

# The Wood-Pile



## POEM TEXT

1 Out walking in the frozen swamp one grey day,  
2 I paused and said, "I will turn back from here.  
3 No, I will go on farther—and we shall see."  
4 The hard snow held me, save where now and then  
5 One foot went through. The view was all in lines  
6 Straight up and down of tall slim trees  
7 Too much alike to mark or name a place by  
8 So as to say for certain I was here  
9 Or somewhere else: I was just far from home.  
10 A small bird flew before me. He was careful  
11 To put a tree between us when he lighted,  
12 And say no word to tell me who he was  
13 Who was so foolish as to think what *he* thought.  
14 He thought that I was after him for a feather—  
15 The white one in his tail; like one who takes  
16 Everything said as personal to himself.  
17 One flight out sideways would have undeceived him.  
18 And then there was a pile of wood for which  
19 I forgot him and let his little fear  
20 Carry him off the way I might have gone,  
21 Without so much as wishing him good-night.  
22 He went behind it to make his last stand.  
23 It was a cord of maple, cut and split  
24 And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.  
25 And not another like it could I see.  
26 No runner tracks in this year's snow looped near it.  
27 And it was older sure than this year's cutting,  
28 Or even last year's or the year's before.  
29 The wood was grey and the bark warping off it  
30 And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis  
31 Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.  
32 What held it though on one side was a tree  
33 Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,  
34 These latter about to fall. I thought that only  
35 Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks  
36 Could so forget his handiwork on which  
37 He spent himself, the labour of his axe,  
38 And leave it there far from a useful fireplace  
39 To warm the frozen swamp as best it could  
40 With the slow smokeless burning of decay.



## SUMMARY

I was walking around an icy marsh one cloudy day when I stopped and told myself, "I'll turn around. Actually, I'll keep going—and just see what there is." The hard-packed snow supported my weight, except every once in a while when one of my feet fell through. My view was filled with the straight, vertical lines made by tall, slender trees, which all looked too similar to use them to mark any specific location, and so there was no telling where I was: I was just a long way from home. A small bird flew in front of me. He was cautious to land a ways away from me, leaving a tree in between the two of us, and he made no sound that might reveal to me what kind of bird he was. Of course, it was silly of me to imagine what the *bird* was thinking. He thought I was going after him in order to pluck one of his feathers—a white tail feather—and in his vigilance was like a person who takes everything personally. Had the bird just flown off to one side, he would have realized that I wasn't trying to trick him. At that point I saw a pile of wood and forgot all about the bird, letting his fear of me spur him away in the direction I might have gone, without even bothering to say goodbye to him. The bird flew behind the wood-pile as if preparing to fight me off. The pile was specifically a cord of maple, chopped and halved and stacked, and it measured four by four by eight feet. I couldn't see another pile like it anywhere. No runner had left footprints nearby in the snow from this past year. And it was definitely older than the wood that had been chopped down this year, or the year before, or the year before that. The wood was faded and the bark was peeling and twisting off of it, and the whole pile was sinking into the ground a bit. A flowering vine had grown around it, wrapping it like a package. What kept it together, though, was a tree growing on one side, and on the other side a handmade support system, which was about to give way. I thought that only a person who made a habit of looking for new chores could forget something they'd worked so hard on and just leave it there, far away from a fireplace that might warm a home, to instead warm the icy marsh, to the best of its ability, with the gradual and unnoticeable process of decay.



## THEMES



### HUMANITY VS. NATURE

"The Wood-Pile" meditates on the complex relationship between human beings and the natural world. The poem consists almost entirely of the speaker describing a walk through an unfamiliar swamp, where he

encounters a small, frightened bird and the remnants of human labor in the form of an abandoned wood pile surrounded by vines. The speaker seems to have ambiguous feelings about the natural world, seeing it as menacing, interesting, indifferent, and beautiful all at once. What is clear's that there seems to be some essential *divide* between human beings and nature, which leaves the speaker feeling isolated and lonely for most of his journey as he's unable to connect with his surroundings.

As the speaker walks through the swamp, he's confronted with a harsh landscape containing no familiarity or warmth. The speaker describes the swamp as "frozen" and "gray," for instance, and the snow as "hard." He says that the snow holds him except for when it occasionally gives way and a foot goes through—an image that suggests that nature isn't entirely supportive or trustworthy. And unlike places marked by human habitation, the swamp is unfamiliar in its uniformity: it all looks the same to the speaker, who can't tell where he is or where he's going—only that he is far from home. The speaker feels alone and possibly lost in this uncaring landscape.

When a small bird appears and seems frightened of the speaker, this further suggests that there's some sort essential divide between humanity and the natural world. The speaker imagines that this bird views him as a threat, and that the creature is thus careful to keep his distance. The little bird, the speaker muses, probably worries that the speaker wants to pluck its feathers, subtly evoking the way that human beings so often use nature for their own ends (and, in doing so, amplify a sense of distrust).

The speaker adds that the bird refuses to tell him who he is, as if he were a human being capable of making the speaker's acquaintance. Yet the speaker then describes himself as "foolish" for this [anthropomorphizing](#)—for treating the bird like a person and presuming to know what the bird is thinking. Deep down, perhaps the speaker believes nature isn't actually all that interested in his presence, and that genuine communion with nature is simply impossible.

When the speaker then comes across an abandoned wood-pile, this might represent his own loneliness amidst nature's indifference. The speaker, feeling like he doesn't really belong here, out in the middle of the swamp, might see himself in this out-of-place pile of wood. At the same time, however, the speaker notices that "clematis" (a kind of flowering vine) had "wound its strings round and round it like a bundle"—effectively wrapping the wood-pile up and incorporating it into the natural landscape. This might suggest nature reclaiming part of itself that human beings once took (i.e., in the process of cutting down a tree for wood), but also might speak to a sense of camaraderie or symbiosis between human beings and the natural world. The mention of the wood decaying also brings to mind the inevitability of death, when human beings, too, will return to the earth.

In the end, then, perhaps people aren't quite as separate from

nature as they think—though whether the divide between these worlds is possible to cross in life remains ambiguous.

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

- Line 1
- Lines 4-9
- Lines 10-16
- Lines 23-40



#### ISOLATION, EXPLORATION, AND CONNECTION

In addition to depicting the ambiguous, shifting relationship between people and the natural world, the poem also explores feelings of distinctly human isolation and loneliness. The speaker, wandering further and further into a "frozen swamp," feels entirely cut off from "home" yet also curious about and eager to find familiarity within in his strange new surroundings. When he finds the wood pile—a marker that another person once stood where the speaker stands—he imagines that the worker who created it left it behind because he, too, felt propelled to move forward, onto "fresh tasks." Exploring more of the world, the poem ultimately implies, is at once exciting and isolating, as it means leaving the comforts of home and familiarity behind.

The speaker's journey through the woods emphasizes this tension between curiosity and loneliness. His surroundings are unfamiliar, and he doesn't quite know where he is, only that he is "far from home." The speaker thus initially feels the desire to turn around and leave the cold, gray swamp behind. Yet he also feels a pull to keep going—to "see" what else there is to see.

As he does so, a little bird crosses his path. The fact that the speaker [anthropomorphizes](#) the bird—treating the creature like a human being—reflects the speaker's desire to connect with something in this new environment—to perhaps dampen the loneliness created by his own curiosity. The speaker understands that he can't *really* know what the bird is thinking, but imagining what's going through the animal's mind nevertheless makes him feel less isolated.

The bird then leads him to an abandoned wood pile—in a way, to a reminder of the human world the speaker left behind. On the one hand, the pile suggests that, even in his solitude, the speaker remains linked to other people. Just as the speaker imagined what the bird was thinking, he delves into the mind of the person who created the wood pile, proposing that this worker had so many exciting, new things going on that he forgot about the pile. The speaker feels a sense of connection to this other person, whom he imagines is also motivated by a desire to explore. Like the person who left the wood pile, the speaker himself seems to be someone who "live[s] in turning to fresh tasks."

At the same time, however, this other person is long gone; all that's *left* is the wood pile. And the speaker identifies with the wood itself: alone and cut off from human context, the wood pile is slowly deteriorating. That this [symbolic](#) remnant of domestic comfort and warmth is now rotting in the woods might reflect the speaker's feeling of icy isolating having left home behind.

The poem's ambiguous ending makes it unclear whether the speaker feels soothed or saddened by the wood pile—or a little of both. This speaks to the joys and pitfalls of exploration and curiosity, which require one to “abandon” familiarity and comfort.

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

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 5-9
- Lines 10-13
- Line 17
- Lines 18-31
- Lines 34-40



### IMPERMANENCE AND MORTALITY

“The Wood-Pile” can be read as [symbolizing](#) charting the cycle of life and death. The speaker's movement away from home and forward through the cold swamp echoes the process of getting older, moving further from the security associated with childhood. Eventually, the speaker will “decay” just as the wood-pile is decaying; he will leave the human world and return to the earth. The abandoned wood-pile, unable to do its job of warming a home, might also be a testament to the impermanence of human works—how nothing people create can last forever. This, in turn, is echoed by the impermanence of human life itself.

The speaker's walk through the swamp can be seen as a symbolic journey through the phases of life. The speaker hesitates early in the poem, thinking of “turn[ing] back” but then carrying on instead. Like a person leaving behind the comfort and familiarity of a childhood home, the speaker's journey into the swamp is bittersweet because he must leave behind certainty for possibility, knowing he may never find his way back.

The speaker is soon distracted by a bird crossing his path; the bird leads him to a wood-pile that then occupies his attention—he forgets about the bird just as the person who built the wood-pile forgot about the wood. Like the path of life, the path through the swamp is full of diversions and things that feel important for a while yet are soon forgotten. Finally, the speaker sees something of himself in the old, abandoned wood-pile. He notices that “No runner tracks” come anywhere near it and that the wood wasn't cut this year or the last. In other words, no one thinks of it anymore; there are newer, more

interesting things to see elsewhere. Just as the wood-pile has sat here undetected for years, so too will the speaker someday be entirely forgotten.

As the speaker meditates on the wood-pile, he also comes to think about how the fruits of human labor never last; eventually, people die and the things they made while they were alive are abandoned, left to decay. In this way, the poem grapples with the impermanence not just of human beings *themselves*, but of the things they *create*.

The speaker notices the care put into the wood-pile by the person who built it—it was “cut and split / And piled—and measured.” This person worked hard to assemble this wood for a fireplace, but now it is just sitting here, slowly decaying, not warming anything. While the speaker tells himself that only someone who had new, more exciting “tasks” to tend to would “forget his handiwork” like this, the poem suggests that in fact all human work is forgotten in time due to the nature of mortality. One can't help but think the poet himself is thinking of this poem as one of the many artifacts of human “labor” which will eventually be forgotten.

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

- Lines 1-3
- Line 9
- Lines 18-21
- Lines 23-40



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-3

*Out walking in the frozen swamp one grey day,  
I paused and said, "I will turn back from here.  
No, I will go on farther—and we shall see."*

The poem establishes its rather unwelcoming [setting](#) right away: a cold swamp on a dreary day. Note how the language here is clear and unembellished: it isn't a *miserably grey afternoon*—it's simply a “grey day.” The straightforwardness of the language creates the poem's conversational and realistic feel.

Right away, readers also get a sense of the speaker's internal conflict: this is someone who feels both compelled by and wary of his natural surroundings, and briefly argues with himself about whether to continue on. The poem thus begins in a place of hesitation and uncertainty, as the speaker seems pulled forward by the desire to explore and, at the same time, reluctant to wander further into the unknown. It isn't clear whether this reluctance stems from fear of getting lost, exhaustion, or simply a desire to be around the creature comforts of home.

In any case, the speaker decides to push forward and "see." The speaker isn't even sure what he's looking for—he just wants to "see" what there is to see. His desire to move deeper into the swamp, then, is fueled by a broad curiosity about the natural world and the tug of the unknown.

### LINES 4-9

*The hard snow held me, save where now and then  
One foot went through. The view was all in lines  
Straight up and down of tall slim trees  
Too much alike to mark or name a place by  
So as to say for certain I was here  
Or somewhere else: I was just far from home.*

The speaker describes his surroundings as he journeys deeper into the swamp, and again the landscape seems harsh and unfamiliar. The snow is "hard" rather than soft and fluffy, and his view is characterized by the vertical lines of trees that seem impossible to tell apart.

The language here continues to be straightforward and conversational. Still, there are lots of suggestive things about the poem's [imagery](#). The speaker says that "the hard snow held" him, for instance, except on the occasion when "One foot went through." This seems to suggest that even though the landscape is rugged and unforgiving, it's also somehow providing the speaker with a sense of support—except, sometimes, that support falls away unexpectedly! The natural world is unpredictable.

The image of the "lines" created by the "tall slim trees," meanwhile, might evoke the bars of a prison cell or cage, as if the speaker feels trapped and isolated by the indistinguishable trees and colorless environment. (This is perhaps subtly [ironic](#), considering the speaker's exploration also represents a kind of freedom—he has made the choice to come out and explore the swamp alone.)

The speaker has no idea where he is exactly, and just knows that he's "far from home." The poem doesn't make it terribly obvious whether the speaker is *happy* to be "far from home" or whether he is in fact longing to see a familiar face or landmark. It seems likely that he feels a mix of both: just as he waffled between turning back and going further into the swamp, he might also have conflicting feelings about "home."

Note how the [consonance](#), [alliteration](#), and [assonance](#) of lines 6-7 evoke the speaker's disorientation, the many overlapping sounds of the lines reflecting the fact that the trees all blend together in the speaker's mind:

Straight up and down of tall slim trees  
Too much alike to mark or name a place by

Also note that lines 4-8 are all [enjambéd](#), whereas the poem's first three lines were firmly [end-stopped](#). Enjambement here helps the poem pick up momentum, pulling readers down the

page in a way that evokes the speaker being pulled deeper into the swamp by his sense of curiosity. The general speed and intensity of the poem's sounds in these lines mirror the speaker's feelings as he confronts the possibility of being lost and alone in the frozen wilderness.

### LINES 10-13

*A small bird flew before me. He was careful  
To put a tree between us when he lighted,  
And say no word to tell me who he was  
Who was so foolish as to think what  
he  
thought.*

The speaker's thoughts are interrupted as a bird flies out in front of him. The bird is cautious, landing in such a way as to keep "a tree between" itself and the speaker. The natural world, it seems, is not necessarily all that pleased about the speaker's presence in the swamp.

The speaker then notes that the bird says "no word" to tell the speaker who "he" (i.e., the bird) is. On a literal level, the speaker is saying that the bird remains quiet—that it makes no call—and thus that the speaker can't tell what kind of bird it is. But the speaker is also [anthropomorphizing](#) the bird, treating it like a person and expecting it to introduce itself to the speaker. This, in turn, reflects the speaker's desire to connect with the natural world around him.

The barrier between the speaker and the bird is also blurred by the poem's rather confusing use of [repetition](#). The somewhat ambiguous use of "who" in lines 12-13 treats both the speaker and the bird as a "who," implying a sort of equal footing:

And say no word to tell me **who** he was  
**Who** was so foolish as to think what *he* thought.

The speaker is saying that it's silly to try to guess what the bird is thinking—though he'll do so in the very next lines.

### LINES 14-17

*He thought that I was after him for a feather—  
The white one in his tail; like one who takes  
Everything said as personal to himself.  
One flight out sideways would have undeceived him.*

Having just acknowledged the "foolish[ness]" of trying to figure out what the bird is thinking, the speaker does it anyway. The repetition (and more specifically [anadiplosis](#)) of "he thought" at the end of line 13 and beginning of line 14 draws attention to the [irony](#) of the speaker's choice to [anthropomorphize](#) the bird right after admitting it was foolish to do so.

He says that the bird thinks that he, the speaker, is after the bird for the white feather in its tail. The speaker then uses a [simile](#) to compare the bird's suspicion to a person who takes everything personally. The fact that the speaker again treats

the bird as though it were a human being reflects his own loneliness and desire to connect to something out in the swamp (even if it's only a small, wary bird). It also ironically points to the speaker's own tendency to take everything personally—he can't help but assume that the bird is thinking about him!

The speaker then says that if the bird were only to fly off the other way, it would quickly realize the speaker wasn't "after" it for one of its feathers after all. The speaker would simply continue on his way, not so much interested in the bird as the journey he himself is on.

### LINES 18-22

*And then there was a pile of wood for which  
I forgot him and let his little fear  
Carry him off the way I might have gone,  
Without so much as wishing him good-night.  
He went behind it to make his last stand.*

The speaker spots a pile of wood that makes him forget the bird and "his little fear" altogether, "Without so much as wishing [the bird] good-night." [Consonance](#) and [alliteration](#) fill the poem with musicality and beauty at this moment. Notice how the lightness of those soft /f/, /w/, and /l/ sounds evoke the small bird's movement as it flits through the trees:

And then there was a pile of wood for which  
I forgot him and let his little fear  
Carry him off the way I might have gone,  
Without so much as wishing him good-night.

The playfulness of these sounds is a subtle reminder that, despite the speaker's loneliness and desire to connect, he is also on an adventure of sorts. There is heaviness in the poem, but also a sense of curiosity and discovery.

The speaker then notes that, instead of flying off in the other direction, the bird actually flies behind the wood-pile, where the speaker is now headed, "to make his last stand." Once again, the speaker is imagining the relationship between himself and the bird as characterized by mistrust, comparing it to some kind of battle. But the tone is again somewhat playful. The bird is only a "little" fighter, and the speaker soon enough gets absorbed by the wood-pile before him.

### LINES 23-26

*It was a cord of maple, cut and split  
And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.  
And not another like it could I see.  
No runner tracks in this year's snow looped near it.*

The wood-pile is more specifically a "cord" of wood. A "cord" is a unit of firewood measuring, as the speaker accurately points out in the next line, "four by four by eight" feet. The speaker also knows by looking at it that the wood is cut from maple trees, and notes the specific steps that went into making the

pile: cutting and splitting and piling and measuring.

All this suggests that he himself has cut firewood or is at least familiar with the practice. He's thus stumbled upon a remnant of the world he thought he'd left behind in journeying through the swamp.

Yet the speaker quickly notices there are no other piles of firewood around—that there's "not another like it" in sight. Like the speaker, the wood-pile is alone in the swamp.

There are no "runner tracks" (that is, marks from the bottom of a sleigh that would have been used to transport the cord) in the surrounding snow, implying that no other person seems to have been near the pile in the past year at least (nor, as the next lines will reveal, in years prior). The fact that no one has come close to the wood-pile again speaks to its utter isolation. While the wood-pile itself has no awareness of being abandoned, it seems the speaker is drawn to it precisely because it seems so alone and out of place.

### LINES 27-31

*And it was older sure than this year's cutting,  
Or even last year's or the year's before.  
The wood was grey and the bark warping off it  
And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis  
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.*

Not only has no one been near the wood-pile since "this year's snow," the speaker says, but it seems that the pile is also older than "this year's cutting / Or even last year's or the year's before." In other words, whoever made this wood-pile did so many years ago.

The use of [diacope](#) here (the repetition of "year's") draws attention to the passage of time, which has affected the wood by turning it "grey" and causing its bark to peel away. What was once carefully stacked and measured is now coming undone, sinking into the ground. In this sense, the wood-pile might be [symbolic](#) of the impermanence of human creations (and even of human beings themselves). Whoever made this wood-pile put a great deal of work into it, but now it's forgotten, left to rot.

"Clematis" (a type of vine) wraps "round and round" the wood-pile, as though reclaiming a bit of nature that humanity borrowed. While this process might seem threatening, it also might suggest a kind of symbiotic relationship between people and nature: people cut down trees and turn them into firewood for survival and warmth, but after they have moved on or died, these resources become part of the landscape once again.

The hushed [sibilance](#) of these lines evokes the quiet winter scene that surrounds the speaker, while [assonance](#) and [consonance](#) make the lines all the more vivid:

And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis  
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.

The poem's sounds add a layer of beauty to the scene, suggesting that the speaker perhaps finds the abandoned wood-pile both sad and comforting.

### LINES 32-34

*What held it though on one side was a tree  
Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,  
These latter about to fall.*

The speaker [juxtaposes](#) the human world with the natural one: the wood-pile only continues to hold its shape because it is being propped up on one side by a tree and on the other by a human-made support system. The [imagery](#) here is telling as the speaker describes the tree as "still growing" while the human-made supports are "about to fall." In other words, the things people have designed have fallen into disarray while nature continues to grow and flourish and renew itself. Impermanent human effort is again at odds with the continuous and replenishing forces of nature.

The imagery also echoes the earlier description of the hard snow, which "held" the speaker as he walked; the tree also "held" the wood-pile in place. This again suggests that the speaker identifies with the wood-pile, perhaps seeing his own eventual decline in its slow sinking into the earth. If readers take the poem as a [metaphorical](#) journey through the cycle of life, then the wood-pile is the speaker's end-point, his final destination: he too will someday be alone and forgotten, and he too will someday be returned to the earth.

### LINES 34-37

*I thought that only  
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks  
Could so forget his handiwork on which  
He spent himself, the labour of his axe,*

After describing the wood-pile in great detail, the speaker thinks of the person who built it and left it here in the swamp. He imagines that only a person "who lived in turning to fresh tasks" could have put so much work into something only to abandon it. In other words, only someone who always had new things to pursue would so nonchalantly leave all this work behind.

The speaker perhaps identifies as such a person himself—after all, he chose to continue his journey into the swamp rather than turn around and go home, and he forgot the little bird which had so captivated his interest the moment he caught sight of the wood-pile. There could also be a tinge of regret in these words, as if the speaker himself has left behind something he once considered important enough to "spend" himself on, and is now forced to imagine its fate.

The [alliteration](#) in "turning to fresh tasks" and "his handiwork on which / He spent himself" adds musicality to this moment, charging it with significance. Thinking about this other person (who has moved on or, perhaps, died) has clearly affected the

speaker. He feels a sense of connection with a person he's never met out here in the middle of the swamp, and at the same time, he also feels profoundly alone, perhaps sensing that all his efforts will someday come to this: an abandoned thing that no one remembers.

### LINES 38-40

*And leave it there far from a useful fireplace  
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could  
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.*

The speaker continues to wonder about the kind of person who would just leave behind "the labour of his axe"—all this work put into creating the wood-pile. That pile, in turn, isn't serving its intended purpose. It's essentially useless out here in the swamp, the speaker says, "far from a useful fireplace."

The image of a fireplace isn't just a question of function; it also conjures up the very "home" the speaker has felt distanced from throughout the entire poem. Think of the phrase "hearth and home"; a fireplace represents not just literal but symbolic warmth and comfort. All alone out here in the swamp, both the wood-pile and the speaker are cut off from such comfort; they're instead, isolated, surrounded by a frozen expanse.

The speaker, lonely and seeing himself in this abandoned stack of wood, again imbues his surroundings with human characteristics. He [personifies](#) the wood-pile, imagining that it was left here to "warm the frozen swamp as best it could." The speaker grants the pile a sense of agency, as if it could make the swamp less harsh and seemingly indifferent.

The poem then ends on a [metaphor](#): the "slow smokeless burning of decay." On the one hand, the metaphor implies that the wood-pile's attempt to "warm" the swamp is futile. It's not *literally* burning, for one thing, and even if it was, it's so small and isolated that it wouldn't make much of a difference in the vast frozen swamp. This might suggest that the speaker himself feels small and insignificant out in the middle of the swamp; if he died, who would even notice? Like the wood-pile, would he simply be left to rot?

Yet, while the wood-pile may not be able to "warm" the entirety of the swamp, it does seem to have at least provided *some* deal of comfort to the speaker by reminding him of home, and connection, and warmth. A "slow, smokeless burning" isn't much, but it's better than nothing at all.

The mention of "decay" also brings back the poem's thematic idea that human life and human works are impermanent. The wood-pile is, in a sense, returning to the swamp in decaying. In calling this process a "slow smokeless burning," the speaker perhaps suggests the steady yet imperceptible process of ageing and death.



## SYMBOLS



## THE SWAMP

The "frozen swamp" isn't *just* an actual swamp, but also a [symbol](#) of the unknown.

As the speaker wanders through the swamp, he gets farther and farther from home and the comforts of familiarity. He can't tell the trees apart, which makes it impossible for him to mark his "place," and his surroundings seem vaguely menacing. Every once in a while one of his feet slips through the "hard snow," suggesting the unpredictable nature of this new environment.

The swamp's strangeness is exciting to the speaker, who is curious about what there is to "see," and also formidable: he could very well end up lost and alone in the cold wilderness!

The swamp is also representative of nature more generally. When the speaker imagines the wood-pile "warm[ing] the frozen swamp as best it could," he is essentially thinking about how small and impermanent human existence is in relation to the vastness of the natural world. Whereas human creations will eventually break down and "decay," the swamp continues to renew itself and is oblivious to the passage of (human) time.

## Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-9:** "Out walking in the frozen swamp one grey day, / I paused and said, "I will turn back from here. / No, I will go on farther—and we shall see." / The hard snow held me, save where now and then / One foot went through. The view was all in lines / Straight up and down of tall slim trees / Too much alike to mark or name a place by / So as to say for certain I was here / Or somewhere else: I was just far from home."
- **Lines 39-40:** "To warm the frozen swamp as best it could / With the slow smokeless burning of decay."



## THE WOOD-PILE

By the end of the poem, the wood-pile has come to [symbolize](#) death and decay, as well as the impermanence of human life and of the things humans beings leave behind.

When the speaker first encounters the wood-pile, he feels connected to the person who built it. The wood offers a sign of human civilization and comforting familiarity in the middle of the swamp. And yet, while the natural world surrounding the wood-pile is "still growing," the wood-pile itself is falling apart. It "decay[s]," as does its human-made support system holding it up (the "stake and prop"). As "clematis" vines wrap themselves around the wood, readers get the sense that the pile will one day rot entirely and be consumed by the swamp. In this way, "the labor of [the builder's] axe" will disappear, just as the

builder himself has.

Also note how the pile is totally isolated, with no tracks nearby indicating that any other person has stumbled upon it in the years since its creation. It's clear that the pile has been abandoned and forgotten; once the person who made it moved on or died, the wood-pile fell into disuse, and it no longer serves the purpose for which it was made (that is, warming a "useful fireplace").

In this way, the wood-pile might also represent the isolation and lack of utility or functionality often associated with old age in Western culture. If the speaker's journey through the swamp is taken as a [metaphorical](#) journey through the stages of life (as he moves farther away from youth and "home"), then the wood-pile is the endpoint, the destination: it represents a future in which the speaker no longer serves a purpose and is eventually left behind and forgotten.

## Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 18-40



## POETIC DEVICES

## ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The speaker [anthropomorphizes](#) the bird that crosses his path, imbuing the creature with distinctly human emotions and thoughts.

For example, the speaker says that the bird refuses to tell him "who he [the bird] was." Literally, the speaker is talking about the fact that the bird is quiet, meaning the speaker can't figure out what species it is from its call. Phrasing it in this way, however, makes it seem like the bird is actively *choosing* not to introduce itself. The speaker also images that the bird perceives him as a threat—that the speaker is "after" it "for a feather"—and compares the creature to someone who takes everything too personally. Finally, when the bird flies behind the pile of wood, the speaker describes the creature as making "his last stand," as though the two are in a showdown in the forest.

The fact that the speaker treats the bird like a person reflects the speaker's own loneliness. Out in the swamp, far from anything familiar, the speaker longs for some sort of connection with his surroundings. He seemingly can't help but view the little bird as being like himself, even as he knows that it's "foolish [...] to think what *he* [the bird] thought." In other words, he knows it's impossible to diving whatever was going through the creature's mind, but finds himself imagining its thoughts anyway.

At the end of the poem, the speaker also treats the wood-pile like a human being (though this is better described as figurative

[personification](#) rather than anthropomorphism). The speaker describes it as "warm[ing] the frozen swamp as best it could." Of course, the wood-pile has no intentions of its own; the phrase "as best it could" is a projection of the speaker's own perception of the scene. Knowing another person has been here makes the place feel a little more familiar and welcoming to the speaker, who thus looks upon the wood-pile with fondness.

#### Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-17:** "A small bird flew before me. He was careful / To put a tree between us when he lighted, / And say no word to tell me who he was / Who was so foolish as to think what / he / thought. / He thought that I was after him for a feather— / The white one in his tail; like one who takes / Everything said as personal to himself. / One flight out sideways would have undeceived him."
- **Lines 38-40:** "And leave it there far from a useful fireplace / To warm the frozen swamp as best it could / With the slow smokeless burning of decay."

## ASSONANCE

The speaker uses [assonance](#) rarely, instead keeping the language pretty conversational and straightforward. When assonance *does* it appear, it adds short bursts of music and melody to the poem and helps to evoke the emotional atmosphere of the swamp.

For example, take line 1:

Out walking in the frozen swamp one grey day,

Here, the mixture of assonance and [consonance](#) (those /w/ sounds in "walking," "swamp," and "one") is almost playful, suggesting the sense of curiosity and intrigue the speaker feels regarding the swamp. At the same time, the rhyme of "grey day" draws readers' attention to the gloomy atmosphere.

The poem is then free of strong, meaningful assonance until its final third or so. When the speaker notices the wood-pile, assonance pops back up:

And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis  
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.

Again, assonance mixes with consonance here (all those /s/, /n/, and /d/ sounds), making the line's [imagery](#) stand out all the more clearly to the reader. The fact that the poem suddenly sounds more poetic in this moment reflects the importance of the wood-pile in the speaker's mind, and his excitement upon finding it. And in the poem's final line, assonance and [sibilance](#) work together to draw out the "slow smokeless burning" that the speaker perceives.

#### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "walking," "swamp," "grey," "day"
- **Line 3:** "we," "see"
- **Line 4:** "me"
- **Line 5:** "through," "view"
- **Line 7:** "name," "place"
- **Line 8:** "say"
- **Line 11:** "tree between"
- **Line 30:** "somewhat," "sunken"
- **Line 31:** "wound," "round," "round," "bundle"
- **Line 35:** "tasks"
- **Line 37:** "axe"
- **Line 40:** "slow," "smokeless"

## CONSONANCE

Like [assonance](#), [consonance](#) helps to bring the poem's atmosphere to life and draws attention to important moments. But while assonance is pretty rare in "The Wood-Pile," consonance appears throughout most of the poem. This gives the poem's language a sense of richness and musicality.

Take lines 6-7, where the sudden flurry of repeated sounds reflects the speaker's confusion:

Straight up and down of tall slim trees  
Too much alike to mark or name a place by

Those /t/, /l/, and /k/ sounds make for a mouthful of sound, and their repetition evokes the notion that all these trees look the same to the speaker.

Later, note how consonance elevates the language in lines 35-37:

Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks  
Could so forget his handiwork on which  
He spent himself, the labour of his axe,

The language here feels crisp and forceful, drawing out the speaker's respect and admiration for this mysterious worker who left the wood-pile behind. In moments like this and elsewhere, the increased intensity of the language reflects the speaker's emotions.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "walking," "swamp one"
- **Line 4:** "hard," "held"
- **Line 5:** "all," "lines"
- **Line 6:** "tall," "slim," "trees"
- **Line 7:** "much," "alike," "mark," "name," "place"
- **Line 8:** "So," "say," "certain"
- **Line 9:** "somewhere," "else," "far," "from," "home"



- **Line 10:** “small,” “bird,” “flew,” “before”
- **Line 13:** “think,” “thought”
- **Line 14:** “thought,” “after,” “for,” “feather”
- **Line 15:** “white,” “tail,” “takes”
- **Line 16:** “Everything,” “said,” “personal,” “himself”
- **Line 17:** “flight,” “sideways,” “would,” “undeceived”
- **Line 19:** “forgot,” “let,” “little,” “fear”
- **Line 20:** “off”
- **Line 21:** “Without,” “wishing”
- **Line 22:** “last,” “stand”
- **Line 23:** “cord,” “cut,” “split”
- **Line 24:** “piled”
- **Line 30:** “somewhat,” “sunken”
- **Line 31:** “wound,” “round,” “round,” “bundle”
- **Line 32:** “tree”
- **Line 33:** “Still,” “stake”
- **Line 35:** “turning,” “to,” “fresh,” “tasks”
- **Line 36:** “Could,” “so,” “forget,” “his,” “handiwork”
- **Line 37:** “He,” “spent,” “himself,” “axe”
- **Line 38:** “far,” “from,” “useful,” “fireplace”
- **Line 39:** “frozen,” “swamp”
- **Line 40:** “slow,” “smokeless”

## ALLITERATION

Like [assonance](#) and [consonance](#), [alliteration](#) helps to bring the poem's [imagery](#) and atmosphere to life. For example, in line 4, the speaker says “the hard snow held” him. Here, the similarity of sound created by /h/ alliteration and /d/ consonance emphasizes the relationship between the hardness of the snow and its capacity to support the speaker's body as he walks through the swamp. This relationship is suggestive of the one the speaker has with nature. On the one hand, nature is “hard”—indifferent and even merciless. On the other hand, the speaker feels “held”—i.e. supported, nourished, comforted—by nature; at least until a foot falls through and he finds himself confronting nature's indifference once again. Even the sounds themselves seem to evoke these two sides of nature: the soft, open /h/ sound and the hard, closed /d/ sound again evoking the speaker's conflicting feelings about the natural world.

### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “walking,” “swamp,” “one”
- **Line 4:** “hard,” “held”
- **Line 6:** “tall,” “trees”
- **Line 7:** “Too”
- **Line 8:** “So,” “say,” “certain”
- **Line 9:** “somewhere,” “far,” “from”
- **Line 10:** “bird,” “before”
- **Line 12:** “to,” “tell”
- **Line 14:** “for,” “feather”
- **Line 18:** “wood,” “which”

- **Line 19:** “forgot,” “let,” “little,” “fear”
- **Line 21:** “Without,” “wishing”
- **Line 23:** “cord,” “cut”
- **Line 30:** “somewhat,” “sunken”
- **Line 33:** “Still,” “stake”
- **Line 35:** “turning,” “to,” “fresh,” “tasks”
- **Line 36:** “forget,” “his,” “handiwork”
- **Line 38:** “far,” “from,” “fireplace”
- **Line 39:** “warm,” “frozen,” “swamp”
- **Line 40:** “slow,” “smokeless”

## REPETITION

The poem uses [diacope](#) (and similar forms of repetition) a few times to add emphasis to certain ideas and images.

For example, the speaker turns to diacope when he says the bird would:

[...] say no word to tell me **who** he was  
Who was so foolish as to think what *he* thought.

The speaker is saying that the bird refused to tell him (the speaker) who he (the bird) was. The quick, and somewhat confusing, repetition of the word “who” draws attention to the poem's [personification](#) of the bird and underscores the fact that the speaker longs to connect with the creature. He wants to understand what the bird is thinking the way he might want to understand what another person—another “who”—is thinking.

Shortly after this, the speaker uses more repetition, this time technically [anadiplosis](#):

Who was so foolish as to think what *he* thought.  
He thought that I was after him for a feather—

This repetition draws attention to the [irony](#) here, as the speaker admits that it's “foolish” to imagine what the bird is thinking and then going on to imagine what the bird is thinking anyway. The speaker is basically saying, *I know this is a silly thought to entertain, but I'm going to entertain it anyway!*

Diacope appears again in line 31 as the speaker describes clematis, a flowering vine, wrapping “round and round” the wood-pile. In this case, the repetition enacts the movement of the vines as they grew around the wood-pile, indicating how long the wood has been sitting there. The wood isn't just an abandoned human project; it began as part of nature and is now being reclaimed by the swamp.

Finally, the speaker's riff on the word “year's” in lines 26-28 creates a piling up effect:

No runner tracks in **this year's** snow looped near it.

And it was older sure than **this year's** cutting,  
Or even last **year's** or the **year's** before.

The speaker is trying to figure out who made the wood-pile and when, and the repetition of "year's" is intentionally confusing. Readers get the sense that the person who made this did so long ago, but the speaker will never know exactly when, and it really doesn't matter; that person is gone.

#### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "who he was / Who was"
- **Lines 13-14:** "he / thought. / He thought"
- **Line 24:** "four by four by eight"
- **Line 26:** "this year's"
- **Line 27:** "this year's"
- **Line 28:** "last year's or the year's before"
- **Line 31:** "round and round"

## ENJAMBMENT

About half of the poem's lines are [enjambéd](#). The balance between these lines and [end-stopped](#) lines grants the poem a measured and conversational feel; the lines expand and contract in accordance with the speaker's observations, with moments of enjambment, in particular, pushing the poem forward and evoking his sense of wonder and anticipation as he ventures deeper into the swamp.

The poem tends to pick up speed when there are several enjambéd lines in a row, as in lines 4-9:

The hard snow held me, save where now and **then**  
One foot went through. The view was all in **lines**  
**Straight** up and down of tall slim **trees**  
Too much alike to mark or name a place **by**  
So as to say for certain I was **here**  
Or somewhere else: I was just far from home.

Here, enjambment propels the reader down the page and feels somewhat discombobulating, evoking the speaker's sense of displacement. The speaker can't "mark or name a place"—that is, he can't pinpoint where he is—because the trees all look the same. The quick enjambment of these lines makes it similarly difficult for readers to stop and "mark" their place in the poem.

For the most part, though, enjambéd lines are mixed pretty evenly with end-stopped lines in such a way that the poem maintains a degree of composure and control. While a completely enjambéd poem might feel more breathless or urgent, and a completely end-stopped poem might feel matter-of-fact or emotionally flattened, the balance between the two line endings creates the feeling that the speaker is both curious and yet not in a hurry.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "then / One"
- **Lines 5-6:** "lines / Straight"
- **Lines 6-7:** "trees / Too"
- **Lines 7-8:** "by / So"
- **Lines 8-9:** "here / Or"
- **Lines 10-11:** "careful / To"
- **Lines 12-13:** "was / Who"
- **Lines 15-16:** "takes / Everything"
- **Lines 18-19:** "which / I"
- **Lines 19-20:** "fear / Carry"
- **Lines 23-24:** "split / And"
- **Lines 29-30:** "it / And"
- **Lines 30-31:** "Clematis / Had"
- **Lines 32-33:** "tree / Still"
- **Lines 34-35:** "only / Someone"
- **Lines 35-36:** "tasks / Could"
- **Lines 36-37:** "which / He"
- **Lines 38-39:** "fireplace / To"
- **Lines 39-40:** "could / With"

## IMAGERY

The poem is filled with vivid [imagery](#) that helps readers envision the "frozen swamp" through which the speaker wanders. Right off the bat, the poem uses striking imagery to establish the cold, dreary atmosphere of that swamp on a "grey day." The snow is "hard" rather than fluffy and pristine, and the speaker's view is marked by straight, "tall slim trees" that all look alike.

All this imagery establishes that this is not a welcoming environment, but rather an icy, unfriendly, and unfamiliar world. This isn't exactly a pleasant stroll the speaker is on, the imagery implies, but something more vital: the speaker seems to be pushing out of his comfort zone in order to experience or feel something new.

When the speaker discovers the abandoned wood-pile, the poem becomes even more imagery-driven. In fact, lines 23-34 are all devoted to a detailed description of this wood-pile itself and its immediate surroundings. Readers can picture the little bird standing behind the "cord of maple," which has been cut and shaped into a pile that measures "four by four by eight." The mention of those measurements reminds readers that another person was once here, standing where the speaker now stands, even as there are no "no runners tracks" nearby and the speaker can tell that the pile is a few years old. All this imagery reinforces the tension between human beings and the natural world.

In keeping with this idea, the speaker notes that the wood-pile is held up on one side by "a tree / Still growing" and on the other by "a stake and prop [...] about to fall"—in other words, nature's support is thriving whereas that made by a human

being is falling apart. Again, then, the poem's imagery evokes the tension between humanity and nature. While human efforts seem bound to eventually fail (or "fall"), nature continues to grow and renew itself. The imagery of the wood-pile in this moment serves as a reminder that the natural world outlives, and indeed seems indifferent to, indifferent to human works and plans.

#### Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 4-7
- Lines 10-12
- Lines 14-15
- Lines 18-20
- Lines 22-34
- Lines 38-40

## SIMILE

The poem uses two [similes](#). The first appears in lines 14-17, when the speaker is describing the bird's apparent fear of him:

He thought that I was after him for a feather—  
The white one in his tail; like one who takes  
Everything said as personal to himself.

The speaker is basically comparing the bird to someone who takes everything too personally. The simile goes hand-in-hand with the poem's use of [personification](#), as the speaker keeps thinking of the bird in human terms. There's thus a bit of [irony](#) at play here: the speaker says that the bird is "like" someone who takes things personally, but the *speaker* is the one assuming that everything the bird is doing is about him! The speaker makes himself the center of the bird's world at this moment, imagining that the animal is scurrying away because it worries the speaker wants to pluck one of its tail feathers.

In lines 30-31, the speaker again imbues the natural world with human characteristics when he says that "Clematis," a kind of vine, had wrapped itself around the wood-pile as though it were "a bundle," or a package of some sort. Again, the fact that the wood-pile looks "like a bundle" to the speaker suggests that the speaker can't help but view the strange natural world through the lens of his own human perspective.

#### Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-15:** "He thought that I was after him for a feather— / The white one in his tail;"
- **Lines 15-16:** "like one who takes / Everything said as personal to himself."
- **Lines 30-31:** "Clematis / Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle."

## METAPHOR

The poem ends in a [metaphor](#). Looking at the abandoned wood-pile, the speaker thinks about the person who left it there "to warm the swamp [...] / With the slow smokeless burning of decay." The wood-pile's "warmth" is metaphorical; the speaker isn't describing a literal fire but rather thinking about the way that human touch "warm[s]" the frozen wilderness around him. It is the reminder that other people have been here that seems to "burn," and the speaker imagines the wood-pile is doing its "best" to combat the cold indifference of the swamp.

But the metaphor is complicated by the poem's final word: decay. The wood-pile isn't just a reminder that someone else was here, but is also a reminder that the things people create are eventually subject to "decay." In other words, the speaker looks at this relic of human effort and feels a complicated mix of comfort and despair. There's comfort because it's nice to know he's not the only person to have wandered out this way (comfort because it's nice to be reminded of something warm and familiar out here in the middle of the frozen swamp), and despair because this comfort is only imagined: whoever built this pile is long gone. The speaker is alone, and like the wood-pile, he will someday be forgotten.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 38-40:** "And leave it there far from a useful fireplace / To warm the frozen swamp as best it could / With the slow smokeless burning of decay."



## VOCABULARY

**Lighted** (Line 11) - Gently landed on.

**Undeceived** (Line 17) - Freed from deception or illusion.

**Cord of Maple** (Line 23) - A unit of measurement for chopped wood, here from a maple tree.

**Warping** (Line 29) - Buckling or twisting out of shape (often due to environmental conditions like heat, cold, or humidity).

**Clematis** (Line 30) - A kind of flowering vine.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

The poem takes the form of a single [stanza](#) made up of 40 lines. The lines aren't particularly narrow or long, nor do they vary much in length (they're typically 10 syllables long, give or take). The overall shape of the poem is reminiscent of the speaker's walk through the swamp ("The view was all in lines / straight up and down"), and is typical of Frost's work in that it doesn't draw a lot of attention to itself. In other words, the form isn't

experimental, but rather traditional for a poem with a [narrative](#) arc (the speaker is on a literal journey through the swamp and a [metaphorical](#) journey through the cycle of life).

## METER

"The Wood-Pile" is written [blank verse](#), or in unrhymed [iambic pentameter](#). This means that lines contain five iambs (poetic feet in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable). Take line 5, for example:

One foot | went through. | The view | was all | in lines

Blank verse gives the poem a feeling of structure and a noticeable rhythm. This poem also has some pretty irregular stresses, however, so though it can be considered blank verse overall, it has a loose, conversational feel. Take the last line for example:

With the | slow smoke- | less burn- | ing of | decay.

The irregularity of the poem meter might subtly mimic the way the orderly "cut and measured" woodpile is slowly decaying and being overtaken by nature, losing its sense of orderly precision and becoming wilder.

## RHYME SCHEME

The poem does not have a [rhyme scheme](#), and in fact hardly uses rhyme at all! The lack of rhyme scheme keeps the poem feeling conversational and unpredictable. A steady pattern of rhyme wouldn't quite fit with the speaker's sense of meandering curiosity and exploration as he travels deeper into the swamp.



## SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Wood-Pile," like the speakers in many of Frost's best-loved poems, is someone who is out in nature, "far from home," with a decision to make: will he turn around and return to what is familiar, or will he go on, and see what there is to see?

This speaker chooses to continue his journey into the swamp, a choice that suggests his desire to explore and be confronted with "new tasks" rather than the familiarity of old ones. His desire to keep going, though, isn't just the mark of an adventuresome spirit—it seems there is some sadness, some sense of loneliness, driving him on, for he looks for connection in unlikely places: a passing bird, an abandoned wood-pile.

"Like one who takes / Everything said as personal to himself," the speaker is someone who sees himself mirrored back to him in the fear of the little bird and the forgotten disarray of the wood-pile. And yet he finds connection in these unlikely places too: there is something almost comforting about the way the

wood-pile is being reclaimed by the swamp, flowering vines wrapping it up and a tree growing to support it. In the end, it isn't really clear if the speaker is happy or sad, frightened or comforted—the poem gives him room to experience all of it, and it is that complexity which makes the speaker so compelling.

Though readers may assume that the speaker is Robert Frost himself, given the poet's well-documented love of the natural world, the poem never actually tells readers the speaker's age, name, profession, or gender. Instead, the specifics in the poem belong to the natural world that surrounds the speaker. In a way, this reinforces the poem's thematic idea that human beings are just one small, impermanent part of the world.



## SETTING

The setting of "The Wood-Pile" is a frozen swamp on a dreary day in the middle of winter. There's snow all around, as well as tall, slender, leafless trees that fill the speaker's view. These trees all look the same to the speaker, which makes it impossible for him to figure out exactly where he is; there are no familiar markers to orient him. This reinforces the speaker's sense of loneliness and isolation, as well as the tension between nature and humanity. The speaker is far from home—far from the comforts and familiarity of the human world—and feels somewhat like an unwelcome intruder in this natural scene.

Deep in the swamp, the speaker stumbles upon an abandoned wood-pile—a marker of another person having stood where the speaker now stands. While the wood makes the speaker think about the person who made it, the setting is still ultimately a natural one: the wood is decaying, its bark peeling off, its weight sinking into the ground. It's being reclaimed by the swamp; vines are growing all over it, and a tree supports it on one side while the human system of supports (a "stake and prop") slowly deteriorate. The setting, then, reflects the impermanence of everything that humans do and make in relation to the ever-growing natural world, which the poem implies is indifferent to the affairs of human beings.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Wood-Pile" was published in 1914 in Robert Frost's second poetry collection, *North of Boston*. Frost's work is often considered traditional or conventional in relation to the [Modernist](#) poets of the time, who were experimenting with form, rhyme, and meter. And yet, there is something quite *untraditional* about the attitudes of Frost's speakers, who often seem to be always immersed in some kind of subtle internal conflict.

For instance, "[The Road Not Taken](#)," possibly Frost's most well-known poem, concludes with the speaker famously deciding to take the road "less traveled" and then noting that this has "made all the difference." While many people recognize and can probably even recite these poem's lines, their interpretation will vary greatly due to Frost's ability to imbue crystal clear [imagery](#) with ambiguous significance. Though it's widely considered to be a poem about making unconventional choices, the poem never actually reveals whether the speaker thinks his choices have resulted in a more fulfilling life. This kind of openness to interpretation is typical of Frost's work, and can be seen in "The Wood-Pile" as well.

"The Wood-Pile" also contains themes that are remarkably similar to those captured in Frost's earlier poem, "[The Tuft of Flowers](#)." Both poems feature a lonely speaker who is walking through a natural setting, lost in his thoughts; both feature an animal that leads the speaker to some sort of epiphany regarding the connectedness of human beings and the natural world. And while "The Wood-Pile" is perhaps not so optimistic as "The Tuft of Flowers," both showcase Frost's interest in common people and everyday language.

While Frost's first two books were published in England, after the publication of *North of Boston* he quickly began to gain traction with American audiences. This was in large part due to the support of the [Imagist](#) poets Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, who championed his work. Frost himself, however, didn't associate his work with any particular movement. Instead, he developed his own style based on using ordinary language to evoke meaning and emotional depth, something he referred to as "the sound of sense."

Frost's interests in colloquial speech and the wonder of the natural world tie his work to one of his earliest and most profound influences, the Romantic poet William Wordsworth. In turn, Frost has influenced countless poets and remains a towering presence in American literature.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The publication of this poem in 1914 coincided with the start of the First World War, when Frost and his family were living in England. Though he didn't write directly about the war, something of the pessimism and despair of this time in history is present in much of Frost's poetry, though typically softened by a sense of curiosity and connection to the world around him.

Many of Frost's most famous poems can be read at least partially through the lens of his own personal hardships. While "The Wood-Pile" makes no direct reference to events Frost lived through in his early life, it's not difficult to imagine how a string of early deaths, including those of two of his children (he would eventually see all but two of his children die before him), affected his view of the world.

It's also possible that the "swamp" in "The Wood-Pile" is based on a real swamp Frost visited in 1894. That year, Elinor White,

a high-school sweetheart whom he would eventually marry, had turned down his marriage proposal due to his not having a job. Dejected, Frost traveled to The Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia, where he considered ending his life. The theme of the lone, despairing person who journeys into nature to find either obliteration or a revived sense of connection and inspiration would become a hallmark of Frost's work.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Reading of the Poem](#) – Listen to "The Wood-Pile" read out loud. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1BTrWjyNxw>)
- [Frost's Biography](#) – A quick introduction to Frost's life and poetry. (<https://www.biography.com/writer/robert-frost>)
- [Robert Frost's New England](#) – An article from the Smithsonian about the New England landscapes that inspired Frost's poetry. (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/mysterious-beauty-robert-frost-new-england-180972502/>)
- [What Is a Cord of Wood?](#) – Learn more about the "four by four by eight" pile of wood mentioned in the poem. (<https://startwoodworkingnow.com/how-much-wood-is-in-a-cord/>)
- [The Great Dismal Swamp](#) – Learn more about the real Virginia swamp that may have inspired "The Wood-Pile." ([https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Great\\_Dismal\\_Swamp/about.html](https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Great_Dismal_Swamp/about.html))

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

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



## HOW TO CITE

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