

# Desert Places



## SUMMARY

Snow and darkness were falling rapidly in a field I passed by. The ground was almost entirely blanketed in snow, except for some weeds and stalks still poking out.

The surrounding woods now dominate the landscape: it belongs to them. All the animals are hiding, snowbound, in their dens. I feel too empty and detached to matter; the scene includes me in its loneliness without realizing it.

As lonely as the scene is, it'll get even lonelier before it gets less lonely. The landscape will grow blanker and whiter in the snowy darkness, becoming expressionless and empty of any sense of human meaning.

I'm not scared when people talk about the emptiness of outer space, or about solar systems uninhabited by humans. I can scare myself quite enough with the emptiness I see close to home (or feel within me).

The speaker also dreads that the "loneliness" of this snowy night will only get worse, to the point where the entire landscape seems completely inhuman. Because the darkness and snow won't end for hours (and in fact will get more intense), the speaker says that the night "will be more lonely" before "it will be less." The landscape will transform into something completely alien and alienating: a perfect blank with "no expression, nothing to express."

This earthly blankness, in turn, makes the speaker think about the blankness of outer space. The lesson, for the speaker, is that there's no point in worrying about the loneliness of the cosmos because deserted landscapes on Earth can be as frightening and alienating as anything outer space holds. The speaker thus claims that other people "cannot scare me" with talk of vast cosmic distances or uninhabited solar systems, because equally empty spaces "nearer home" are already scary enough.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16



## THEMES



### HUMANITY'S PLACE IN THE UNIVERSE

"Desert Places" expresses the dread that the whole "human race" is alone and insignificant in the cosmic scheme of things. The poem's speaker passes by a remote field while both snow and night are "falling fast." As snow and darkness pile up around the speaker, this landscape seems wild, deserted, and "blank[ly]" indifferent to human life. The speaker imagines that the landscape will only keep getting "blanker" until it has no visible human presence or human-friendly features at all (the speaker feels they don't "count" as a presence). The speaker dryly concludes that there's no reason to fear the alien emptiness of outer space, because the "desert places" of Earth—empty, alien-seeming landscapes closer to home—are frightening enough.

The snowfall and darkness disturb the speaker because they're diminishing or erasing virtually all signs of life. They've covered all but a few "weeds and stubble," and the animals, who have retreated into their dens, seem "smothered," as if the snow is burying them alive. Meanwhile, the only human being in sight (the speaker) feels "too absent-spirited to count." That is, the speaker feels so puny and empty that it's as though they're not even there; they've been absorbed into the larger "loneliness" of the scene. The falling snow and night thus overwhelm people, animals, and plants alike. Only the "woods"—a [symbol](#) of untamed, mysterious nature—dominate this chilling, deserted landscape.



### LONELINESS, ALIENATION, AND CREATIVE ANXIETY

Frost wrote "Desert Places" during a period of depression and creative frustration. As such, it's possible that the desolate world described here represents not only the indifference of both nature and the cosmos toward human life, but also the speaker's *internal* feelings of isolation and emptiness. In this interpretation of the poem, what ultimately frightens the speaker while traveling alone through this dark, wintry landscape are their "own desert places": a phrase that *literally* refers to the bare terrain near their home, but also [metaphorically](#) suggests a *psychological* landscape marked by anxiety, isolation, and an inability to communicate. In other words, the poem implies that the "desert places" within the speaker's mind are just as frightening and alienating as the vast emptiness of the universe.

When the poem begins, the speaker describes darkness and snow quickly enveloping a field, "smooth[ing]" over all signs of life and humanity in the process. This clearly frightens the speaker, who opens the poem by describing the snow and darkness as "falling fast, oh, fast"—a phrase that immediately conveys anxiety. Likewise, the speaker imagines woodland creatures "smothered in their lairs," as if suffocated by the snow—another image suggesting how this snowy darkness hinders joy, vitality, and so forth. The speaker then claims that their own presence in this lonely landscape is not worth considering, because they feel "too absent-spirited to count";

they seem to have already felt hollow, detached, and/or depressed even before encountering this snowy night.

While a literal presence in the poem, then, this snowy scene also seems to remind the speaker of (and/or metaphorically represent) the landscape of their own mind. That is, it reflects the fact that the speaker feels utterly empty, alone, and unable to express themselves (possibly *poetically*, if readers take the speaker here to be Frost himself).

The speaker also worries that things will get worse before they get better: the night will just get darker and snowier, making the scene "more lonely ere it will be less." The speaker fears becoming *more* isolated, in other words, their mind becoming *more* "desert[ed]"—devoid of feelings of connection, creative ideas, and so forth. Projecting this sensation onto the landscape, the speaker imagines the snowy fields turning into a "blacker whiteness" with "no expression, nothing to express." Again, the physical world here seems to represent the speaker's own internal anxiety—perhaps about failing to communicate with others, and perhaps the poet's more specific fear of losing inspiration and staring at a "blank" page.

The speaker admits, finally, that "I have it in me so much nearer home / To scare myself" with "my own desert places," suggesting that the desolation they fear might be a feature of their own psyche—and that that's the scariest thought of all. From one angle, then, "Desert Places" is a fairly impersonal poem about humanity's place in nature and the universe. From another, it can be read as the personal expression of a scared, lonely, and/or creatively frustrated speaker.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 5-16



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*Snow falling and ...  
... stubble showing last.*

The first [quatrain](#) of the poem depicts a heavy snowstorm on a winter night. The speaker describes passing by a "field" in which snow and darkness were rapidly "falling." It's not clear what the speaker was doing out in this snowstorm, or where he was coming from or going. (The speaker was probably near "home," mentioned later in line 15, but it's not clear if they headed *toward* this home or *away from* it.) The field itself, meanwhile, appears to be rural farmland, with "a few weeds and stubble" showing through a nearly "smooth" blanket of snow. "Stubble" here likely refers to the cut stalks left in a harvested field of grain.

Notice that this first [stanza](#) consists of a single sentence *fragment*. That is, there's no main verb here; the speaker doesn't say, for example, that the snow and night *were* "falling" or that the ground *was* "almost covered smooth in snow." These omissions make the stanza feel a bit hasty and perhaps disorienting, as if the speaker is describing the scene in a breathless rush. The words seem to tumble out almost as "fast" as the falling snow and darkness, and the exclamation "oh" in line 1 ("fast, oh, fast") may further suggest that the speaker feels anxious.

The [paralleling](#) (and [diacope](#)) of "Snow **falling** and night **falling**" suggests certain parallels between snow and night: for example, they're both associated with cold, and both are adverse conditions for travel. Nighttime and winter can both be [symbols](#) of death, so perhaps the speaker, wherever they're headed, is uneasily reminded that their life's journey will someday end.

The [meter](#) of this stanza is somewhat jarring and uneven. The poem is written in [iambic pentameter](#), meaning that its lines generally contain 10 syllables arranged in a "da-DUM, da-DUM" (unstressed-stressed) rhythm. But it takes a while to actually settle into that rhythm; the pattern of stresses in the first two lines, for example, goes something like this:

Snow fal- | ling and | night fal- | ling fast, | oh, fast  
In a | field | | looked in- | to go- | ing past,

This unevenness suits the speaker's uneasy, anxious mood, as well as the image of a wild snowstorm. [Alliterative](#) /f/ sounds link many of the stressed syllables as well, adding emphasis and bombarding the reader like a "fast" and furious blizzard.

Finally, this stanza establishes the AABA [rhyme scheme](#) that will continue throughout the poem. (AABA-rhymed quatrains are known as *rubaiyat* stanzas, a form explained in more depth in the Form section of this guide.) The three rhymed lines outnumber the unrhymed line in each quatrain—perhaps even seem to overwhelm it, like snow burying the landscape. On the other hand, the unrhymed line, and especially the unrhymed end-word, stands out as unique. In this case, "snow" (line 3) stands out for good reason: it's clearly a key [image](#) in the poem!

### LINES 5-8

*The woods around ...  
... includes me unawares.*

The second [stanza](#) (lines 5-8) continues describing the snowy nighttime scene, this time investing it with an ominous sense of "loneliness."

First, the speaker [personifies](#) the woods surrounding the snow-covered field: "The woods around it have it—it is theirs." Presumably, "it" refers to the field, though it seems almost to encompass the whole scene. As snow buries everything else in

sight, the tall woods seem to dominate, or take possession of, the landscape. All other living things seem to have gone into hiding: "All animals are smothered in their lairs" (i.e., burrowed in dens). The word "smothered" is [metaphorical](#)—the animals aren't literally suffocating under the snow—and may be a projection of the speaker's own feelings. (Perhaps they feel anxious and overwhelmed in the snowstorm, especially if they still have a ways to travel.)

Meanwhile, the speaker is the only human being in sight, and they consider themselves "too absent-spirited to count." The invented word "absent-spirited" suggests that the speaker feels absent-minded, spiritually empty, and/or detached from the world around them. They feel as if their presence here doesn't even "count"; they're merely part of the larger "loneliness" of the scene, which "includes [them] unawares" (i.e., without even being aware of the speaker's existence).

Notice that the unrhymed third line of the [quatrain](#) contains the only clause in which the speaker ("I") is the subject. The other, [rhymed](#) lines have other subjects: "woods," "animals," "loneliness." This effect makes the speaker seem isolated within the stanza, just as they are within the scene as a whole.

### LINES 9-12

*And lonely as ...  
... nothing to express.*

The third [stanza](#) confidently states that this bleak winter's night will only get bleaker. As bad as it is now, the speaker predicts, the "loneliness" of the scene will get worse "ere" (before) it gets better. In other words, neither the darkness nor the snowstorm is going to let up anytime soon. (Recall that nighttime lasts longer in the winter.) The landscape will lose all its familiar features, becoming only "A blanker whiteness of benighted snow / With no expression, nothing to express."

There's a subtle [metaphorical](#) element to these lines. Though the speaker doesn't directly compare the snowscape to anything, its "blank[ness]" and lack of "expression" bring two images to mind: a blank face and a blank sheet of paper. It's as if the snow is erasing anything comforting, recognizable, or *human* from the scene, until the landscape becomes as empty and primitive as if humans had never existed. ("Benighted" can mean *primitive* as well as *covered by darkness*.) In this state, the world seems completely indifferent and lacking in human meaning, like a face or page that has nothing to say.

Once again, however, the speaker's description of the landscape might just reflect their own mood: their personal "loneliness." (If so, this would be an example of the [pathetic fallacy](#).) It might also reflect the speaker's fear that they, personally, have "nothing to express"—especially if the speaker is a stand-in for the poet!

This stanza is the most [metrically](#) regular in the poem. There's hardly a single variation in its [iambic](#) pentameter (da-DUM,

da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM) pattern:

And lone- | ly as | it is, | that lone- | liness  
Will be | more lone- | ly ere | it will | be less—  
A blank- | er white- | ness of | benight- | ed snow  
With no | express- | ion, noth- | ing to | express.

This steady rhythm is reinforced by [consonance](#) ("lonely"/"loneliness"/"Will"/"lonely"/"will"/"less"; "blanker"/"benighted"; "no"/"nothing"; "expression"/"express"); [internal rhyme](#) ("whiteness"/"benighted"; "snow"/"no"); and [diacope](#) ("lonely"/"loneliness," etc.). These various types of [repetition](#) make the lines smooth and easy to say—as smooth as a blanket of snow!

### LINES 13-16

*They cannot scare ...  
... own desert places.*

The final [stanza](#) shifts from description (mixed with prediction) to commentary. Having described an incredibly "lonely," snow-covered landscape, the speaker dryly boasts that the lonely reaches of outer space don't "scare" them in the least. The "empty spaces / Between stars" or "on stars" are too remote to care about—unlike the emptiness closer to "home":

I have it in me so much nearer home  
To scare myself with my own desert places.

At first glance, "my own desert places" refers to barren landscapes like the field the speaker has just passed. On closer inspection, it could be read [metaphorically](#): it might refer to the speaker's *internal* sense of "loneliness," the "absent-spirited" feeling he brought to this landscape to begin with. Either way, the [juxtaposition](#) of these "desert places" with the void of outer space conveys the profound loneliness the speaker is capable of experiencing here on Earth.

When the speaker claims that "They cannot scare me" with talk of outer space (line 13), it's not entirely clear who "They" refers to. It could be a general "They," meaning "anyone who happens to talk about space." But it could also be a more specific "They," meaning "scientists" or "astronomers." In the decade or so before the poem was published, several landmark scientific discoveries had confirmed that the universe was much larger than previously suspected—and was, in fact, expanding (see the Context section of this guide for more). The poem might, in part, be a reaction to these discoveries, which seemed to deepen the "loneliness" of humankind.

It's also unclear how close the speaker is to their literal "home" (line 15), or where exactly the poem is [set](#). However, the [enjambment](#) at the end of line 15—along with the way the [rhyme scheme](#) singles out the unrhymed end-word in this line—draws extra attention to the word "home." Perhaps there's

some [irony](#) in this emphasis. After all, this speaker seems to feel lonely and alienated: they don't appear to be at "home" in nature, the universe, or even their own psyche!



## SYMBOLS



### SNOW

Snow might [symbolize](#) a few things in the poem.

Like the night, the snow is a cold, enveloping force that isolates living things—and even seems to bury life altogether. (Notice those "smothered" animals in line 6, for example.) As such, snow here might represent the isolating, smothering sensation of anxiety and loneliness. The falling snow could also be read as a symbol of approaching death—the ultimate "loneliness." (There's no evidence that the speaker is actually dying, of course, but this cold, snowy landscape might remind the speaker of death's inevitability.)

In the third [stanza](#), the snow's "blank[ness]" seems to symbolize nature's (or the universe's) indifference toward humanity, as well its lack of any ultimate meaning. The snowfall returns the familiar landscape to a "benighted" state, a primitive atmosphere much older than human "expression." The fallen snow has no relatable "expression" of its own, and "nothing to express." It's like a featureless face staring blankly and coldly at humanity, or an empty, meaningless sheet of paper.

If the speaker is a stand-in for the poet, this blankness might be a projection of the poet's creative frustrations: his inability to "express" and make sense of the world. But it might also, symbolically, suggest that there's *no sense to be made*—that the world is meaningless, at least in human terms.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 6
- Lines 9-12



### WOODS

In line 5, the speaker describes the woods as owning or dominating the snowy landscape: "The woods around it have it—it is theirs." On a literal level, this detail suggests that the accumulating snow has covered everything in sight except for the tall forest trees. On a [symbolic](#) level, the woods represent wild, primitive nature. Their dominance suggests that nature is reasserting its power over the landscape, which human beings had seemed to tame (with their cultivated "field[s]" full of harvest "stubble" in lines 2 and 4). The world of the poem seems to be returning to a primitive or "benighted" state (line 11), in which people are small,

vulnerable, and meaningless. Or maybe the poem is suggesting that was its true state all along!

Frost often used woods as symbols of a natural wildness that could be both ominous and darkly thrilling. Other examples occur in poems such as "[Into My Own](#)" and "[Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#)."

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "The woods around it have it—it is theirs."



## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

"Desert Places" uses plenty of [alliteration](#), often to reinforce the [imagery](#) it's describing or to highlight important words and ideas.

Lines 1-2, for example, contain a number of emphatic /f/ words, which help create a driving, slightly uneven rhythm:

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast  
In a field I looked into going past,

The thick, chaotic swirl of /f/ sounds might be compared to the thick, swirling snowfall. In the same [stanza](#), the soft, repeated /s/ sounds of "smooth in snow" seem to make the phrase itself run more smoothly.

In the third stanza, alliteration links a number of thematically meaningful words. Consider the /l/ words "lonely," "loneliness," "lonely," and "less" (lines 9-10); the /b/ words "blanker" and "benighted" (line 11); and the /n/ words "no" and "nothing" (line 12): not the world's most cheerful group! These words have to do with isolation, diminishment, darkness, and nothingness: key themes in a poem that's all about inner as well as outer desolation. Again, alliteration also simply makes the language flow smoothly, subtly mirroring the smooth blanket of snow being described.

Finally, a run of /s/ words appears in lines 13-14: "scare," "spaces," "stars," "stars." This [sibilance](#) sounds a bit eerie, like whispering or hissing—an appropriate effect for lines about vast, chilling emptiness.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "falling," "falling fast," "fast"
- **Line 2:** "field"
- **Line 3:** "smooth," "snow"
- **Line 9:** "lonely," "loneliness"
- **Line 10:** "lonely," "less"
- **Line 11:** "blanker," "benighted"
- **Line 12:** "no," "expression," "nothing," "express"

- **Line 13:** "scare," "spaces"
- **Line 14:** "stars," "stars"

## ASSONANCE

The poem contains several instances of [assonance](#) (and [internal rhyme](#)).

One example is the phrase "their lairs" in line 6, which follows the rhyme word "theirs" in line 5 (and precedes the rhyme word "unawares" in line 8). This cluster of similar sounds gives the line—in fact, the whole [stanza](#)—a density that reflects the intense, "smother[ing]" snowfall being described.

Similarly, the rhyming sounds in "whiteness"/"benighted" and "snow"/"no" (along with the near-repetition of "expression" and "express") gives lines 11-12 a smoothly repetitive quality. The pile-up of similar sounds seems to mimic the way the snow itself just keeps piling higher.

Finally, the shared /o/ of "so" and "home" (line 15), along with "own" in the following line, adds a little extra emphasis to these words:

I have it in me so much nearer home  
To scare myself with my own desert places.

The assonance seems to stress that the emptiness the speaker fears is so much closer than outer space, it's practically next door. (Or maybe it's inside the speaker's head, which would mean it's truly the speaker's own.) The emphasis on *home* might be [ironic](#), as this alienated speaker doesn't seem to feel particularly at home in the world.

### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "their lairs"
- **Line 11:** "whiteness," "benighted," "snow"
- **Line 12:** "no"
- **Line 15:** "so," "home"
- **Line 16:** "own"

## PARALLELISM

The poem turns to [parallelism](#) a few times to suggest connection and emphasize certain images. Take the parallelism in line 1, which helps suggest similarities between the descent of night and snow (note that the repetition of "falling" here is also an example of the device [diacope](#)):

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh fast

Both night and snow associated with cold and discomfort, especially for travelers who might be caught out in them. They're both conditions that make people want to go inside, where it's warm, light, safe, etc. The fact that they're both

falling "fast" suggests that the travel conditions in this [setting](#) are quickly getting worse.

The parallelism in line 12, meanwhile, intensifies the speaker's claims. The blank snow has "no expression, nothing to express." In other words, not only does it look empty on the surface, but it's also empty in a more *profound* way. Like a featureless face or white sheet of paper, it has nothing to communicate to human beings (and, by implication, nature itself is cold and indifferent).

Finally, the parallelism (and diacope) in line 14 ("Between stars—on stars") evokes an associative leap of thought. The empty spaces "Between stars" (the vast reaches of outer space) immediately make the speaker think of the emptiness "on stars" (i.e., on the uninhabitable surfaces of stars themselves). The dash between these parallel phrases conveys the quickness of the speaker's mental leap, which is also a kind of intensification. Not only are the heavens mostly dark and empty, even the few lights people can see in them—stars—would be "desert places" if people somehow visited them.

### Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Snow falling," "night falling"
- **Line 12:** "no expression, nothing to express."
- **Line 14:** "Between stars—on stars"

## DIACOPE

The poem features quite a bit of [diacope](#), repeating a number of words (or variants on the same word) in close succession. In the first line alone, "falling" and "fast" each appear twice, with either one or two intervening words:

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast

This [repetition](#) likely makes the reader feel slightly bombarded, like the speaker passing through a swirl of snowflakes. In themselves, the words "falling" and "fast" (along with the speaker's anxious "oh") create an atmosphere of anxiety, a sense that conditions are rapidly deteriorating.

The most noticeable diacope spans lines 8-10: "loneliness [...] lonely [...] loneliness [...]. Although this passage primarily describes the desolation of the landscape, the insistent repetition suggests that the speaker is wrestling with their own loneliness—in fact, projecting that feeling onto the surrounding world. When a version of "lonely" appears four times in three lines, it's a major clue that loneliness is one of the poem's main themes! (Meanwhile, the repetition of "will be" invests the passage with a sense of inevitability and foreboding: the speaker won't be able to escape this loneliness.)

Lastly, the word "stars" appears twice in quick succession in line 14: "Between stars—on stars where no human race is." Here, diacope evokes a quick, associative leap of thought: the inhuman emptiness *between* stars (the void of outer space) puts

the speaker in mind of the inhuman emptiness *on* stars (heavenly bodies completely inhospitable to life).

#### Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "falling," "falling," "fast," "fast"
- **Line 8:** "loneliness"
- **Line 9:** "lonely," "loneliness"
- **Line 10:** "Will be," "lonely," "will be"
- **Line 12:** "expression," "express"
- **Line 14:** "stars," "stars"

## METAPHOR

The poem's subtle [metaphors](#) help illustrate both the [setting](#) and the speaker's mood.

The first metaphor appears in line 6: "All animals are smothered in their lairs." Of course, this isn't literally true: the woodland animals are burrowing or hibernating in their dens, not suffocating in them. This adjective should be read [figuratively](#): there's so much snow on the ground that it's *as if* the animals are "smothered." At the same time, the speaker themselves may *feel* smothered—overwhelmed, anxious, etc.—on this bleak night, and they may be projecting their own feelings onto other creatures.

There are also metaphorical elements to the description of the landscape in lines 11-12:

A blanker whiteness of benighted snow  
With no expression, nothing to express.

On the simplest level, this description refers to a white expanse of snow, which is covered by nightfall ("benighted") and so smooth that it seems featureless, or "expression[less]." Metaphorically, however, "benighted" can mean "primitive" or "ignorant." The references to "blank[ness]" and lack of "expression," meanwhile, bring to mind at least two images: a blank sheet of paper and a neutral-looking face. In other words, the figurative undertones of this description emphasize how primitive, inhuman, and meaningless the snow (or nature) is. It's like a white sheet of paper with nothing written on it, because nature has no human-style literacy and "nothing to express" in human terms. It's also like a blank face in which we can't see anything resembling ourselves.

Not only is this landscape empty of other living creatures, then, it also seems empty of significance. This metaphorical "blank[ness]" troubles the speaker deeply, as a human being and perhaps also as a poet.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "All animals are smothered in their lairs."
- **Lines 11-12:** "A blanker whiteness of benighted snow /

With no expression, nothing to express."

## JUXTAPOSITION

The final stanza of the poem [juxtaposes](#) the "desert places" of outer space with those the speaker finds "much nearer home":

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces  
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.  
I have it in me so much nearer home  
To scare myself with my own desert places.

"Between stars" refers to the uninhabitable void of outer space; "on stars" refers to the uninhabitable climate of stars themselves (or perhaps to whole solar systems uninhabited by human life). Neither of these things, the speaker says, can "scare me" with their emptiness. That's because the speaker has desert places of "[their] own," which are just as empty and forbidding, but far less remote—and therefore far more frightening. They're "nearer home" in the literal sense that they're located close to the speaker's residence (like the "field" described in line 2), but perhaps also in the [metaphorical](#) sense that they're part of the speaker's psyche. In other words, the scariest emptiness might be an *inner* emptiness that the speaker feels.

The juxtaposition here mainly draws a contrast, claiming that faraway "desert places" are less frightening than those close at hand. But it also implies a comparison, suggesting that the loneliness in one's own backyard—or in one's own mind—can be as profound as the loneliness of outer space.

#### Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-16:** "They cannot scare me with their empty spaces / Between stars—on stars where no human race is. / I have it in me so much nearer home / To scare myself with my own desert places."

## ENJAMBMENT

"Desert Places" contains only a handful of [enjambments](#), but all help reinforce the poem's meaning.

For example, the enjambment at the end of line 1 makes the line seem to hang in midair for a moment before "falling" into the next:

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, **fast**  
In a field I looked into going past,

This effect subtly mimics the "falling" of night and snow. The lack of a grammatical pause between lines also makes the speaker, who's anxiously describing the weather ("fast, oh, fast"), seem a bit more breathless.

The enjambments at the end of lines 9 and 13 highlight two important words/phrases: "loneliness" and "empty spaces":

And lonely as it is, that **loneliness**  
 Will be more lonely ere it will be less—  
 [...]
 They cannot scare me with their **empty spaces**  
**Between** stars—on stars where no human race is.

Both relate to the core themes of this poem about isolation and desolation. Due to the lack of end-line punctuation, the words themselves seem to dangle in the empty spaces at the end of their respective lines.

The final enjambment, at the end of line 15, emphasizes the word "home":

I have it in me so much nearer **home**  
 To scare myself with my own desert places.

This, too, is a thematically important word, though it reads as somewhat [ironic](#) in the overall context of the poem. This speaker seems to feel that they, and humanity, are *not* at home in nature or the surrounding universe. Everything around them looks lonely, indifferent, and forbidding, not cozy and welcoming. Again, the word seems to dangle uneasily in empty space; it's not *driven* home by end-line punctuation.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "fast / In"
- **Lines 9-10:** "loneliness / Will"
- **Lines 13-14:** "spaces / Between"
- **Lines 15-16:** "home / To"



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Desert Places" consists of four quatrains (a.k.a. four-line stanzas). These are more specifically something called *rubaiyat* stanzas, meaning:

- Each stanza has an AABA [rhyme scheme](#). In other words, the first, second, and fourth lines of each quatrain rhyme, while the third line is unrhymed. (However, two of the poem's unrhymed lines, lines 3 and 11, end with the same word: "snow." That's one sign of the importance of snow in the poem!)
- Each line is written [iambic pentameter](#): that is, they generally consist of 10 syllables that follow a "da-DUM, da-DUM" rhythm. (Not all *rubaiyat* stanzas use pentameter, but it's common.)

*Rubaiyat* (sometimes rendered *rubā'iyāt* or *rubāiyāt*) is the plural of the Persian term *rubā'i*, meaning quatrain. In classical Persian poetry, the *rubā'i* form followed a different meter but was conventionally rhymed AABA or AAAA. This form was adapted into English in the 19th century, beginning with poet Edward FitzGerald's loose translation of selected *rubāiyāt* attributed to the classical Persian astronomer and poet Omar Khayyam. The *Rubāiyāt of Omar Khayyām* (1859) was a popular success and inspired other English-language poets to use this form in subsequent decades.

FitzGerald's translation was notable for its religious skepticism (an outlook the original poet may have shared, though this question is still debated). Frost's "Desert Places," with its skeptical view of humanity's place in the universe, may use the *rubaiyat* form partly in order to evoke the wry cosmic pessimism of Khayyam/FitzGerald. Frost also used versions of this form on other occasions, including in "[Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#)" (a poem whose [setting](#) and themes overlap with those of "Desert Places").

### METER

The poem's [meter](#) is [iambic](#) pentameter, meaning that its lines typically contain 10 syllables arranged in a "da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM" stress pattern. (That is, they typically contain five iambs, or metrical feet consisting of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable.)

That's the basic pattern, anyway—but Frost roughens it up a bit, as he often does. The first line of *perfect* iambic pentameter doesn't arrive until line 5:

The woods | around | it have | it—it | is theirs.

Until then, every line contains metrical variations, and lines 1-2 are especially weird and wild:



## VOCABULARY

**Stubble** (Line 4) - The short, cut stalks of a harvested field.

**Lairs** (Line 6) - The dens of wild animals.

**Absent-spirited** (Line 7) - Feeling empty, detached, and/or distracted.

**Unawares** (Line 8) - Unconsciously; without being aware (of something).

**Ere** (Line 10) - An archaic synonym of "before."

**Benighted** (Line 11) - Literally, covered with the darkness of night; [metaphorically](#), ignorant or primitive.

**Desert** (Line 16) - Deserted, empty, barren (as applied to any landscape, not necessarily a hot or arid one).

Snow fal- | ling and | night fal- | ling fast, | oh, fast  
In a | field | | looked in- | to go- | ing past,

There are other ways to read the meter in these lines; the point is, they're well off the groove of the iambic pattern. This unevenness might reflect the whirling chaos of the snowstorm, as well as the anxious, unsettled mood of the speaker.

As the poem goes on, the meter reinforces meaning in other ways, too. For example, the third [stanza](#) is metrically smooth, with few variations—perhaps mirroring the snow's "expression[less]" smoothness.

## RHYME SCHEME

The poem is written in [quatrains](#) that rhyme AABA. The first, second, and final lines of each [stanza](#) rhyme, while the third is unrhymed:

[...] fast A  
[...] past, A  
[...] snow, B  
[...] last. A

This kind of quatrain is known as a *rubaiyat* stanza, after the classical Persian form called the *rubāʿi* (plural *rubāʿiyāt*). In English-language poetry, this form is especially associated with the *Rubāʿiyāt of Omar Khayyām* (1859), a translation by the English poet Edward FitzGerald. That book's desert settings and skeptical outlook may have influenced "Desert Places" (see Form and Context sections for more).

The AABA rhyme scheme has other effects that subtly shape, or reinforce, the poem's meaning. The flurry of A rhymes in each stanza has a heavy, cumulative impact that might be compared to the accumulating snowfall. Meanwhile, the unrhymed end word in the third line serves as the "exception to the rule" and therefore stands out. In the first and third stanzas, this effect draws attention to the word "snow"—obviously an important image in the poem! In the final stanza, it draws attention to the word "home," a complicated and possibly [ironic](#) word for this lonely, alienated speaker.



## SPEAKER

"Desert Places" has a generic first-person speaker whose name, gender, occupation, etc. are never specified. This speaker is traveling through rural woods and farmland on a snowy night, but it's not clear where they're coming from, where they're going, or why they're out in the cold weather. The lack of specificity makes the speaker seem more universal, in keeping with a poem that portrays a kind of universal "loneliness."

Of course, the speaker could also be a stand-in for the poet. The general voice and [setting](#) are consistent with many other

Frost poems (including "[Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#)"), and the references to "blinker whiteness" and having "nothing to express" (lines 11-12) might reflect the creative frustrations of a poet who fears the blank page.

In any case, most of what the reader learns about the speaker concerns their mood or psychological state. The speaker feels "absent-spirited"—empty or distracted, as if they're not really there—and suggests that they don't even "count" as part of the larger scenery. They share the "loneliness" of their surroundings (or *project* their loneliness *onto* their surroundings), and they seem unnerved by the blank emptiness of the snowy landscape. They "scare" themselves with "[their] own desert places," which presumably include this landscape—but might also include an *internal* sense of emptiness. Overall, the speaker seems to feel hollow or numb in a way that corresponds with the barren, snowy fields.



## SETTING

"Desert Places" is set in a rural landscape on a snowy winter night. A number of Robert Frost poems use this kind of [setting](#), including the famous "[Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#)." Frost himself is particularly associated with rural New England, where he lived for most of his adult life, but nothing in this poem specifies a geographical location.

The "field" the speaker passes is cultivated farmland; the "stubble" showing through the snow refers to cut stalks of harvested grain. This farmland is surrounded by wilder "woods," whose tall trees seem to dominate the scene ("it is theirs") once the snowfall has blanketed everything else. All the animals in the vicinity are burrowed in their dens, or, as the speaker puts it, "smothered in their lairs." The speaker appears to be the only living creature out in this snowstorm, and even he feels "too absent-spirited to count."

The speaker expects the snow and darkness to last for many more hours, meaning that the night will grow "more lonely" before it grows "less." The speaker also situates this barren scene within a wider universe, full of vast, empty spaces "Between stars" and "on stars where no human race is." In this way, the poem makes the loneliness of its rural landscape seem universal.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

"Desert Places" was written in 1933, first published in the journal *The American Mercury* in 1934, and collected in *A Further Range* (1936), the volume that won Robert Frost his third of four Pulitzer Prizes in Poetry. It remains one of the better-known poems from that volume, which also includes such



widely anthologized classics as "[Neither Out Far nor in Deep](#)" and "[Provide, Provide](#)."

Though widely read and much honored during his lifetime, some audiences originally viewed Frost as a quaint, folksy writer: a kind of backwoods New England sage. In 1958, the famous literary critic Lionel Trilling helped change this perception when he called the elderly Frost "a terrifying poet." Though Frost remained steadfastly traditional in his use of [meter](#) and [rhyme](#), he displayed a very modern, scientifically informed skepticism—sometimes even a chilling pessimism—in poems like "Desert Places," "[Design](#)," "[The Most of It](#)," and others. Many of Frost's poems, including "Desert Places" and the famous "[Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#)," feature solitary characters, rural settings, and [metaphors](#) that explore the relationship between humanity and nature.

"Desert Places" uses something called rubaiyat stanzas: [iambic pentameter](#) [quatrains](#) that follow an AABA [rhyme scheme](#) (more on this in the Form, Meter, and Rhyme Scheme sections of this guide). This stanza is based on a classical Persian form popularized in English by Edward FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859), a loose translation of various *rubáiyát* attributed to the Persian scientist and poet Omar Khayyam (1048-1131). This book is remembered for its mix of hedonism, religious skepticism, and worldly pessimism. Readers can hear the last of those qualities in this excerpt (which, like Frost's poem, features the words "Desert" and "Snow"):

The Worldly Hope men set their Hearts upon  
Turns Ashes—or it prospers; and anon,  
Like Snow upon the Desert's dusty Face,  
Lighting a little hour or two—is gone.

Frost isn't necessarily [alluding](#) to the *Rubáiyát* through his use of rubaiyat stanzas, but the older book may have had some influence on the form and tone of "Desert Places."

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Desert Places" takes place in a barren, timeless-seeming winter landscape. It doesn't mention any historical figures or events; unlike Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," which it resembles in some ways, it doesn't even include period details such as a horse with "harness bells." However, a few of its features may subtly reflect the life and times of the poet.

Frost wrote "Desert Places" during a winter in which he struggled with depression. Some scholars have interpreted the poem in autobiographical terms, suggesting that it reflects Frost's personal alienation and anxieties about creative decline—his fear that he, like the snow, had "nothing to express" (lines 11-12). For example, the biographer Henry Hart has claimed that Frost "transfigured his disenchantment with life" into this "haunting" poem.

The last [stanza](#) of the poem may also allude to then-recent discoveries in the field of astronomy. In 1923, astronomer Edwin Hubble proved that other galaxies exist beyond the Milky Way; in 1929, he confirmed Georges Lemaître's theory that the universe is expanding. In 1930, astronomer Clyde Lombaugh confirmed the existence of the barren dwarf planet Pluto. All these events happened in the decade or so before Frost wrote "Desert Places," and any or all may have informed the poem's reference to "empty spaces / Between stars—on stars where no human race is" (lines 13-14). These lines seem to reflect a modern view of the universe as vaster and emptier than pre-20th-century science had ever imagined. Perhaps the "They" who "cannot scare" the poem's speaker refers to the scientists who kept showing how lonely outer space is!



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Aloud](#) — Listen to a reading of the poem, courtesy of The Frost Place. ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoEdd\\_7ZsaE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoEdd_7ZsaE))
- [The Poet's Life and Work](#) — Read a biography of Frost at Poets.org. (<https://poets.org/poet/robert-frost>)
- [More on Frost](#) — A video biography of the poet. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2stTH-rtq8>)
- [Frost's Ideas About the World](#) — Listen to a talk on "Frost as a Thinker" by poet Don Paterson. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/75941/don-paterson-on-robert-frost>)
- [Frost's Landscapes](#) — A photo essay about the rural New England scenery that inspired much of Frost's poetry. (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/mysterious-beauty-robert-frost-new-england-180972502/>)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- [Acquainted with the Night](#)
- [After Apple-Picking](#)
- [Birches](#)
- [Dust of Snow](#)
- [Fire and Ice](#)
- [Home Burial](#)
- [Mending Wall](#)
- [Nothing Gold Can Stay](#)
- [Out, Out—](#)
- [Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#)
- [The Oven Bird](#)
- [The Road Not Taken](#)
- [The Sound of the Trees](#)
- [The Tuft of Flowers](#)
- [The Wood-Pile](#)



## HOW TO CITE

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