

Robert Frost

(1874-1963)

Design (1936)

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth--
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches' broth--
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?--
If design govern in a thing so small.

ANALYSIS

The most awful of Frost's smaller poems is one called "Design"... This is the Argument from Design with a vengeance; is the terrible negative from which the eighteenth century's Kodak picture...had to be printed. If a watch, then a watch-maker; if a diabolical machine, then a diabolical mechanic--Frost uses exactly the logic that has always been used. And this little albino catastrophe is too whitely catastrophic to be accidental, too impossibly unlikely ever to be a coincidence: accident, chance, statistics, natural selection are helpless to account for such designed terror and heartbreak, such an awful symbolic perversion of the innocent being of the world.

Frost's details are so diabolically good that it seems criminal to leave some unremarked; but notice how *dimpled*, *fat*, and *white* (all but one; all but one) come from our regular description of any baby; notice how the *heal-all*, because of its name, is the one flower in all the world picked to be the altar for this Devil's Mass; notice how holding up the moth brings something ritual and hieratic, a ghostly, ghastly formality, to this priest and its sacrificial victim; notice how terrible to the fingers, how full of the stilling rigor of death, that *white piece of rigid satin cloth* is. And *assorted characters of death and blight* is, like so many things in this poem, sharply ambiguous: a *mixed bunch of actors or diverse representative signs*. The tone of the phrase *assorted characters of death and blight* is beautifully developed in the ironic...hartiness of *mixed ready to begin the morning right* (which assures us, so un reassuringly), that this isn't any sort of Strindberg *Spook Sonata*, but hard fact), and concludes in the *ingredients* of the witch's broth, giving the soup a sort of cuddly shimmer that the cauldron in *Macbeth* never had... For sweet-sour, smiling awfulness *snow-drop spider* looks unsurpassable, until we come to the almost obscenely horrible (even the mouth-gestures are utilized) *a flower like froth*; this always used to seem to me the case of the absolutely inescapable effect, until a student of mine said that you could tell how beautiful the flower was because the poet compared it to froth; when I said to her, "But--but--but what does froth *remind* you of?" looking desperately into her blue eyes, she replied: "Fudge. It reminds me of making fudge."

And then, in the victim's own little line, how contradictory and awful everything is: *dead wings carried like a paper kite!* The *dead* and the *wings* work back and forth on each other heart-breakingly, and the contradictory pathos of the *carried* wings is exceeded by that of the matter-of-fact conversion into what has never lived, into a shouldered toy, of the ended life. "*What had that flower to do with being white, / The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?*" Expresses as well as anything ever has the arbitrariness of our guilt,

the fact that Original Sin is only Original Accident, so far as the creatures of this world are concerned.... The *wayside* makes it universal, commonplace, and somehow dearer to us... The poem is likely to remind the reader of Melville's chapter on the Whiteness of the Whale, just as Frost may have been reminded....

"In large things, macroscopic phenomena of some real importance," the poem says, "the classical mechanics of design probably does operate--though in reverse, so far as the old Argument from Design is concerned; but these little things, things of no real importance, microscopic phenomena like a flower or moth or man or planet or solar system (we have so indissolubly identified ourselves with the moth and flower and spider that we cannot treat our own nature and importance, which theirs symbolize, as fundamentally different from theirs), are governed by the purely statistical laws of quantum mechanics, of random distribution, are they not?" I have given this statement of "what the poem says"--it says much more--an exaggeratedly physical, scientific form because both a metaphorically and literally astronomical view of things is so common, and so unremarked-on, in Frost. This poem, I think most people will admit, makes Pascal's "eternal silence of those infinite spaces" seem the hush between the movements of a cantata.

Randall Jarrell
"To the Laodiceans"
Poetry and the Age
(Knopf 1953)

The connotations in this poem work in two opposite directions. First, there is a series of words and images suggesting innocence--*dimpled, heal-all, morning, right, snow-drop, flower, blue, innocent*, and the five-times repeated *white*. Second, there is an equally impressive sequence suggesting evil--*spider, death, blight, witches' broth, froth, dead, night, darkness, appall*. The collocation of these two kinds of words seems to pose a question.

The design indicated by the title is formed by three things--a white heal-all, a white spider, a white moth. Two of them are ordinarily of a different color. The heal-all, a wild flower with medicinal virtues, is usually blue. Spiders are ordinarily black or brown. What has brought together these three white things, two of them so rarely white? It would seem the work of a conscious artist. But what is the purpose of the artistry? The end is death. The white moth, lured by the usually protective kindred color of the heal-all, has been trapped by the spider and killed. It is held now "like a white piece of rigid satin cloth" (the image not only describes a dead moth exactly but suggests the lining of a coffin). The three white things are thus "like the ingredients of a witches' broth." The suggestion that these ingredients have been mixed "to begin the morning right" is ironical. There is irony also in the connection of the innocent color white with this sinister enterprise of death.

In the eighteenth century, a favorite argument for the existence of God was the so-called "argument from design." The intricate construction of the universe, it was held, with all of its stars and planets whirling in mathematically chartable courses and regulated by the law of gravity, testified to the existence of an infinitely wise creator, for how could there be design without a designer? As the nineteenth Psalm so eloquently expresses it, "The Heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork."

Frost's title alludes to this famous argument in a grimly ironical fashion. For the design, Frost points out, in nature is that of a "witches' broth." Thus the poem asks a terrible question, "What brought the kindred spider to that height, / Then steered the white moth thither in the night? / What but design of darkness to appall?--" Perhaps the universe is governed, not by infinite goodness, but by infinite evil. The poem does not assert this proposition as an actuality, merely suggests it as a possibility. And the suggestion is immediately softened, apparently, by the provision of another possibility--"If design govern in a thing so small." But the afterthought, tossed in so casually, when examined closely turns out to be not very comforting either. If nature is not governed by design, then it is governed merely by chance, coincidence, anarchy, chaos--certainly not by the traditionally omnipotent benevolent God who is concerned over the smallest sparrow's fall.

Cast in the sonnet form (so often used for the theme of love), making an intricate design out of only three rhyme sounds (the title might refer to the pattern of the poem as well as to the design made by the three white things in nature), Frost's brief poem, like the wayside blue or white heal-all, seems from the outside innocent enough. But within its fourteen innocent-seeming lines, Frost chillingly poses the problem of evil.

Laurence Perrine
100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century
(Harcourt 1966) 46-47
with James M. Reid