

Design



POEM TEXT

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

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

life is brutally random or if there's a higher power with an intelligent "design" for the universe pulling the strings. The poem ultimately implies that the existence of such a power (i.e., God) isn't necessarily any more comforting than the idea that people are all alone; on the contrary, such a "designer" must have a twisted taste for darkness and evil.

On the one hand, the sight of these three white figures might mean that the world is the product of intelligent design—that all of nature's complex parts have been finely tuned by an outside force into one miraculous system. The speaker wonders if something or someone "steered" the moth to the flower at the exact moment the spider was on top of it and ready to pounce. Other elements of the scene also might suggest that it's more than mere coincidence: "heal-all" flowers are usually blue, for example, but this one is white, just like the spider and moth atop it.

That the spider, moth, and flower are all white in color might also [symbolically](#) link these creatures with purity and divinity. Perhaps, then, the white scene is meant to be a sign of God's hand in guiding the world.

But the scene is also brutal: a creature is being eaten, after all! To the speaker, there's thus something unnerving and grotesque about all this whiteness because it's so clearly tied to suffering and destruction; it evokes not heavenly purity and divine love, but deathly pallor. These "characters," the speaker continues, are more like the "ingredients" in a creepy witches' potion than proof of God's love for creation.

If a higher power did design this ugly scene, the speaker concludes, then this power might actually be pretty malevolent! The speaker calls this a "design of darkness" and suggests that this sight was placed before the speaker with the express purpose of making them feel "appall[ed]." The poem thus proposes that the designer of the universe is more like a malevolent trickster than a loving father. The idea of a higher power being in control is thus more unnerving than comforting, the speaker implies, because such a power must have intentionally designed suffering, cruelty, and death.

In the end, however, the poem questions whether God exists at all: the speaker wonders if there really is any sort of design to a "thing so small" as this creepy little interaction between a spider, moth, and flower. In other words, the speaker wonders if life itself is too "small" and unimportant to warrant the hand of a designer in the first place.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14



SUMMARY

I came across a bloated, white, dimpled spider, resting on a white heal-all flower. The spider held a white moth above itself, as though it were a piece of stiff, satin cloth. These various figures of death and destruction seemed poised to act with purpose this morning. They were like the ingredients being stirred up in a witches' brew: a snow-white spider, a flower that looked like foam, and the fragile wings of the dead moth being carried by the spider as though they were a kite.

Why on earth was that innocent little flower white, when heal-all flowers are supposed to be blue? What prompted the spider to climb up onto the heal-all, as though in cahoots with it, and then drove the moth right by them during the night? Whatever designed this scene must have been trying to to frighten those who saw it—that is, if there is any design behind such trivial things.



THEMES



THE ROLE AND EXISTENCE OF GOD

Robert Frost's "Design" describes a white spider on a white flower holding a dead white moth (its next meal). Musing on who or what brought these three "characters" together in this gruesome scene, the speaker wonders whether



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*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—*

The poem begins with the speaker coming across a strange sight. First, there's a spider. Nothing unusual there, except that this spider is "dimpled" (meaning it has little indentations in its body) and fat. Such adjectives are usually used when talking about human beings, and their use here might make this spider seem a little cartoonish.

The [consonance](#) of "found a dimpled spider"—with all those bloated /d/ sounds in particular—seems to evoke the spider's rotund appearance. Notice, too, how that [caesura](#) between "spider" and "fat," makes the line feel almost like it's swaying, as though the spider is nearly too heavy for the flower it sits on.

This spider is also "white," a relatively unusual color for such a creature. This big, white spider doesn't seem all *that* odd, however, until readers get to the next two lines: the spider is resting on a "white heal-all" (a small flower, which is normally blue), and it's holding onto a white (presumably dead) moth—it's next meal!

The spider might now seem grotesque and gluttonous rather than merely odd. And the fact that there are three white creatures together makes the scene all the more surreal. The speaker repeats the word "white" three times in three lines, in fact, emphasizing just how wild of a coincidence this is (note that this kind of repetition is called [diacope](#)).

The white moth, meanwhile, is stiff with death, like a "piece of rigid satin cloth." This [simile](#) makes it seem as though the spider is inspecting the moth for quality, admiring its deadly handiwork while remaining callously indifferent to the life it has just taken.

The flower's name thus becomes rather [ironic](#): heal-alls have long been utilized for their supposed medicinal properties, and their name itself suggests positivity, good health, and the wonder of nature. The color white also often [symbolizes](#) purity, holiness, innocence, and so forth. There's a dawning tension, then, between the connotations this white scene might evoke and what is actually being described.

Finally, note the [meter](#) of these lines: Frost is using something called [iambic pentameter](#), which means that there are five iambs per line. An iamb is a poetic foot that follows an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern. Here's the meter of line 1 as an example:

I found | a dimp- | led spi- | der, fat | and white,

This bouncy da-DUM pattern makes the lines feel bouncy and

musical. The meter, like the whiteness of the scene, is perhaps deceptively simple and upbeat.

LINES 4-6

*Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches' broth—*

The speaker views the spider, flower, and moth as "assorted characters" in a kind of macabre drama, playing out a scene of death and brutality. Calling these creatures "characters" suggests that there's a playwright or director behind the scenes—that they're simply acting out parts that have been written for them. And those parts are all about "death and "blight"—destruction, ruination, etc. The whiteness here no longer suggests holiness or purity but the paleness of death itself, as though these figures have been drained of all vitality.

These "characters" have all been "[m]ixed" together, the speaker continues, and it looks like they're "ready to begin"—that is, they're poised to play the roles they've been assigned, "to begin the morning right." Think about the use of "right" here: it suggests that what they're doing is correct (that is, it's what they've been *designed* to do). Note, too, how "blight" rhymes with "right," implying a connection between natural order and destruction. These ghastly sights are as much a part of the world as anything else, the poem suggests.

The speaker next compares this mix of characters to "ingredients of a witches' broth." Readers might hear echoes of Shakespeare's [Macbeth](#) here: the play famously includes three witches tossing obscure, grotesque ingredients (think: "eye of newt and toe of frog") into their cauldron in order to divine Macbeth's downfall. In comparing the moth, flower, and spider to witches' ingredients, the poem implies that they're tools being used toward some ghastly end.

LINES 7-8

*A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.*

Lines 7 and 8 recap the "ingredients" of this witches' brew using surreal visual [imagery](#): the spider here is like a "snow-drop," a phrase that sounds like something sweetly pleasant yet is being used to [ironically](#) describe a fat, hungry spider. The heal-all flower, meanwhile, is like "a froth," or foam—perhaps the kind that froths from a sick person's mouth.

With its thick [alliteration](#), [assonance](#), and [consonance](#), this line sound almost like a spell. Think back to the poem's earlier [allusion](#) to [Macbeth](#), with its creepy witches who famously chant, "Double, double toil and trouble; / Fire burn and caldron bubble":

A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,

The comparison of the moth's wings to a kite is also darkly ironic: kites are usually exciting toys that soar through the air, but here the [simile](#) refers to the way that the spider carries the moth's stiff, lifeless body above itself. This simile removes any agency from the moth, depicting it instead as the spider's (and maybe the witches'/God's) plaything.

LINES 9-12

*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?*

Line 9 marks this poem's turn, or [volta](#): the moment in a [sonnet](#) when the speaker changes tack, responding in some way to the questions or concerns posed in the poem's first eight lines (called the sonnet's octave). The final six lines of the poem are called a [sestet](#).

Here, the speaker moves from simply describing this unnerving scene to commenting on it. What business did "that flower" have being white, the speaker wonders? For one thing, heal-alls are usually blue, so this one is strange, even freakish. The speaker implies that this isn't the flower's fault, however; the heal-all is "innocent" in the sense that it didn't actively *choose* to be white. (The word "wayside" probably just refers to the fact that heal-all flowers often grow at the side of the road.) Instead, the speaker implies, something else (the grand designer of the universe, perhaps) *made* it white.

Remember, too, that the color white usually [symbolizes](#) purity, truth, light, etc. So when the speaker [rhetorically](#) asks what the flower had "to do with being white," the speaker is also implicitly questioning the meaning of whiteness itself. If whiteness is *really* a sign of purity and divine love, then why on earth would the higher power that designed the world make a *white* flower the scene of killing?

The speaker then poses another rhetorical question, asking what compelled the spider to climb up on top of the flower (its "kindred" collaborator in the sense that both seem to work together to trap the moth). What, the speaker continues, then "steered" the white moth right into the spider's grasp? It all seems too perfect to be a coincidence. Surely, the speaker wonders, there must be some supernatural designer work—right?

Listen to the way Frost uses sound in these lines. The gentle /th/ [consonance](#) throughout line 12 reflects the quiet, delicate, fluttering movement of the moth as it's "steered"—guided by some outside hand—into the spider's grasp and its own death:

Then steered the white moth thither in the night?

The line seems to evoke just how fragile the moth is, perhaps making its violent death feel all the more cruel.

LINES 13-14

*What but design of darkness to appall?—
If design govern in a thing so small.*

The poem ends with a final [couplet](#) that responds to the previous four lines (making it a kind of second *volta*!). If the scene before the speaker was truly the "design" of a higher power, the speaker concludes, then that "design" must have been one of "darkness"—that is, a design intended to "appall" (horrify) anybody looking on. In other words, any higher power that designed this scene did so in order to disgust and disturb onlookers.

The word "appall" might also be a subtle [pun](#): it comes from an Old French word meaning "to grow pale," and it thus evokes both the pallor of death and the creepy white color that's appeared throughout the poem. The dull, thudding [alliteration](#) of "design of darkness," meanwhile, calls attention to this phrase and also puts the poet's own "design" skills on display, perhaps subtly mirroring the handiwork that went into making the universe itself.

In the poem's final line, however, the speaker tosses in one final twist. The speaker says that if a higher power did indeed design the world, then that higher power is pretty terrifying—but the key word here is "if." The speaker doesn't necessarily *believe* in a malevolent creator. Here, they allow for the possibility that there's no higher power, no designer, at all—that the world is in fact the product of random chance and chaos. "[D]esign" might not actually "govern," or rule over, "a thing so small" as a spider eating a moth.

All the complexities of the world aren't necessarily evidence of God, in other words, and the speaker suggests that they might not be that complex in the first place! Perhaps life itself is "small" in the grand scheme of things, and it's mere hubris to consider that a grand designer is behind things. Perhaps people are all alone—but whether that's more or less terrifying than being ruled over by a malevolent designer is up to readers to decide.



SYMBOLS



WHITENESS

"Design" takes some familiar [symbolism](#) and flips it on its head. The color white typically represents purity, innocence, and truth. It's a color often linked with goodness and with God, while its opposite—darkness—is linked with evil.

Yet when the speaker finds a white spider on top of a white flower, holding a dead white moth, this sight offers none of the warm, fuzzy feelings associated with the symbolism mentioned above. In this scene, whiteness seems more linked with the

pallor of death than it does with any sort of heavenly truth and light. To the speaker, there's nothing innocent about what's going on; on the contrary, it's a "design of darkness"—something evil. This whiteness thus feels like the kind of cosmic joke: if God designed the world—and, it follows, designed the scene before the speaker—then that means God took a color people link with goodness and used it "to appall," or disgust. Whiteness, here, suggests God's cruelty, not God's love.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "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—"
- **Lines 9-10:** "What had that flower to do with being white, / The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?"



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem features a few examples of [alliteration](#), which mostly help call attention to its [imagery](#). Listen, for example, to the alliteration in line 7 as the speaker describes the "ingredients of a witches' broth":

A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,

These hushed sounds lend subtle beauty to the line; that "snow-drop spider" might seem lovely rather than grotesque. And yet, this line is describing something pretty spooky: a ghostly white spider and a flower that resembles the foam atop a witches' brew. The clear alliteration might even make readers think of a spell or chant.

Another interesting example of alliteration comes in line 12:

Then steered the white moth thither in the night?

All these breathy /th/ sounds make the line feel delicate, perhaps like the little moth itself as it's guided toward its doom by some unhand force.

By contrast, the heaving /d/ sounds of "design of darkness" in the poem's second-to-last line adds weight and power to the description of God's seemingly evil blueprint for the world. And in the final line, the quick, whispery /s/ of "so small" ends the poem on a quiet note—one perhaps reflective of how "small" and insignificant the scene might really be.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "snow-drop spider," "flower," "froth"

- **Line 8:** "carried," "kite"
- **Line 9:** "white"
- **Line 10:** "wayside"
- **Line 12:** "Then," "the," "thither," "the"
- **Line 13:** "design," "darkness"
- **Line 14:** "so small"

CONSONANCE

The occasional [consonance](#) in "Design" adds subtle music and emphasis to the poem's images and ideas. The thudding /d/ and plosive /p/ sounds of "dimpled spider," for example, seem to evoke that spider's rotund, bumpy body. Later, the sharp /k/ sounds of "carried like a paper kite" suggest a certain harshness: the image isn't delicate and lovely but crisp and cold, in keeping with the fact that the speaker is talking about the moth's "rigid," lifeless body.

Altogether, the poem's sonic devices (consonance along with [alliteration](#) and [assonance](#)) might also draw the reader's attention to the fact that this is a *poem*: a piece of writing that's been carefully *designed* by a poet to sound a very specific way.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dimpled spider"
- **Line 2:** "heal-all, holding"
- **Line 7:** "snow-drop spider," "flower," "froth"
- **Line 8:** "carried like," "kite"
- **Line 9:** "white"
- **Line 10:** "wayside"
- **Line 11:** "kindred spider"
- **Line 12:** "Then," "the," "moth thither," "the"
- **Line 13:** "design," "darkness"
- **Line 14:** "so small"

END-STOPPED LINE

Most of the lines in "Design" are [end-stopped](#). This creates a steady, plodding pace throughout the poem. Even the two lines that arguably feature [enjambment](#) are very subtle and controlled; readers probably hear slight pauses after "moth" in line 2 and "blight" in line 4.

As a result, the speaker never seems erratic; there are no moments when emotion threatens to dislodge things, or when a sense of urgency or confusion pushes a thought to snap in the middle of a phrase and spill across to spill across a line break. End-stopping thus adds to the poem's pensive, reflective tone. The speaker is logical, even detached—considering the scene before them as rationally as possible.

The use of so much end-stopping also might remind readers that there's someone pulling the strings here—that the poet has *designed* this poem to sound a certain way and to elicit certain responses from readers.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "white,"
- **Line 3:** "cloth—"
- **Line 5:** "right,"
- **Line 6:** "broth—"
- **Line 7:** "froth,"
- **Line 8:** "kite."
- **Line 9:** "white,"
- **Line 10:** "heal-all?"
- **Line 11:** "height,"
- **Line 12:** "night?"
- **Line 13:** "appall?—"
- **Line 14:** "small."

IMAGERY

Robert Frost is famous for his evocative natural [imagery](#), and his ability to conjure up vivid scenes for the reader is on clear display in "Design."

The poem's first three lines paint a clear picture of the bizarre sight that confronts the speaker: a white spider atop a white flower holding a white moth. The [diacope](#) of the word "white" calls attention to just how unlikely this scene is; white spiders are pretty rare and heal-all flowers are usually blue. Readers can envision how such a scene would stand out starkly against the greenery of the natural world and catch the speaker's eye.

Other visual details make the scene downright disturbing: the spider is bloated in a way that suggests gluttony and greed. And the [simile](#) "like a white of rigid satin cloth" calls attention to just how *weird* this moth looks: satin is usually silk and smooth, not rigid. The moth is stiff with death, and this has made it look odd and unnerving to the speaker.

The speaker again uses striking imagery when describing this scene in lines 7-8. The speaker likens these creatures to "ingredients of a witches' broth," linking them with supernatural evil. The speaker then compares the spider to a "snow-drop," the flower to "froth" (or foam—at the top of that witches' brew, maybe), and the moth's rigid wings to a lifeless "paper kite." There's again something surreal and disturbing about these images; something seems wrong with the scene, which has been sapped of color and vitality.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "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—"
- **Lines 7-8:** "A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth, / And dead wings carried like a paper kite."

DIACOPE

"Design" uses [diacope](#) in its opening lines, repeating the word

"white" three times in close succession:

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—

This repetition serves a pretty clear purpose: it emphasizes the whiteness of this scene! Diacope underscores the strangeness of the scene, almost as though the speaker is saying to the reader, "This was white *and* this was white *and* this was white... what are the odds!"

In bombarding the reader with this color (or, technically, absence of color), the poem also clues readers into the importance of whiteness in the poem. The color white is also usually linked with purity. Calling attention to the color might make readers expect this scene to be one that speaks to the innocent beauty of nature, and which evidences God's loving hand guiding the natural world. Of course, that's not the case; this ghastly scene leads the speaker to conclude that whatever or whoever designed the world (if such a designer exists) must enjoy "appall[ing]" people. The whiteness becomes grotesque, linked with death and cruelty.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "white"
- **Line 2:** "white"
- **Line 3:** "white"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Traditionally, the octave (or first eight lines) of a Petrarchan [sonnet](#) will pose a question or a problem, which the [sestet](#) (the final six lines) then resolve. The sestet of "Design," however, doesn't provide any clear answers. On the contrary, the speaker introduces a series of [rhetorical questions](#) starting in line 9: what business did the heal-all flower, which is usually blue, have being white—a color linked with innocence and purity, yet here used in a scene of "death and blight"? What force guided the white spider to the top of the flower, and then "steered" a white moth directly into its clutches?

On one level, the speaker does seem to be really seeking answers to these questions—to be searching for some insight into the nature of the universe. Yet they're ultimately rhetorical because the speaker is asking them in order to prove a point about intelligent design. The speaker takes the unsettling sight of the white spider, moth, and heal-all and confronts the reader with a theological problem: if there is a higher power behind this scene, then that power must have had "darkness" in mind. In other words, such a designer must be malevolent.

Note, too, that these rhetorical questions overlap with the device known as [anaphora](#): the speaker repeats "What" at the start of each. In addition to adding a sense of building

momentum to the poem, this repetition calls attention to the fact that the speaker doesn't actually know "what," if anything, designed the world.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-13:** "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?—"

SIMILE

"Design" uses three [similes](#) to create haunting images and unsettle its readers. Effectively, there is just one main image in the poem—the white spider on a white flower, holding a dead white moth—but the speaker uses a range of similes to present and re-present what they can see. Notably, these aren't [metaphors](#); the speaker isn't saying that the moth is a piece of cloth or a kite, nor that the flower is "froth." Broadly speaking, this repeated reaching for *similes* suggests the speaker's confusion—their attempt to understand this bizarre, grotesque display of death and destruction.

The simile in lines 2-3 describes the way in which the spider holds the moth "like a white piece of rigid satin cloth." It's as though the bloated spider is a merchant, inspecting material for its quality—which, given the moth was until recently a living creature, seems pretty cruel and callous (in turn suggesting that any "designer" behind the world must have a cruel streak, or that the world is cruelly random). Saying that the moth itself looks like "rigid satin cloth" adds to the surreal quality of the scene as well. Satin is smooth and supple, not "rigid." This image is a subtle [oxymoron](#), one that might make the scene feel more disturbing and wrong.

The speaker then compares the spider, moth, and flower to the "ingredients of a witches' broth." This is a rather queasy and unsettling idea that makes the whole scene seem frightening and supernatural (as if designed by an evil spirit). The speaker then compares the flower to "froth," which might evoke the bubbles and foam atop that witches' brew and presents the flower as something disgusting rather than beautiful.

Finally, the speaker compares the dead moth's motionless wings to "a paper kite" carried by the spider. Kites are toys, items linked with joy and play. Here, though, this kite is being passively carried rather than soaring through the air, reinforcing the disturbing nature of this scene.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "holding up a moth / Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—"
- **Line 6:** "Like the ingredients of a witches' broth—"

- **Lines 7-8:** "a flower like a froth, / And dead wings carried like a paper kite."



VOCABULARY

Dimpled (Line 1) - With small indentations.

Heal-all (Line 2) - A small flower thought to have medicinal properties. A heal-all is usually blue in color—hence the speaker's surprise!

Rigid (Line 3) - Hard, stiffened.

Satin (Line 3) - A glossy fabric.

Assorted (Line 4) - Various.

Blight (Line 4) - Disease and/or destruction.

Broth (Line 6) - A soupy potion.

Snow-drop (Line 7) - White in color, like the snow-drop flower.

Froth (Line 7) - Foamy bubbles.

Wayside (Line 10) - On the side of the road/path (here, the word also implies that the flower has lost its way).

Kindred (Line 11) - Similar/part of the same family. Here, the word implies that the spider and flower are working together.

Steered (Line 12) - Guided.

Thither (Line 12) - There; towards a particular place.

Appall (Line 13) - Disgust/horrify. Etymologically speaking, the word originally meant "to make pale"—which fits in with the poem's frequent references to whiteness!



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Design" is a [sonnet](#). Its 14 lines can be broken down into an opening eight-line stanza called an octave and a six-line stanza called a sestet.

There are a few different kinds of sonnets. The first half of "Design" sticks to the Petrarchan variety, meaning its octave can be broken into two quatrains (four-line stanzas), each of which follows an ABBA ABBA [rhyme scheme](#). In a Petrarchan sonnet, the sestet also serves as a kind of answer to a question or issue presented in the octave, almost like a joke with its set-up and punchline. The moment when the poem shifts direction is called the turn or *volta*, it comes right on cue here in line 9 ("What had that flower to do with being white").

The sonnet is one of the most famous poetic forms in English (and other) languages. Particularly in its early days, the sonnet was often a kind of arena in which poets could prove their poetic skill. There's thus a strong association between the form

in general and the intelligent designer behind it (the poet). By choosing the sonnet form, Frost situates his "Design" in a long history of poetic design.

But this poem also disrupts the normal conventions of Petrarchan sonnet in some important ways. For one thing, the speaker doesn't provide any real answers in the sestet; instead, the speaker shifts to more uncertain ground, posing a series of questions that probe at the nature of existence itself.

The sestet's rhyme scheme also breaks with that of a Petrarchan sonnet. It ends with a rhyming couplet—something that happens in a *Shakespearean* sonnet, not a Petrarchan one:

What but design of darkness to appall?—
If design govern in a thing so small.

In Shakespearean sonnets, the couplet also marks the poem's volta. And there is indeed essentially a *second* volta here: the speaker declares that any grand designer of the universe must be malevolent, before ending things with the possibility that there's no designer at all. In this way, the speaker turns the poem on its head in the final moments, leaving the reader with no easy answers.

METER

"Design" uses the standard meter for [sonnets](#): [iambic pentameter](#). This means that each line has five iambs, poetic units (a.k.a. feet) that follow an [unstressed-stressed](#) syllabic pattern (da-DUM). The first line provides a good example of this meter in action:

I found | a dimp- | led spid- | er, fat | and white,

This steady meter gives the poem a sense of stability and control. In a way, it reflects Frost's own "Design" for his poem.

There are some variations in the poem's meter, however, which keep things from feeling too stiff and also call attention to important moments. For example, check out the extra stresses in line 8:

And dead | wings car- | ried like | a pa- | per kite.

Read most naturally, this line includes a [spondee](#) (two stresses in a row, DUM-DUM) on the second foot. This seems appropriate, given that "dead," "wings," and "carried" all feel like weighty words.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem features the following [rhyme scheme](#):

ABBAABBA ACAACC

The first eight lines here, a.k.a. the octave, follow the expected rhyme scheme of a Petrarchan [sonnet](#): two B rhymes

sandwiched between two A rhymes. Rhyme works like fancy patterns on a piece of cloth, providing clear evidence that a master designer is at work (in this case, Robert Frost!).

The [sestet](#) uses a unique rhyme pattern, however, that veers off from any of those usually used in Petrarchan sonnets. For one thing, the poet returns to that same A rhyme sound from the octave ("white"/"height"/"night"), when typically a sonnet would introduce *new* sounds in its final six lines. This might subtly reflect the fact that the sestet here isn't actually providing any resolution to the octave; it's just *continuing* the speaker's line of thought and posing questions. The continued A rhyme sound makes the whole poem feel intricately interwoven as well.

The poem then ends with a rhyming [couplet](#) ("appall"/"small"), which makes it sound more like a Shakespearean sonnet. That final rhyme calls attention to the poem's closing argument: that any "design" must exist to "appall," if such a design exists at all.



SPEAKER

"Design" uses a first-person speaker, though readers don't learn anything about this person's identity. That makes sense, given that the poem isn't really about the speaker; instead, the speaker here is a lens through which the reader gets to experience the strange sight of the white spider on the white flower holding the white moth. The speaker is clearly disturbed by this scene, using vivid [imagery](#) that makes it seem grotesque and wondering what kind of God would "design" it.

It's fair (though not necessary) to take the speaker of "Design" as representing the perspective of Robert Frost himself, as the poet wrote often about his experiences with the natural world.



SETTING

"Design" takes place on a morning out in nature, perhaps in a forest or field of some sort (or, given the reference to the "wayside" heal-all, at the side of a rural road). This isn't the green, luscious natural world that poetry often depicts, however; instead, it's a place seemingly drained of life and color, where a "fat" white spider sits atop an unnaturally white heal-all flower while holding onto a white moth.

Spiders and heal-alls aren't typically white, so this sight, in one interpretation, might point to the existence of a divine creator: an intelligent designer who brought these three white figures into this creepy tableau. But if that's the case, the speaker reasons, then it suggests this God-like figure has a pretty twisted sense of humor. In other words, if this scene points to there being a "design" to the world, it must be a "design of darkness" meant to disgust and disturb. The natural world thus becomes a reason *to doubt* the existence of a benevolent God, rather than *proof* of such a god.

On the other hand, the speaker notes in the poem's final line, it might not be evidence of a grand "design" at all; perhaps the scene is just a coincidence.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Design" first appeared in print in 1922 and was later collected in Robert Frost's 1936 book of poems, *A Further Range*. Frost (1874-1963) remains one of the most celebrated poets in the English language. He was popular both critically and commercially during his lifetime and won numerous prestigious prizes, including a Congressional Gold Medal and four Pulitzers.

Though loved and admired by a wide range of poets (including Modernists like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound), Frost never really belonged to a specific poetic group or movement. He wrote during the heyday of Modernist poetry, yet his own work was pretty traditional in terms of form. He regularly turned to steady [meters](#) and [rhyme schemes](#) in his poems, for example, famously likening [free verse](#) (which Modernism helped popularize) to "playing tennis without a net." At the same time, he favored accessible, down-to-earth language.

Frost wrote often about the mystery of existence and the relationship between humanity and nature, two themes on display in "Design." Many of Frost's most famous poems similarly drill into existential questions about what it means to be alive; "[Out, Out—](#)," for example, reflects on the unnecessary death of a young boy, while "[The Road Not Taken](#)" questions the agency people have (or don't have) over their own lives.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Frost wrote an early draft of "Design" in 1912 (then titled "In White") and revised the poem in 1922, not long after the First World War (which lasted from 1914 to 1918). Thanks to advances in modern technology (including more sophisticated and significantly more deadly weapons), WWI resulted in death and suffering on a previously unfathomable scale. For many, the war cast doubt on the very idea of civilization and progress while also destroying their religious faith; at the same time, some increasingly turned to religion for comfort.

Frost, who was too old to fight in WWI, purchased a farm in New Hampshire in 1915. He'd previously spent nine years working on a farm in Derry N.H., purchased by his grandfather, and these experiences in rural New England form the backdrop of much of Frost's most famous poetry. Though professionally successful in the period between the two world wars, Frost's personal life was blighted by tragedy not long before this poem was included in his 1936 collection. His sister, Jeanie, died after battling mental illness, and his daughter, Marjorie, passed away in 1934 at just 29. Frost had previously lost two other children

as well. It's possible that events like these inform the poem's skepticism that a kind, loving God designed the world.

Of course, this poem is commenting on a very old theological concept: the "argument from design," or the idea that the complexity of the world proves the existence of a divine creator. This concept stretches back centuries, having been popularized by the medieval theologian St. Thomas Aquinas and further developed by the 18th-century priest William Paley. In the 1990s, the idea was essentially rebranded as "intelligent design."



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Further Range](#) — Check out the full collection in which "Design" appears. (<https://www.fadedpage.com/showbook.php?pid=20150527>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](#) — Listen to a reading of "Design." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvVHOCKhfEU>)
- [Frost and Religion](#) — An interesting article exploring attitudes towards God in Frost's poetry. (<https://medium.com/@sockfood1/robert-frosts-exploration-of-religion-in-his-poetry-deeba31a0c61>)
- [Frost at Home](#) — Watch a 1952 interview with the poet, filmed at his house in Vermont. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qwCEnkb2_E)
- [Frost's Biography and More Poems](#) — Learn more about Frost's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- [Acquainted with the Night](#)
- [After Apple-Picking](#)
- [Birches](#)
- [Desert Places](#)
- [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](#)



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