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Interpreting Literature

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An Analysis of Robert Frost's "Birches"

At first glimpse, Robert Frost's poem "Birches" appears to focus on the trees which the poem was named after and their tendency to droop and break after an ice storm. The speaker opens with a long description of how after such icy assault these particular trees are often found bent in every direction with curved trunks and low swaying branches, yet appear never to truly break. Although, he is sure to note that if they are bent "so low for long, they never right themselves" (Frost 16). Frost's speaker also employs the use of contrasting imagery when speaking of the birches, making sure to differentiate the "black branches" from their "snow-white trunk" (Frost 55). Despite the initial observation that the poem appears to centralize around the trees, through further analyzation the reader is able to grasp that the speaker wishes to convey a much more meaningful message. Only in characterizing and first knowing the speaker in this sense can the reader decipher his/her deeper meaning.

Early on, the speaker can be portrayed as someone quite whimsical who often utilizes their imagination to escape the realities which they acknowledge to be true. Let uninspired by truth, the speaker creates his/her own theory on how the trees may have ended up bending. He/she often states his/her preference in regard to viewing the outside world. Burdened with the weight of everyday life, the speaker expresses this desire to return to a childlike state of wonder going as far as to say "So was I once myself a swinger of birches. And so I dream of going back

to be.” (Frost 41-42). With this knowledge, the reader gains insight to the origin of such a unique, particular view on such a trivial topic as well as its significance to the speaker. Through identifying his/her self as a former swinger of birches, the speaker allows the reader to understand some facets of his/her personality. The reader can then gather the notion that the speaker values equal amounts imagination and truth in life.

Once the reader has a sound understanding of who the speaker is, then the occasion for writing “Birches” becomes pretty clear. One major focus is of this innate desire to return to a life as a swinger of birches which stems from a longing to reignite the spark of imagination. It is evident that the gravity of worldly concerns has kept the speaker grounded for too long. He/she knows of another place and time when upon reaching the vertical limits of the birch tree, aspiring “towards heaven”, the tree “dipped its top and set” him/her down once more (Frost 56-57). The speaker has tasted heaven and continually strives to do so yet knows Earth to be equally good and opposite in magnitude especially in regard to its truth and love. The nature of swinging from one realm to another, never fully belonging to either, is the speaker’s personal recipe for a well lived life.

Typical of Frost is his use of opposing imagery. The white and black of the tree, summer or winter, heaven and earth, truth and imagination, the sun’s warmth versus the ice-storms are a few of the major contrasts which Frost (through his speaker) employs. The sets of contrasting ideas play off one another, yet are both necessary in the context of this poem. The reader can only truly grasp one concept by what it is not (its polar extreme). This particular imagery evokes a sense of balance within the reader’s mind, precisely the balance the speaker is trying to reestablish in his/her life. In this way swinging is very much like a balancing act. It is not the birches nor their branches that the speaker truly cares about but the motion of swinging itself.

This is the reason he/she writes.

“Birches” is more than meets the eye. It is a poem emphasizing a need to find balance in order to live a good life. Contrasting ideas allow the reader to consider the benefits and drawbacks of one mode of living over another. Through a relatable speaker, Frost encourages the reader to find his/her inner swinger of birches because the journey itself is far better than the destination.