

140 QUOTATIONS



Robert Frost

(1874-1963)

Robert Frost is the most popular American poet, in part because (1) he looks simple and (2) can be enjoyed in a literal sense by the common reader apart from the figurative sense—the symbolism and subtle implications. He is also appealing because (3) he wrote as a common man using common speech and (4) his simplicity is modest—the tone humble even—(5) affirming flinty moral virtues in the New England Puritan tradition, and (6) a Platonic philosophical idealism in the tradition of Emerson and E.A. Robinson, most evident in “After Apple-Picking.” His poems feel uplifting. The reader may vicariously experience the transcendent consciousness often expressed in his poems without understanding their implications, because Frost thinks in archetypal (or universal) imagery. He is a Modernist in the mode of *holistic realism*, with Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Hemingway, and to some extent Faulkner and Wallace Stevens—in contrast to the Modernist mode of *intellectual expressionism*—Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Hart Crane, Marianne Moore. His idealism and agrarian pastoralism differentiate Frost from William Carlos Williams, an urbane materialist in philosophy. Frost became the iconic American poet of the 20th century as Walt Whitman had been of the 19th, more honored than any poet ever. Near his end, he read a poem at the inaugural ceremony of the idealistic young President, his fellow New Englander John F. Kennedy—frail and bent, his wispy white hair flying and pages almost blowing away in a cold wind.

ORDER OF TOPICS: home, education, independence, thinking, talking, teaching, women, love, family, society, pastoralism, Puritanism, working, freedom, liberal, Postmodernism, collectivism, politics, conservatism, America, power, philosophy, religion, Platonism, morality, loneliness, literary criticism, poets, the poem, poetry, metaphor, style, Modernism, Ezra Pound, free verse, writing poetry, conviction, death:

HOME

Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.

EDUCATION

College is a refuge from hasty judgment.

Education is hanging around until you've caught on.

Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.

Education doesn't change life much. It just lifts trouble to a higher plane of regard.

You can be a little ungrammatical if you come from the right part of the country.

The chief reason for going to school is to get the impression fixed for life that there is a book side for everything.

[Poets and scholars] differ most importantly in the way their knowledge is come by. Scholars get theirs with conscientious thoroughness along projected lines of logic; poets theirs cavalierly and as it happens in and out of books. They stick to nothing deliberately, but let what will stick to them like burrs where they walk in the fields.

INDEPENDENCE

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference.

THINKING

How many things have to happen before something occurs to you?

Our very life depends on everything's recurring til we answer from within.

All thought is a feat of association; having what's in front of you bring up something in your mind that you almost didn't know you knew.

Thinking isn't agreeing or disagreeing. That's voting.

I have outwalked the furthest city light.

TALKING

Half the world is composed of people who have something to say and can't, and the other half who have nothing to say and keep on saying it.

Talking is a hydrant in the yard and writing is a faucet upstairs in the house. Opening the first takes the pressure off the second.

Forgive me my nonsense, as I also forgive the nonsense of those that think they talk sense.

TEACHING

I believe in teaching, but I don't believe in going to school.

I am not a teacher, but an awakener.

I go to school the youth to learn the future.

There are two kinds of teachers: the kind that fill you with so much quail shot that you can't move, and the kind that just gives you a little prod behind and you jump to the skies.

WOMEN

You don't have to deserve your mother's love. You have to deserve your father's.

A mother takes twenty years to make a man of her boy, and another woman makes a fool of him in twenty minutes.

Dancing is a vertical expression of a horizontal desire.

A woman asked me, "What do you mean by that 'subverted flower'?" I said, "Frigidity in women." She left.

It's a funny thing that when a man hasn't anything on earth to worry about, he goes off and gets married.

A diplomat is a man who always remembers a woman's birthday but never remembers her age.

Being the boss anywhere is lonely. Being a female boss in a world of mostly men is especially so.

There's nothing I'm afraid of like scared people.

LOVE

Love is an irresistible desire to be irresistibly desired.

Earth's the right place for love. I don't know where it's likely to go better.

Something we were withholding made us weak until we found it was ourselves.

You've got to love what's lovable, and hate what's hateable. It takes brains to tell the difference.

FAMILY

Families break up when they get hints you don't intend, and miss hints you do.

SOCIETY

To be social is to be forgiving.

Pressed into service means pressed out of shape.

You can be a rank insider as well as a rank outsider.

A successful lawsuit is the one worn by a policeman.

A jury consists of twelve persons chosen to decide who has the better lawyer.

A civilized society is one which tolerates eccentricity to the point of doubtful sanity.

A bank is a place where they lend you an umbrella in fair weather and ask for it back when it begins to rain.

Nobody was ever meant, / To remember or invent, / What he did with every cent.

PASTORALISM

Happiness makes up in height for what it lacks in length.

You've got to learn to enjoy a lot of things you don't like.

There never was any heart truly great and generous, that was not also tender and compassionate.

If one by one we counted people out / For the least sin, it wouldn't take us long / To get so we had no one left to live with.

Nothing can make injustice just but mercy.

PURITANISM

Let him that is without stone among you cast the first thing he can lay his hands on.

Don't ever take a fence down until you know why it was put up.

"Good fences make good neighbors."

WORKING

The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows. / My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

The brain is a wonderful organ; it starts working the moment you get up in the morning and does not stop until you get into the office.

By working faithfully eight hours a day you may eventually get to be boss and work twelve hours a day.

The worst disease which can afflict executives in their work is not, as popularly supposed, alcoholism; it's egotism.

The reason why worry kills more people than work is that more people worry than work.

The only way round is through.

FREEDOM

Freedom lies in being bold.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall.

You have freedom when you're easy in your harness.

If society fits you comfortably enough, you call it freedom.

I hold it to be the inalienable right of anybody to go to hell in his own way.

LIBERAL

A liberal is a man too broadminded to take his own side in a quarrel.

A person will sometimes devote all his life to the development of one part of his body--the wishbone.

POSTMODERNISM

I had it from one of the youngest lately: "Whereas we once thought literature should be without content, we now know it should be charged full of propaganda." Wrong twice, I told him.... But he returned to his position after a moment out for reassembly: "Surely art can be considered good only as it prompts to action." How soon? I asked him. But there is danger of undue levity in teasing the young.... We must be very tender of our dreamers. They may seem like picketers, or members of the committee on rules, for the moment. We shan't mind what they seem, if only they produce real poems.

Some of these quotations are excerpted from
"Robert Frost" (1963)

Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Second Series

(Viking Compass, 1965)

COLLECTIVISM

I have none of the tenderer-than-thou / Collectivistic regimenting love / With which the modern world is being swept.

The best things and best people rise out of their separateness; I'm against a homogenized society because I want the cream to rise.

POLITICS

I was born a Democrat—and been unhappy ever since 1896.

I never dared to be radical when young for fear it would make me conservative when old.

The father is always a Republican toward his son, and his mother's always a Democrat.

The middle of the road is where the white line is--and that's the worst place to drive.

I don't belong to any party.

CONSERVATIVISM

Americans are like a rich father who wishes he knew how to give his son the hardships that made him rich.

The world is full of willing people; some willing to work, the rest willing to let them.

AMERICA

If you don't know how great this country is, I know someone who does--Russia.

POWER

I often say of George Washington that he was one of the few in the whole history of the world who was not carried away by power.

The strongest and most effective force in guaranteeing the long-term maintenance of power is not violence in all the forms deployed by the dominant to control the dominated, but consent in all the forms in which the dominated acquiesce in their own domination.

PHILOSOPHY

I always entertain great hopes.

I'm not confused. I'm just well mixed.

I'm never serious except when I'm fooling.

I am a writer of books in retrospect. I talk in order to understand; I teach in order to learn.

Always fall in with what you're asked to accept. Take what is given, and make it over your way. My aim in life has always been to hold my own with whatever's going. Not against: with. [Compare Taoism]

Most of the change we think we see in life is due to truths being in and out of favor.

In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: it goes on.

Take care to sell your horse before he dies. The art of life is passing losses on.

RELIGION

The artist in me cries out for design.

Don't be agnostic--be something.

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still.

Belief is better than anything else, and it is best when rapt--above paying its respects to anybody's doubt whatsoever.

PLATONISM

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.

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 the ladder-round.

MORALITY

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

What we live by we die by.

LONELINESS

One aged man – one man – can't fill a house.

Space ails us moderns: we are sick with space.

Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice.

LITERARY CRITICISM

I don't read criticism. You see no magazines in the house.

A good book has no ending.

POETS

To be a poet is a condition, not a profession.

A poet never takes notes. You never take notes in a love affair.

No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.

Poets are like baseball pitchers. Both have their moments. The intervals are the tough things.

Modern poets talk against business, poor things, but all of us write for money. Beginners are subjected to trial by market.

Hell is a half-filled auditorium.

THE POEM

A poem begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness.

Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting.

The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom...in a clarification of life – not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion.

POETRY

Poetry is what gets lost in translation.

Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat.

Poetry among other things is the marrow of wit.

Poetry is about the grief. Politics is about the grievance.

Poetry should be common in experience but uncommon in books.

Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words.

Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another.

The whole thing is performance and prowess and feats of association.

METAPHOR

An idea is a feat of association, and the height of it is a good metaphor.

Unless you are at home in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere.

Unless you are educated in metaphor, you are not safe to be let loose in the world.

Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors, “grace” metaphors, and goes on to be the profoundest thinking that we have.

There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority. Poetry is simply made of metaphor. So also is philosophy—and science, too, for that matter, if it will take the soft impeachment from a friend. Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing. And there is a sense in which all poems are the same old metaphor always.

STYLE

Style is that which indicates how the writer takes himself and what he is saying. It is the mind skating circles around itself as it moves forward.

MODERNISM

Pound had an afternoon meeting once a week with Flint and Aldington and H.D. and at one time Hulme, I think. Hulme started with them. They met every week to rewrite each other's poems.... I knew Hulme, knew him quite well. But I never went to one of those meetings.

EZRA POUND

Among other things, what Pound did was show me Bohemia.... Showed me jiu jitsu in a restaurant. Threw me over his head. Wasn't ready for him at all. I was just as strong as he was.

He wrote me a couple of letters when I got him out of jail last year.

We've been friends all the way along, but I didn't like what he did in wartime.

FREE VERSE

Writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down.

WRITING POETRY

I have never started a poem yet whose end I knew. Writing a poem is discovering.

When they want to know about inspiration, I tell them it's mostly animus.

The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader.

I have sunk to a diction even Wordsworth kept above.

I alone of English writers have consciously set myself to make music out of what I may call the sound of sense.

We can make a little order where we are, and then the big sweep of history on which we can have no effect doesn't overwhelm us.

CONVICTION

The one thing I boast I can't be, is disillusioned. Anything I ever thought I still think. Any poet I ever liked I still like. It is noticeable, I go back on no one. It is merely that others go back on me. I take nothing back. I don't even grow. My favorite theory is that we are given this speed swifter than any stream of light time or water for the sole purpose of standing still like a water beetle in any stream of light time or water off any shore we please.

DEATH

I had a lover's quarrel with the world.

They would not find me changed from him they knew – only more sure of all I thought was true.

We dance round in a ring and suppose, but the secret sits in the middle and knows.

No memory of having starved atones for later disregard, or keeps the end from being hard.

Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee, / And I'll forgive / Thy great big joke on me.

The best way out is always through.

The only certain freedom's in departure.

