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Applying Reader Response Criticism to Robert Frost’s “Out, out”

The first part of the poem introduces the beautiful setting, though it leaves the reader unsettled with a sense of foreboding. What is most striking about the opening lines of the poem is Frost’s appeal to the senses. The reader can imagine the sound of the buzz-saw as it “snarl[s]” and “rattle[s]” (1) and the “sweet” scent of the freshly cut wood as “the breeze dr[aws] across it” (3). Though the opening line jars with words like “snarled” and “rattled,” the lines that follow flow smoothly, assisted by the use of alliteration: “dropped stove-length sticks of wood,/ Sweet-scented stuff” (2-3). The reader is invited to visualize the picturesque mountain backdrop while simultaneously recalling the snarling and rattling of the buzz-saw. As Frost repeats these words, the sound of the buzz creates a dominant impression early on, a menacing sound which competes with the beautiful scenery and leaves the reader unsettled, especially as the saw sounds like an animal snarling menacingly.

The next part of the poem brings the day to a close but opens up a tragedy, which in turn heightens the suspense. As the day draws to a close and “nothing happen[s],” the reader’s attention shifts from the setting to the workers, the characters of the poem (9). The reader identifies with these workers as the poem describes a universal feeling, especially among the young: the hope of being released from work early. The time saved from work means the world to the young, and the reader remembers a time when being sent home early from work “count[ed]” so much, identifying with the boy’s eagerness to call it a day (12). The scene belongs to the everyday when “nothing happens” and workers leave their posts destined to repeat the day the next morning. However, what happens next breaks from the mundane. The saw, which has a life of its own, “[l]eap[s] out at the boy’s hand,” severing it much to the astonishment of the onlookers (16). As it happens in life, tragedy is unexpected, and those affected respond accordingly. As the boy turns to the workers “half in appeal,” the reader may recall an unexpected incident from the past, one that leaves all – including the victim – temporarily stunned and unable to react (21). The urgency with which the boy turns to them highlights the confusion of the scene. As he keeps the “life from spilling,” a metaphor which likens blood to life, suspense heightens (22). Just as the poem foreshadowed the saw’s cruel work, the metaphor threatens a more serious consequence: the boy is at risk of losing his life. However, the reader is temporarily duped into thinking the tragedy is limited to the loss of a hand – and not the boy’s life – as the boy pleads, “’Don’t let him cut my hand off’” (25). It’s easy to see why, from the boy’s perspective, “all [is] spoiled,” especially since his hand is crucial to his financial livelihood and his identity as a worker. The reader, like the on-lookers, is stunned when the boy loses not only his hand but his life too.

The real tragedy of the poem, however, is the reaction of the onlookers. If the reader is sad to learn the fate of the boy, he or she is devastated to learn the onlookers’ reaction. The brutal finality of life is captured in the line, “and that ended it” (32). The euphemism is blunt and avoids the humanity of the scene; so does the following line, “No more to build on there,” which limits the value of a life to its ability the grow (33). Then comes the harsh reality of the loss of life: expecting the on-lookers to break down before the loss of young life, the reader is crushed by the harsh realization that life continues seemingly unchanged by the tragedy as the workers “turn[ ] to their affairs” (34). The reader may have expected something quite different, something more human; however, since “they/ Were not the one dead,” the workers go about their routines, seemingly indifferent to the boy’s death. Even the sister is denied a voice in these last lines; instead, the reader is left to consider the harsh reality that life takes little notice of life, that life continues out of cold necessity. If, as Macbeth suggested, life is a tale told by an idiot, the idiot coldly reminds the reader that life signifies nothing.