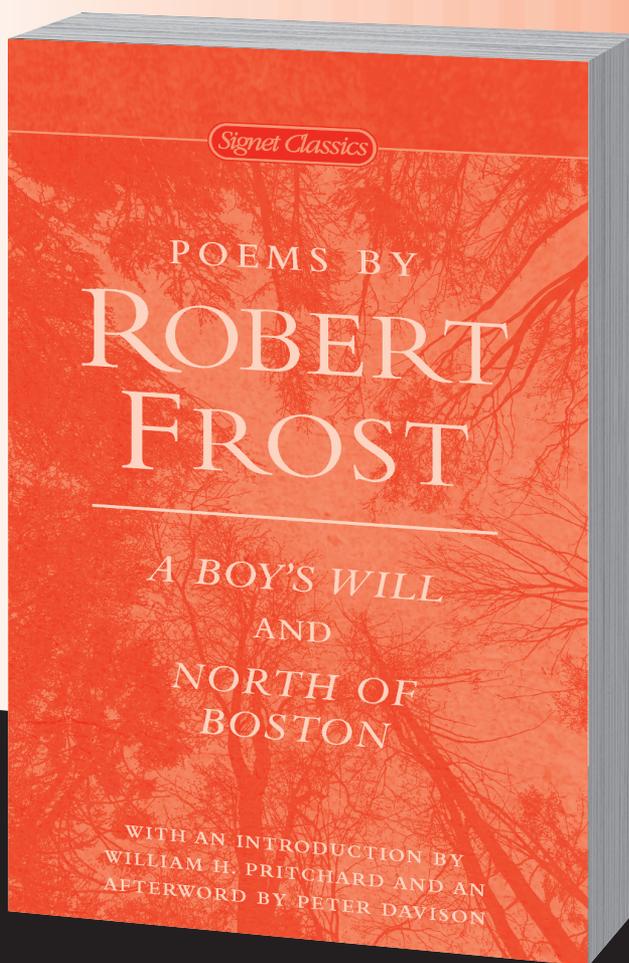
TEACHER'S GUIDE

*Signet Classics*

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE SIGNET CLASSICS EDITION OF

# POEMS BY ROBERT FROST

A BOY'S WILL AND NORTH OF BOSTON



BY **JAMES E. McGLINN**

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## INTRODUCTION

Robert Frost is one of the most widely celebrated of American poets. During his lifetime he received four Pulitzer Prizes for his poetry, and his works are still widely anthologized in collections of American poetry and school literature textbooks. In the afterword to this volume, the poet Peter Davison says that for some time Americans “tended to regard Frost as the other bookend to match Norman Rockwell...whose work could be counted on to convey the values of traditional American country life” (p. 147). However, this conception does not account for the depth and complexity of even some of the most straightforward-seeming poems. Frost experienced times of intense hardship and grief in his personal life, and echoes of his grief and the wisdom he learned about the hard truths of life can be found in his poetry. Along with vivid images of American life and landscape, Frost's poetry also contains deep and sometimes enigmatic reflections on life and nature.

This volume of Frost's early poems presents a rich resource for readers. It comprises the first two published books of poetry and largely consists of poems centered in rural life in New England. *A Boy's Will* shows Frost's various uses of the lyric and traditional poetic forms, and *North of Boston* explores the use of blank verse in longer narrative poems to present reflections on human experience. Some of Frost's best known and loved poems are contained in these two books. For example, “Mowing,” “The Tuft of Flowers,” and “Reluctance” are in *A Boy's Will* and “Mending Wall,” “The Death of the Hired Man,” and “After Apple Picking” in *North of Boston*. Students will find many opportunities to explore, enjoy, and be challenged by the levels of meaning they find here. And in their explorations, students can learn about the elements of poetry—imagery, metaphor, rhyme, rhythm, diction—that Frost uniquely developed in his expression of “the sound of meaning.”

## BEFORE READING

### EXPLORING FROST'S LIFE

1. As mentioned by Peter Davison in the afterword to this volume, an excellent biography of Frost is *Into My Own: The English Years of Robert Frost 1912-1915* by John Evangelist Walsh. This work focuses on a period when Frost wrote some of his greatest poems and when *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston* were first published. It is useful in that it discusses the context of Frost's writing such poems as “Mending Wall” and also gives a more sympathetic portrait of Frost's character than the three-volume official biography by Lawrance Thompson.

If you can get several copies from your media center or local library, have students sign up in pairs to read specific chapters from this biography and report interesting points to the class, using a Power Point presentation. Alternately, as a class, students could build a timeline of significant personal and professional events in Frost's life as covered by this biography.

2. In addition to the printed works, there are a few useful biographical resources of Robert Frost online:

#### **Robert Frost Biography**

<http://www.biography.com/articles/Robert--Frost-9303322>

This essay reviews the major events of Frost's life and also discusses his work and significance as a poet.

#### **Modern American Poetry: Frost's Life and Career**

[http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/frost/life.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/life.htm)

This site contains two biographical summaries of Frost's life—one by William H. Pritchard, writer of the introduction to this volume which includes a commentary on Frost's work. The other is a slightly longer essay by Stanley Burnshaw which describes more of the personal details of Frost's life.

### Robert Frost Biographical Information

<http://www.ketzle.com/frost/frostbio.htm>

Based on a detailed chronology published in *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays* (1995), the chronology listed here includes interesting details about Frost's life in a brief format.

The online biographies can be used to give students an outline of Frost's life and provide a context for his poetry. Assign students to read one of the online sources and choose one event in Frost's life before 1915 when the Frost family moved back from England to America. Students could report on how the event they have chosen could have been instrumental in the development of the life of an artistic person. Ask the students to discuss their reasons for the choices they made.

### 3. Places and Poetry

<http://www.frostfriends.org/places.html> is a very interesting biographical sketch with links to pictorial essays illustrating the places where Frost lived including San Francisco, where Frost was born, and villages in New Hampshire, England, and Vermont.

Assign students in teams to visit one of the sites and capture images for a video presentation to the class about the place they studied and Frost's life there.

## ON TEACHING POETRY

According to Frost, teachers should not take a "pre-graduate school" approach to teaching poetry in high school and college. He believed that a scholarly approach to teaching poetry was not appropriate. He stated that the object of the poet is "to entertain you by making play—it's symbol and metaphor, see—by making play with things you already know" (Frost, 1954). It follows from this view of poetic composition, that the goal in teaching poetry is to enable students to "make play" in reading. In other words, teachers should encourage and facilitate students' delight in reading the poems. One approach to enabling personal enjoyment is through focusing on reader response first and

making study of the elements of poetry a secondary means to responding to the poetry.

Reader response gives students an opportunity to express their personal reactions to the poems through open-ended questions and journal writing. For example, the teacher can ask students to explore a group of poems and then choose the poem that they liked the best and tell why in a journal. Then, as a class, students can discuss their reactions and explore their choices and different reactions. In another reader response activity, students reread a poem several times, choosing what they believe are the most significant lines first and then after a second reading, the most significant word in the poem. Students share their ideas with a partner, again reflecting on how their responses are different and alike. Teachers who begin with reader response prompts encourage students to not only express their reactions but also to explore why they are reacting in a certain way. This type of open-ended discussion can build students' confidence in their ability to understand poetry and their willingness to take risks in expressing their ideas.

## READER RESPONSE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF CHOICE

Since reader response encourages choice, an approach to teaching the poetry in this volume is to focus on those poems that are most interesting to both you and your students. After handing out *Poems by Frost* to the students, take 10-15 minutes to have students survey *A Boy's Will* and individually identify three to five poems that they would like to read. Because the poems are generally shorter and more traditional in this book, it is appropriate to consider them before approaching those in *North of Boston*. Students can find their favorite poems initially by skimming through the section, reading the titles and a few of the lines of each. Have students list their choices to be handed in. With the whole class, discuss why students made the choices they did and share the titles of your favorite poems with the class. Using

the students' and your choices, you can now identify the corpus of poems for whole group reading and analysis.

Alternatively, you can lead students in this survey of the poetry, pointing out titles and themes as you go and then following this up with choosing those works that you and the students would like to study, based on their initial reactions.

## READER RESPONSE IN POETRY CIRCLES

Poetry circles can be created for students to engage in reading, responding to, and discussing self-selected poems. Poetry circles are designed to give students:

- the opportunity to choose poems they want to read
- control over the pace of the reading
- opportunities to respond to the poetry and discuss it in detail
- choices for how they will contribute to the discussion
- opportunity to develop skills of literary analysis
- time to develop independent thinking
- time to engage in creative group projects

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR STUDENTS:

### 1. Choose a group of poems

Independently identify poems you would like to read in *A Boy's Will* and in *North of Boston*. Choose at least three poems in *A Boy's Will* and at least one from *North of Boston*. You will be assigned to a group of four or five students based on the poems you choose.

### 2. Plan the Reading

When your group meets for the first time, decide how members want to read and discuss the poems (independently, in pairs, groups, silently, aloud) and the pace of the reading (how many poems per day). Your teacher will give you a deadline for completion of the selections and the projects

designed to extend your background knowledge and show your responses to the reading.

### 3. Choose roles

Choose roles for each member of your group: Discussion Director (develops questions for the group discussion), Literary Luminary (chooses several key lines of the poems being discussed to read aloud to the group), Investigator (looks up background information on any topic related to the poetry, identifies unfamiliar terms or vocabulary words), Travel Tracer (describes where the action takes place—this will be useful especially in the longer poems), Connector (makes connections between students' experiences and the themes in the poems), Poetics Expert (leads the analysis of form, meter, and rhyme scheme), Summarizer (prepares a brief summary of the day's reading and discussion), and Illustrator (sketches or finds images on the internet or in magazines related to the poetry). Since most groups will be no larger than five students, some of the roles, suggested by these labels, can be combined. The teacher will explain the role of each group member. Your group will be counting on you to contribute to the group's effort.

### 4. Set goals

During each group meeting, students need to accomplish the following:

- A. Discuss the poems thoroughly, using questions prepared by the Discussion Director and information on the poetry presented by the Literary Luminary, Investigator, Travel Tracer, Connector, and Poetics Expert. Explore and discuss symbolic or metaphorical meanings as appropriate.
- B. Keep a journal recording the new vocabulary related to the poetry and the poetic elements discussed.
- C. Work on a creative project.

**(Note:** The teacher can assign one of the following activities: plan a Reader's Theatre presentation of one of the poems to the class or to another poetry circle; write a poem, imitating the subject matter, structure, meter,

or rhyme scheme of one of Frost's poems. There are more suggestions in After Reading Activities.)

### 5. Evaluate

As a group, assess the work of the group and its members. How effectively did group members work together? Did you keep to your schedule? What can you do to improve the quality of your poetry circle?

## POETIC FORM AND STRUCTURE IN FROST'S POETRY

In addition to starting out with reader response activities, teachers can review and build students' background knowledge of poetic form. The tutorial on poetics provided by the Friends of Robert Frost (<http://www.frostfriends.org/tutorial-poetics.html>) has a very useful approach to analyzing the form and structure of Frost's poetry. It identifies three main forms used by Frost: lyric, dramatic, and narrative. It also discusses the structure of the forms used by Frost, dividing these into stanzaic form (referring to the number of lines in the stanzas), fixed form (including the sonnet and blank verse), and continuous form (not broken into stanzas). Students can be directed to this site either individually or in pairs to learn about the definitions of form and structure and to see examples in Frost's poetry.

Another site, "About the Sonnet" <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/sonnet.htm>, gives a clear definition of the sonnet and other elements like lyric, pentameter, and rhyme scheme.

After studying these sites and discussing with the class the various forms and structures Frost used, students can create a word wall or visual maps, called graphic organizers or thinking maps, of poetic terms with clear definitions. These maps can be displayed around the classroom so students can apply these concepts when analyzing and discussing individual poems.

## POETIC DEVICES

Robert Frost had an ear for the music in poetry and was a master of poetical structure and devices to create this music. In order to enable students to better respond to his poetry, have them work in groups to find and present examples of Frost's use of sound. In a computer lab setting, assign groups of students to study different sections of "The Poetics of Robert Frost: Sound Devices" at: <http://www.frostfriends.org/sounddevices.html>

The sections include: Assonance, Consonance, Alliteration, Rhyme, and Tone.

After students have understood the concept assigned, have them explain their concept to the class giving examples from Frost's poetry. At least some of their examples should be beyond those presented on the site.

## METER

Since Frost uses natural, colloquial language in his poems; students can rely on the meaning they understand in the lines of poetry to guide them in their expressive reading of the poetry. However, it may prove useful for students also to scan the meter of the poems while preparing to read the poems out loud. "The Poetics of Robert Frost: Meter" at: <http://www.frostfriends.org/meter.html> gives examples of the various uses of meter by Frost and also gives an example of how to scan a poem using "Birches."

In analyzing the meter, students will need to be able to recognize the different types of metrical feet used by Frost in his metered lines. An additional site defining the different types of metrical feet is "Examples of Iamb, Trochees, Spondees, Dactyls, and Anapests" <http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Examples%20of%20iamb.pdf>

Teachers can use these sites in their teaching of the concepts of meter and feet or else assign students to gather definitions and examples from the sites. Again students can create thinking maps that display definitions and examples to post around the classroom. These

thinking maps will provide a ready resource to consult when reading Frost's poetry.

During reading students can compare poems to see how the meter of a poem conveys or reflects meaning. For example, have students compare the meaning, tone, and meter of "Into My Own" with "Flower-Gathering." Ask them to identify how the differences between the poems are emphasized by the different meter used in each?

## SOUND OF SENSE

In the introduction to this volume, William Pritchard refers to Frost's use of the "sound of sense" in his poetry, and quotes how Frost considered "Mowing" to "come so near what I long to get that I almost despair of coming nearer" (p. 4). Acquaint students with the concept of "sound of sense" or the reciting of sentences in poetry in a way that communicates their meaning through expressive intonation. First have students silently read "Mowing" and brainstorm their initial ideas about its meaning. Then have them listen to Frost's recitation of the poem at: "Robert Frost Out Loud" <http://robertfrostoutloud.com/Mowing.html>. Ask them in what ways they think Frost's intonation conveys the meaning of the poem? Have students practice reading the poem out loud in pairs similarly emphasizing the meaning in their reading. Then have students in groups read and discuss the meaning of "Storm Fear." Based on their understanding of the poem, have them

practice reading the poem aloud to emphasize the meaning. Volunteers can present their reading to the class and have the class discuss which reading best captures the meaning of the poem and why.

## LEVELS OF DICTION

As William Pritchard states in the introduction, Frost wrote the poems in *North of Boston* in a "different cast and style" than in *A Boy's Will*. In the latter book, Frost "dropped to an everyday level of diction that even Wordsworth kept above" (p. 7). In some of the poems he realistically captures the speech of the rural New Englander, and he also breaks from colloquial to more poetic speech at heightened moments in the narratives. In order to enable students to be sensitive to the levels of diction that Frost uses, have them expressively read in small groups "The Death of the Hired Man," and listen for the point where the poem uses a more elevated form of language. Ask students to discuss why the change in language occurs where it does. "Home Burial" and "After Apple Picking" are other poems that are very appropriate for students to analyze for the change of tone and diction with meaning.

For a clear contrast between elevated and colloquial speech, have students contrast the formal language in "My Butterfly" (the first poem Frost published) with a poem such as "Blueberries" which maintains a strict poetic structure despite the colloquial voice.

## DURING READING ACTIVITIES

### MODELING DISCUSSION OF FROST'S POETRY USING LEVELS OF QUESTIONS

Depending on the ability of your students, it may be best to begin with whole class discussions of some of Frost's more accessible poems to model how students can approach them when they read and respond on their own and in groups.

The general reader-response approach will be to elicit students' first impressions and the literal meaning in the poems, before discussing the deeper levels of meaning and the ways the poet expresses this meaning through figurative language and other techniques. In order to hear the music in Frost's poetry, a good way to start is to read the poem out loud a couple of times and then silently. The teacher might first read the poem aloud, then call on a stu-

dent to read it or ask students to read the poem to a partner, and then ask the students to read the poem silently, identifying a key word or line and journaling about why they think it is significant. Following is a model of the types of questions that can be used to discuss first each stanza and then the whole poem, after the initial reader response discussion.

### **“INTO MY OWN”**

- What does the poet say in the first stanza? What else does he say?
- What images do you see or hear?
- What tone is set in this first stanza? How is this tone conveyed?

After reading and discussing each stanza, ask:

- What change referred to in the last stanza would the person undergo?
- Why do you think that this experience might lead to this change?
- What do you think is the overall thought or idea the poet wants to convey?
- How might this poem be interpreted at a symbolic or metaphorical level?
- Is there anything in your personal experience that connects with the theme or ideas in this poem?

After this initial discussion of meaning, ask students to reflect on the impact of sound and meter in the poem:

- What is the rhyme scheme of the poem?
- What is the meter?
- What effect does the regularity of the form in this poem have on you?

By discussing this poem in this manner, you have modeled a questioning approach which begins with readers' personal responses and then leads into analysis for meaning. The poetic style of the poem is then analyzed to see how it helps to convey the meaning and the overall effect of the poem. Discuss with students the steps in the process you have followed and encourage them to follow a

similar process when responding to poems individually or in their poetry circles. Students should first read the poem out loud and silently, discuss the surface meaning of each stanza, discuss the overall meaning or theme, discuss possible metaphorical meanings if appropriate, find personal connections, and then consider the elements of the poet's style in conveying the meaning of the poem.

### **THEMATIC APPROACHES TO FROST'S POEMS**

Although Frost's poems depict the New England village and farmland and the characters indigenous to this setting, the themes and reflections expressed in these poems have universal interest and relevance. The poems in *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston* can be grouped according to general topics, with individual poems expressing different points of view and insights. The activities provided here can be used as teachers lead students as a whole class or in small groups. Poems addressing a similar topic are listed together, though some of the poems are covered in more than one section. Discussion questions are included for each of the poems. These can be used as support for students as they develop their abilities at analysis following a reader response approach. Once students become confident and insightful in their personal responses to the poetry, these questions might be made available only as a backup for students to use as needed. Look for discussion questions at the first listing of the poem.

### **THE JOURNEY**

**From *A Boy's Will*: “Into My Own,” “A Late Walk,” and “Reluctance”**

**From *North of Boston*: “The Wood-Pile,” and “Good Hours”**

Frost uses the journey as a metaphor for the significant issues that individuals face in their lives, and in some of his poems, the image of the journey seems to reflect his own personal crises. For example, at a difficult turning

point in his life, Frost journeyed to The Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia. Have students read about this journey at: “Robert Frost in the Dismal Swamp” [http://www.literarytraveler.com/literary\\_articles/robert\\_frost\\_dismal\\_swamp.aspx](http://www.literarytraveler.com/literary_articles/robert_frost_dismal_swamp.aspx)

For a vivid description of the swamp, have students read a sight seer’s journal at: “Swamp in a Quagmire” [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1016/is\\_4\\_106/ai\\_67547037/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1016/is_4_106/ai_67547037/)

Show students an image of a road like the one Frost took into the swamp at: “Great Dismal Swamp Road” <http://www.pbace.com/tmurray74/image/84401122>

Ask students to discuss Frost’s possible motivation for journeying into the swamp. What was he seeking? What might happen to him from this experience? Then ask students to tell about individual journeys they have taken which have been meaningful for them. How did the journey change them? Did they learn anything on the journey? What did they learn about themselves?

Have students read the cluster of poems which reference different kinds of journeys. Ask them to discuss in small groups or lead a discussion in class and ask:

- What happens in each of the poems?
- What is the journey?
- What is the insight gained from the journey?
- Which poem seems most appropriate to Frost’s experience in The Great Dismal Swamp?

Following are additional questions for discussion on each of the poems.

### “A Late Walk”

- What does the speaker see on his late walk?
- What is the speaker’s mood?
- How does his mood change at the end of the poem?
- What might be the significance of the faded blue of the flower?

### “Reluctance”

- Where has the speaker journeyed?
- How are his heart and feet in conflict?
- What is the meaning of the last stanza—that it is good to go with the drift of things or not?

### “The Woodpile”

- Why does the speaker pause in the frozen swamp land?
- Why does he go on?
- How does he personify the small bird?
- Describe the image of the woodpile.
- Why would someone work so hard at chopping and stacking wood and leave it to decay?
- What metaphorical meanings are suggested by this journey to the swamp, the bird, and the woodpile?

### “Good Hours”

- What does the speaker see and hear on the way out of town?
- How far does the poet go, and why might he repent?
- What does the speaker see and feel on the way back?
- What metaphorical meanings are suggested in this poem?

## ROMANTIC LOVE

*From A Boy’s Will: “Love and a Question,” “A Late Walk,” “Wind and Window Flower,” “Flower Gathering,” “A Dream Pang,” and “A Line-Storm Song”*

*From North of Boston: “The Generations of Men”*

In this group of poems, Frost explores the emotions of the romantic lover whose yearning for love is largely unfulfilled and is reflected in the natural setting. To begin discussion of Frost’s various reflections on romantic love, show the picture of the painting “Lovers” by

the 19th century painter, Pál Szinyei Merse, at [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Szinyei\\_Merse,\\_P%C3%A1l\\_-\\_Lovers\\_\(1869\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Szinyei_Merse,_P%C3%A1l_-_Lovers_(1869).jpg)

Ask students: What do you see in this painting? Describe the figure of the man. Describe the woman. Describe the landscape. What is the relationship of the man to the woman? What is the overall effect of this picture? Does the landscape reflect the emotion evoked by the lovers? How does it do this? Or how does it suggest a different emotion?

Have students read the biographical sketch about Frost by Stanley Burnshaw at [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/frost/life.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/life.htm) regarding the events leading up to his marriage to his high school sweetheart, Elinor White. Ask students how Frost responded to Elinor's refusal of marriage. What does this suggest about Frost's temperament? What sort of love poems do you think Frost might write given this temperament?

Following are additional questions for discussion of each of the poems on this topic.

### **"Love and a Question"**

- What is the underlying question asked by the stranger?
- What does the bridegroom want for his bride?
- How should the bridegroom respond to the stranger and why?
- At a deeper level, what might the stranger symbolize?
- What does the poet suggest about marriage?

### **"Wind and Window Flower"**

- What is the attraction of the winter wind to the flower?
- What might be the attraction of the flower to the wind?
- What might the poet be saying about love in this poem?

### **"Flower Gathering"**

- Why has the speaker left his lover?

- What is his lover's response when she sees his return?
- How might his lover feel upon the speaker's return?

### **"A Dream Pang"**

- What is the action in this poem?
- What does the girl who approaches the wood say in the dream? How does the speaker respond?
- What do the last two lines indicate actually happened between the boy and girl?

### **"A Line-Storm Song"**

- What are the images of nature in this poem?
- What has happened to the sounds of nature?
- What images does the poet evoke that are especially striking?
- What, if anything, is attractive about the idea of being in love in the rain?
- What is the analogy that the poet draws in the last stanza?
- What does the east wind represent for the speaker?
- How are these poems similar in meaning and how are they different?
- What are the different moods of romantic love that the poet expresses?

### **"The Generations of Men"**

- What did the governor proclaim?
- What marked the ancestral origin of the Stark family?
- What spoiled the gathering at the cellar hole?
- What happens between the two who meet there?
- In what ways is the young woman connected to the Stark family heritage?
- Why do the two joke that the girl may be mad?

- What do the two pretend to see?
- To what does the young man listen?
- What do the voices tell him to do?
- How is Granny's voice different?
- Why does the girl feel she must leave?
- How would you describe the relationship between the young man and woman at their parting?

## NATURE'S BEAUTY AND POWER

From *A Boy's Will*: "A Prayer in Spring," "Rose Pogonias," "Asking for Roses," "Waiting—Afield at Dusk," "Going for Water," "The Tuft of Flowers," and "October"

Many of Frost's poems have a natural setting, and in the poems included here, Frost looks directly at the beauty of the natural world. Begin discussion of this subject by showing the class the images in "Spring in New England by George W. Drew" at <http://americangallery.wordpress.com/category/drew-george-w/> or "Field of Flowers" at <http://www.johnharveyphoto.com/PanoramaRidge/FieldOfflowers.html>

Discuss: How are these pictures realistic? How are they idealized? How does nature have the power to inspire us? How can nature be frightening to us?

Ask students to write freely in their journals about a time they were outdoors in nature and felt inspired or frightened. Have students share their writing in pairs, and then call on a few students to share their writing with the class. Brainstorm a list of emotions inspired by nature and post this list for students to add to when discussing the poems on this subject.

To get students in the mood to read Frost's lyrical nature poetry, have them take a mental journey into nature through a guided imagery activity.

Dim the classroom lights and say in a calm, slow voice, loud enough for everyone to hear:

Relax, close your eyes, and breathe deeply, become aware of your breathing. You have left the turmoil and ugliness of the city, seeking peace within yourself. You go out to the countryside. You walk out at dusk into a field. You sit and relax and breathe deeply and gaze at the sights around you. What do you see? What do you hear? What odors do you smell? You let your mind wander—what do you think about? Hold this thought in your mind. Let this thought float away as if it is on a cloud. How do you feel? Hold on to this feeling for a while. Now open your eyes, and come back to the classroom.

After the guided imagery, ask for volunteers to answer:

Were you able to visualize a field? What kind of field was it? What was in the field? What did you see or hear or smell? What thoughts came to your mind? How did you feel?

Following are additional questions for discussion of each of the poems on this topic.

### "A Prayer in Spring"

- What is the speaker's prayer?
- What images do you see and hear in this poem?
- What might the last stanza mean?

### "Rose Pogonias"

- What does the meadow look like?
- Why are the speaker and the person with him bowing?
- What are the images you see here?
- What is the prayer in the last stanza?
- How does this poem connect with "A Prayer in the Spring"?

### "Waiting—Afield at Dusk"

- Where is the speaker?
- At what time of day is it?
- What are the images of moon and sun?
- What does the poet "dream" of?

- In what way is this a love poem?
- Why has the speaker come to this field?
- Why is the poem titled “Waiting”?  
For what is the speaker waiting?

### “Going for Water”

- What are the images in this poem?
- How might the water in the brook be like pearls? Like a silver blade?
- How do these images contrast with those in “A Prayer in Spring”?
- Besides going for water, what other reason has brought the speaker and the person with him on this journey?

### “The Tuft of Flowers”

- What happens in this poem?
- Why has the speaker come to the field?
- What does he think about being alone in the field?
- What does he see?
- What does the butterfly show him?
- How does this sight change his feeling about being alone?

### “October”

- What does the poet ask of the October morning?
- What is the mood of this poem?  
How does it contrast with the mood of “A Prayer in Spring”?

### “Storm Fear”

- In contrast to the previous nature poems discussed here, in this poem Frost suggests a menacing aspect of nature.
- How is the wind like a beast in this poem?
- What do those who are awake in the house during the storm think about?
- How does the speaker feel about his ability to survive the storm?
- How is this poem different from “Waiting—Afield at Dusk”?

## POETIC INSPIRATION

### From *A Boy's Will*: “To the Thawing Wind,” “In a Vale,” “Mowing,” “Pan with Us,” and “Reluctance”

In speaking about poetic inspiration, Frost observed that true poems begin tentatively “as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness” (Walsh, 1988, p. 126). For example, Frost wrote “Birches” while longing for home and reminiscing as he was “tramping the muddy yard at the Bungalow” sometime during his stay in England from 1912-1914. To get students thinking about poetic inspiration, ask about what inspires them when they write personally, for themselves. Discuss what might inspire a poet to write poetry?

Following are additional questions for discussion of each of the poems on this topic.

### “To the Thawing Wind”

- To what is the poet referring in line 2?
- In your own words identify the meaning of lines 3, 4, and 5.
- What is the literal meaning of the second half of the poem?
- What could be the poetic or symbolic meaning of the second half?
- Do you see any connections between this poem and your personal experience?

### “In a Vale”

- Discuss this poem stanza by stanza.
- Stanza 1: How might a fen ring? What could have given the speaker the impression of a trailing garment?
- Stanza 2: Where is the speaker? What is the time of day?
- Stanza 3: What do we learn about the speaker?
- Stanza 4: How might the bird and flower be “one and the same”?
- Stanza 5: Why were the speaker’s imaginative musings not in vain? How can the imagination enrich our life?

**“Mowing”**

- As in “In a Vale,” the speaker imagines hearing a voice. What does he guess the scythe may be whispering?
- What does he say that the scythe does not whisper about?
- Why is this distinction of what is said important to the speaker?
- What could the “facts” be that the speaker refers to in this poem?

**“Pan with Us”**

- What is the action in the first three stanzas?
- In the last three stanzas, why does Pan “toss his pipes”?
- What does Pan choose for his music now?
- What songs might Pan (or the poet) play?
- How does this poem reflect the ideas in “Mowing”?

**GRIEF/DEATH**

From *A Boy's Will*: “My November Guest,” “Stars,” “Spoils of the Dead,” and “The Trial by Existence”

From *North of Boston*: “The Death of the Hired Man,” and “Home Burial”

In the afterword to this volume, Peter Davison notes the sadness and turmoil Frost experienced in his personal life. Frost “lost two children to death in early childhood, another to insanity, another to death after childbirth, and still another (after the death of [his] wife, Elinor) to suicide” (pp. 145-146). Given the personal tragedies Frost experienced, it seems inevitable that a strain of grief and, perhaps, bitterness would run through his poetry. Review with the class one of the online biographical timelines such as “Robert Frost Biographical Information” <http://www.ketzle.com/frost/frostbio.htm>, mentioned earlier. Discuss the personal trials Frost faced in his life. Ask students how they expect such experiences might affect his poetry. Also, ask students to journal about a

personal grief they have had (or the grief of a person they know), and, if the atmosphere is conducive in the class, take some time to share their writings. These reflections may cause students to be open to the reflections on sorrow and death in Frost’s poetry.

Following are additional questions for discussion of each of the poems on this topic.

**“My November Guest”**

- In what “beauties” does the speaker’s “Sorrow” take pleasure?
- Why might the poet not be able to tell his “Sorrow” about the pleasure he takes in “bare November days”?

**“Stars”**

- What is the image of the first stanza?
- How might someone feel in such a landscape?
- In the second stanza, where do the stars go at dawn?
- How might this image apply to where the speaker is heading?
- In the third stanza, what is the simile the poet makes? What does this show about the speaker’s feeling about the stars?

**“Spoils of the Dead”**

- What is the action in this poem?
- What do the fairies do with the man’s jewelry?
- How does the speaker’s view of death differ from that of the fairies?
- How does the tone of the poem change from beginning to end?
- What might be an overall message of this poem?
- What connection do you see between this poem and “Stars”?

**“The Trial by Existence”**

This is one of Frost’s more complex and ambiguous poems and may be profitably assigned as a challenge to the more able

students. The focus of the discussion as always should elicit students' personal interpretations.

- What happens in this poem?
- Why are the souls gathering?
- What choice is given the souls waiting for birth?
- Why can the brave souls who make the choice not remember that they did choose?
- What is the effect of the trial by existence on the individual?
- What view of human existence is expressed in this poem?

After students have discussed this poem, an option is to assign them to read a critical interpretation such as "Frost, Schopenhauer, And 'The Trial By Existence'" at <http://personal.georgiasouthern.edu/~jpellegr/articles/frostarticle.html>

After noting key ideas in the critique, students can reread the poem for a deeper analysis.

### "The Death of the Hired Man"

- What is the scene of the first stanza?
- Why does Warren not want Silas back?
- Why did Silas leave during the last haying?
- How has Mary received Silas?
- What do Silas' remarks about Harold Wilson and his troubled feelings about Harold reveal about Silas?
- How are Warren and Mary different from each other?
- What does the poem reveal about their relationship?

### "Home Burial"

- What happens in the first stanza?
- Why hasn't the man noticed the view of the graveyard at the top of the stairs?

- How is the relationship between the man and woman revealed in their physical postures toward each other?
- Does the man want to share the woman's grief? How does he reveal his attitude about her grief?
- What does the woman find abhorrent in the man?
- What does she find abhorrent about death?
- What does the last stanza reveal about the relationship between the woman and the man?

## CHARACTER SKETCHES IN NORTH OF BOSTON

Frost dedicated this book to his wife Elinor, calling it "this book of people." These poems, for the most part, depart from the lyricism of the poems of *A Boy's Will*. Instead in *North of Boston*, Frost uses blank verse and colloquial speech in narrative, conversational poems as he depicts the attitudes and struggles of New England farm people. His character sketches of his subjects often reveal the effects of alienation and the loneliness of the life of the small farmer. Because so many of these poems consist of dialogue, it is especially important that they be read aloud with realistic expression. These poems often lend themselves to being read in parts, as with Reader's Theater. Following are suggested discussion questions for poems not already covered.

### "Mending Wall"

- What is the meaning of the first four lines? What makes the gaps in the stone wall?
- Why do hunters tear apart a wall?
- Why might the speaker consider that rebuilding the wall with his neighbor is "just another kind of out-door game"?
- In general, why might the saying that "Good fences make good neighbors" be true?

- Why does the speaker not think that the saying is true for his and his neighbor's wall?
- What is it that the speaker imagines does not love a wall?
- What does it tell us about the neighbor that he won't consider any other idea about whether to maintain the wall?
- What are the differences between the speaker and his neighbor?

### **"The Mountain"**

- What does the speaker see when he takes a walk at dawn?
- What is the image of the mountain as he speaks with the ox-cart driver?
- How does the speaker's imaginings about the mountain differ from the view of the driver?
- Why doesn't the driver want to climb the mountain?
- What is peculiar about the spring flowing from the top of the mountain, and what is the natural explanation for this?
- How does the diction of the driver differ from that of the speaker, and what does this suggest about their personal differences?
- How might this poem be interpreted metaphorically?

### **"A Hundred Collars"**

- In the first stanza, why does the scholar decide to spend the night in Woodsville Junction?
- Why does he consider his fellow boarder a brute?
- How are the two men different in physical appearance?
- From the scholar's actions and words, what do we discover about his character?
- How is the salesman's character different from the doctor's?

- How does the scholar reveal that he is a democrat only on principle?
- Which of these two characters do you find the more trustworthy and why?

### **"The Black Cottage"**

- What is the sequence of action in this poem?
- What has made the cottage walls look black?
- What does the interior of the cabin look like?
- Why does the cottage seem forsaken by the minister?
- How did the woman feel about the principle of equality?
- How does the minister feel about this principle?
- How was the woman innocent in the minister's eyes?
- What is the minister's view of "truth"?
- How is the last stanza different from the rest of the minister's monologue?

### **"Blueberries"**

- What is the image of the blueberries in the first stanza?
- Were the blueberries planted or wild?
- What kind of person is Loren?
- Do you think the speakers of the poem should compete with Loren and his family for the berries?
- How is the meaning of the couplet at the end of the poem appropriate?

### **"A Servant to Servants"**

- What does the speaker reveal about herself?
- Why do you think that she doesn't know how she feels about things in her life?
- What does Lake Willoughby represent to her?
- What is her husband, Len, like?

- What motivates Len?
- What motivates the speaker of the poem?
- How does the speaker feel about the pen in which her father kept her uncle?
- What does the speaker see that she must do in life?
- Why is the person who has come to camp so interesting to the speaker?
- Trace the change of subjects in the speaker's conversation. What does this reveal about her?
- How is the speaker's life similar to her mother's?
- What advice would you give the speaker?

### **"After Apple-Picking"**

- What is the sequence of images in this poem? What is the first thing we see? What next?
- What explains the magnified images the speaker sees while drifting off to sleep?
- Why has the speaker worked so hard at picking apples?
- Has the harvest of apples been fulfilling? What in the poem supports your interpretation?
- What will trouble the speaker's sleep? Why?
- How might this sleep be like the wood-chuck's sleep?
- How might you interpret this poem metaphorically? For what might apple-picking be a metaphor?
- What effect does the rhyming in this poem have on your response to it?

### **"The Code"**

- What is the setting in the first stanza?
- What images do you see?
- What has the "town-bred farmer" said?
- Why does the one helper head home?
- What has the farmer found out?

- Why does the other helper stay?
- What story does the helper tell?
- What caused the sense of dignity of Sanders to be hurt?
- Why didn't Sanders fire the field hand?
- What is the moral of the story for the town-bred farmer to learn?

### **"The Housekeeper"**

- What is the housekeeper doing when the speaker enters the house?
- What has been the relationship of Estelle and her mother to John?
- What effect has Estelle's leaving had on John?
- Why hasn't John married Estelle?
- Why has Estelle left John?
- What do Estelle and John have in common?
- Why does the speaker consider Estelle to be bad?
- Why does the mother call John a "dreadful fool"?
- What do we learn about the attitudes and values of the farmer and the two women?

### **"The Fear"**

- What is the action in this poem?
- What has the woman seen?
- What is she afraid of?
- What indicates that the woman has been afraid for a long while?
- What is Joel's response when the man on the road identifies himself?
- What happens at the end? Why does the lantern hit the ground?
- What has contributed to the woman's fears?

### **"The Self-Seeker"**

- What is the sequence of action in this poem?

- What has happened to the injured worker?
- What sort of mill has he been working in?
- What has the injured worker's avocation been?
- What can be inferred about Anne's love of wildflowers and her relationship to the injured worker?
- What is the attitude of the lawyer toward the worker?
- What is Willis' view of the agreement?
- Why is the worker so anxious to get the signing of the agreement over with?
- What does his gesture at the end of the poem convey?

## AFTER READING ACTIVITIES

Now that students have been immersed in Frost's poetry, they can return to specific poems or sets of poems to engage in a deeper analysis of Frost's themes and to relate Frost's poems to other poetry they have read. They can also engage in various creative activities, such as Reader's Theatre and writing their own poems modeled after Frost's style or themes.

### COMPARING FROST TO LONGFELLOW

The title of *A Boy's Will* alludes to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "My Lost Youth." Have students read Longfellow's poem at: **Representative Poetry Online: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)** <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/1335.html>

After discussing Longfellow's poem, ask students to compare and contrast its poetic structure, tone and meaning with Frost's "In a Vale." Alternatively, have students find a poem in *A Boy's Will* that reflects the meaning, meter, or rhyme scheme of one of Longfellow's stanzas, or is counter to these features of Longfellow's poem. Discuss with students which of Frost's poems resemble that of the romantic poet and which have a more realistic tone or perspective.

### ROBERT FROST ON SYMBOLISM

1. Frost discusses his use of symbolism in his letters as quoted in Monteiro (1988):

I should be sorry if a single one of my poems stopped with either of those things—stopped anywhere in fact. My poems—I should suppose everybody's poems—are all set to trip the reader head foremost into the boundless. Ever since infancy I have had the habit of leaving my blocks carts chairs and such like ordinaries where people would be pretty sure to fall forward over them in the dark. Forward, you understand, and in the dark. I may leave my toys in the wrong place and so in vain. It is my intention we are speaking of—my innate mischievousness. (*Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, p. 344)

After reading "Mending Wall," or "The Wood-Pile," ask students how these poems "trip the reader" into considering the deeper meanings suggested.

2. Frost also discusses the use of symbolism in his talks at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference at Middlebury College in Connecticut. In "Being Let in on Symbols" Frost discusses the value of metaphor and also that poetry should be understandable by the normal literate person who has grown up with figurative language and not just by scholars. Have students listen to or read the transcript of this

talk at: [http://middigital.middlebury.edu/local\\_files/robert\\_frost/lectures\\_readings/transcripts/1953\\_june\\_25.html](http://middigital.middlebury.edu/local_files/robert_frost/lectures_readings/transcripts/1953_june_25.html), and then ask them to discuss their own feelings when they find it difficult to understand poetry that they are reading. Discuss the importance of first getting the literal meaning as best they can by taking the poems line-by-line, looking up unfamiliar references, making connections with their own experience, and then discussing with others possible deeper or symbolic meaning in the poetry. “Into My Own” and “Stars” are good poems on which to practice this way of reading for deeper meaning.

## RESPONDING TO THE CRITICS

1. One of Frost’s contemporaries, the poet Amy Lowell, opines that *North of Boston* “is the epitome of a decaying New England.” Have students read the review and its comments about the various poems, and choosing one poem write a personal review that supports or refutes Lowell’s comment. Her review is at: **Review-a-Day—Poems by Robert Frost:** [A] *Boy’s Will* and *North of Boston* [http://www.powells.com/review/2001\\_05\\_17.html](http://www.powells.com/review/2001_05_17.html)

2. John F. Lynen in *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* (1960) published by Yale University Press (New Haven, CT) compares Frost to William Wordsworth and states that, unlike Wordsworth, “Frost views nature as essentially alien....he looks at nature across an impassable gulf.” Have students read “Nature and Pastoralism” at <http://www.frostfriends.org/FFL/Nature%20and%20Pastoralism%20-%20Lynen/lynenessay1.html>. Ask students to outline Lynen’s comparison of Frost with Wordsworth, and then choose one of the poems in *A Boy’s Will* and analyze it discussing the relationship of the speaker to the natural world.

## WRITING POETRY

1. In its regular meter and rhyme, “Flower-Gathering” in *A Boy’s Will* makes a good poem for students to emulate in writing their own

verse. Have students use the poem as a model and write an eight-line poem about a trip they have made that was important to them.

2. In “The Generations of Men” in *North of Boston*, Frost plays with New England rural diction in the speech of the young woman and more notably in the young man’s imitation of Granny’s speech. After reading aloud and discussing the speech patterns in this poem, assign students to identify persons or groups whom they know with distinctive speech patterns and listen carefully to bring in examples of expressions and turns of phrase they hear. Then, have students compose a dialogue including the expressions they have heard. The dialogue can be written in poetic form, using iambic pentameter, figurative language, or stanzas.

3. Nature is often the setting and at times the subject of Frost’s poems. After reading the poems listed under the “Beauty and Power of Nature” topic in the During Reading section of this guide, modify the guided imagery activity described there to have students first identify a difficult problem or challenge they are currently facing and then go to the natural setting for reflection. Have them become conscious of the sights, sounds, and odors of the setting and then reflect on the problem. Perhaps you can have them meet a favorite person or someone they consider wise, tell that person their problem, and listen to his or her advice. Immediately after the guided imagery, have students write freely a narrative of their experience. Ask students to compose a poem of their own structure or modeled after one of Frost’s such as “A Late Walk,” “Rose Pogonias,” or “Waiting: Afield at Dusk.”

## READER’S THEATRE

Students can create a Reader’s Theatre presentation of a poem. Poems in this volume that especially lend themselves to dramatic readings are:

From *A Boy’s Will*: “Asking for Roses”

From *North of Boston*: “The Death of the Hired Man,” “A Hundred Collars,” “Home Burial,”

“Blueberries,” “The Code,” “The Generations of Men,” “The Housekeeper,” and “The Fear.”

Students create a script from the poem they select and then perform, assuming the voice of the narrator and characters. They do not use physical action; rather, the interpretation of events and characters must come through voice, gestures, and facial expressions. Students do not memorize their parts, and elaborate props or costumes are not needed.

Steps to create a Reader's Theater Script:

- Choose a poem or a section for the longer poems.
- Make copies of the poem and highlight the dialogue.
- Adapt the poem by adding a narrator's line to set the scene and bridge gaps.
- Students assume roles and read the poem aloud, revising the text until they are satisfied with the effect. The final

version can be typed and duplicated, if the students wish.

- Students choose the parts they will read; one person is needed for each character, plus one for a narrator.
- Students read through the poem once or twice, stopping as they wish to discuss the characters and how to interpret (deliver) their lines. They should decide what facial expressions and gestures will make the characters come alive and practice voice inflections, pronunciations, speed, and other vocalizations.
- Readers stand or sit together in one place. If standing, they may step forward to read their lines. Props and costumes are not necessary but simple ones may be used. Students should concentrate on interpreting the characters as fully as possible for their listeners.

## USEFUL ONLINE RESOURCES

### ADDITIONAL ROBERT FROST POEMS

Teachers may wish to refer students to other popular poems of Frost outside of those collected in this edition.

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Links to all of the poems in *A Mountain Interval*, Frost's third volume of poetry including “The Road Not Taken,” “Birches,” “The Hill Wife,” and “Out, Out—” can be found at *A Mountain Interval*: <http://www.bartleby.com/119/index2.html>

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*Miscellaneous Poems to 1920* <http://www.bartleby.com/155/> includes “The Axe Helve,” “Fire and Ice,” and “Good-by and Keep Cold.”

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From **The Academy of American Poets: Robert Frost** <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/192> This Webpage includes a

brief biographical essay and links to a variety of Frost's poems and also biographical sketches and criticism.

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**Robert Frost: America's Poet** <http://www.ketzle.com/frost/> This site, maintained by Jeff Ketzle, links to additional poems from the volumes: *New Hampshire* (including “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”); *West-Running Brook* (“Tree at my Window,” “Acquainted with the Night”); *A Further Range* (“Two Tramps in Mudtime”); and others. Also included are links to a detailed biographical timeline and other resources.

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**PoemHunter.com: Robert Frost** <http://www.poemhunter.com/robert-frost/> Contains links to 116 poems listed in alphabetical order for ease of finding. Also links to a biographical sketch and a multitude of quotations taken from the poems.

## MULTIMEDIA

**Robert Frost Out Loud** <http://robertfrost-outloud.com/> Links to poems read by Frost, accompanied with text, including:

From *A Boy's Will*—"To the Thawing Wind," "Mowing," "The Tuft of Flowers," "October," and "Reluctance."

From *North of Boston*—"The Pasture," "Mending Wall," "A Hundred Collars," and "After Apple Picking."

From *Mountain Interval*—several poems including "The Road Not Taken."

Some poems have a different reader.

**Robert Frost** [http://town.hall.org/radio/HarperAudio/012294\\_harp\\_ITH.html](http://town.hall.org/radio/HarperAudio/012294_harp_ITH.html)

Here are more poems read by Frost. Several are grouped together on the same audio files, so individual poems may be hard to find. But includes many of the popular poems such as "The Death of the Hired Man" and "Birches."

**Poetry Everywhere** <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/poetryeverywhere/frost.html>

Here is a video of Frost reading "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

**Modern American Poetry: A Robert Frost Exhibit** [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/frost/exhibit.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/exhibit.htm)

This site contains a variety of images of Frost, places he lived, book covers, and a handwritten manuscript.

**Robert Frost—A Chronology** <http://www.frostfriends.org/chronology.html>

Together with the detailed chronology of Frost's life are pictures of Frost and his family.

## CRITICAL REVIEWS

**"The Art of Poetry No. 2 Robert Frost"** [http://www.parisreview.com/media/4678\\_FROST.pdf](http://www.parisreview.com/media/4678_FROST.pdf)

A 1960 interview of Frost published in the *Paris Review*. He discusses his early years, some of his acquaintances in England, such as Pound and Eliot, and some of his poetry, such as "The Subverted Flower."

**The Poetry Foundation: Robert Frost (1874-1963)** <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=2361>

A critical review of Frost's work. It includes discussion of Frost's style, use of colloquial speech, metrical form, New England regionalism, and views of life and nature found in his poetry. Also includes summaries of his published books of poetry and comments on his significance as an American poet.

**The Friends of Robert Frost** <http://www.frostfriends.org/>

This is an essential site for teachers which has helped inform this guide on teaching Frost's poems. Resources here include a tutorial for students, a Frost library, a biography, and a chronology.

**The Robert Frost Tutorial** <http://www.frostfriends.org/tutorial.html>

This site gathers a variety of resources for the student including links to biography and criticism. Especially useful is the "The Poetics of Robert Frost" which includes instruction on Frost's use of figurative language, imagery, meter, and other devices.

## BOOKS IN PRINT

Frost, R. (1995). *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*. (New York: Library of America). This comprehensive volume of Frost's work also contains notes on the texts and a detailed chronology.

Walsh, J. E. (1988). *Into My Own: The English Years of Robert Frost, 1912-1915*. (NY: Grove Press).

Thompson, L. & Winnick, R. H. (1981). *Robert Frost: A Biography*, one-volume ed. (NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston).

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Frost, R. (1954). *On teaching poetry*. Retrieved February 17, 2010, from Robert Frost at Bread Loaf: An Online Exhibit Presented by Special Collections at Middlebury College: [http://middigital.middlebury.edu/local\\_files/robert\\_frost/lectures\\_readings/](http://middigital.middlebury.edu/local_files/robert_frost/lectures_readings/)

Frost, R. (1964). *Selected Letters of Robert Frost* L. Thompson, (Ed.). New York, NY: Holt.

Monteiro, G. (1988) "Linked Analogies." Retrieved February 17, 2010, from *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance*: <http://www.frostfriends.org/FFL/Frost%20%26%20NE%20Renaissance%20-%20Monteiro/monteirotitle.html>

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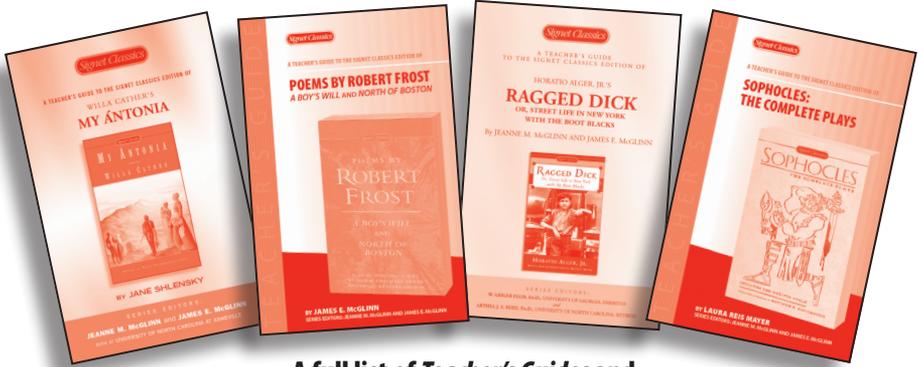
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**NOTES**

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