J. Daniel Justin Newman

4/29/2012 ENG131-02

What Separates the Men from the Boy

In the poem “’Out, Out—‘“, Robert Frost illustrates the differences between a man’s understanding of life and a boy’s perceptions of it. The poem seems written from the perspective of a man who witnessed the boy, who is the central figure of the poem, injure himself and subsequently die. Due to being narrated from a man’s point of view, the poem is colored by an adult’s perceptions of life. In this poem Frost refers to the main character simply as the “Boy” (l. 11) and the men as a vague “they” (l. 33).

The poem opens to a picturesque new England sunset scene with a boy using a buzz saw to cut wood in his yard. The boy’s sister then appears beside him and tells him that supper is ready. The boy, in his childish exuberance severely injures one of his hands on the saw that he is using. He realizes that he may lose his hand and begs his sister to prevent the doctor from removing it. When the doctor does come, he puts the boy under anesthesia, and the boy eventually dies. After the boy’s death everybody else returns to their business in a seemingly callous and uncaring gesture.

The death of the boy in “’Out, Out—‘” can seemingly be attributed to the difference in nature between a boy and a man. Men are goal oriented, whereas boys are easily distracted and are fun oriented. A boy often does not have specific goals upon which he focuses and works toward. A boy’s mind is also prone to slipping from one thing to another without further consideration to the task at hand. This is especially true when a boy is tired or bored, as the bot in the poem may have been. The line “he must have given the hand” (l. 17) seems to imply that the boy moved his hand into contact with the saw. The boy, being so distracted by his sister’s announcement of “Supper” (l. 14) at the end of a long day’s work, must have inadvertently swung his hand into the saw due to his careless and boyish excitement. In contrast to a boy’s distractibility and carelessness, a man has a focus on what needs to be done or accomplished, and will work towards it until it is finished. The man’s focus on work and doing what needs to be done is evidenced by the line “And they, since they were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.” (l. 33-34). The men in the poem don’t have time to sit around mourning the boy’s death forever; there are things that need to be done.

Men and boys have different understandings of the realities of life. A man understands that life has a beginning and must have an end. However, a boy may not comprehend that he will someday, die. This distinction between the boy’s ignorance of his own fragile mortality, and a man’s understanding of it is an overarching theme of “’Out, Out—‘”. The boy in the poem is using a buzz saw to cut wood, “man’s work” (l. 24), and while he may understand that there is a risk of injury, he doesn’t seem to understand or appreciate the risk of death from that task he is performing. When the boy mangles his hand on the saw his only reaction it to beg his sister not to let the doctor amputate his hand. The possibility of death doesn’t seem to enter his mind. The men in the poem on the other hand, comprehend death and accept it as the inevitable end to all life. When the boy’s pulse begins to fail the men know what is happening, and when the boy is dead, the men return to their work. This return to work on the men’s part may be misconstrued as callous and uncaring, but it from their perspective death is a part of life and life must go on.

Sadly for the boy in “’Out, Out—‘”, his boyish nature conspired to send him to his grave and send him there in ignorance. When he mangled his hand on the buzz saw he did not expect to die, he was concerned about the doctor cutting off his hand. When the doctor put him under, he never realized that he would never wake from the “dark of ether” (l. 28). As a boy he had no conception of his own mortality, or human fragility.