

## **Birches**

BY ROBERT FROST

When I see birches bend to left and right  
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,  
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.  
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay  
As ice-storms do. Often you must have seen them  
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning  
After a rain. They click upon themselves  
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored  
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.  
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells  
Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust—  
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away  
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.  
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,  
And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed  
So low for long, they never right themselves:  
You may see their trunks arching in the woods  
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground  
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair  
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.  
But I was going to say when Truth broke in  
With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm

I should prefer to have some boy bend them  
As he went out and in to fetch the cows—  
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,  
Whose only play was what he found himself,  
Summer or winter, and could play alone.  
One by one he subdued his father's trees  
By riding them down over and over again  
Until he took the stiffness out of them,  
And not one but hung limp, not one was left  
For him to conquer. He learned all there was  
To learn about not launching out too soon  
And so not carrying the tree away  
Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise  
To the top branches, climbing carefully  
With the same pains you use to fill a cup  
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.  
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,  
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.  
So was I once myself a swinger of birches.  
And so I dream of going back to be.  
It's when I'm weary of considerations,  
And life is too much like a pathless wood  
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs  
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping  
From a twig's having lashed across it open.

I'd like to get away from earth awhile  
And then come back to it and begin over.  
May no fate willfully misunderstand me  
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away  
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:  
I don't know where it's likely to go better.  
I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,  
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk  
*Toward* heaven, till the tree could bear no more,  
But dipped its top and set me down again.  
That would be good both going and coming back.  
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

Birches by Robert Frost: About the poem

Robert Frost's icy 'Birches' is more than just the fond ramblings of a nature lover. It is also a personal quest to **achieve balance between different worlds**. Frost expresses this idea using birch trees as an **extended metaphor** and the recurring **motif** of a lively lad climbing and swinging down on them. By openly sharing his thoughts and feelings, Frost encourages the reader to identify with the poem and seek out their own harmony. We deal with so many expectations, realities and duties in our daily lives; sometimes we lose focus on the plain joy of living. Birches then becomes relevant today, gently reminding us to find an oasis of calm and refreshment that one can tap into when things get tough.

Birches, originally titled 'Swinging on Birches' was one of Frost's early works published in 1916 — right in the middle of World War I. Behind its simple charm, there is a world weariness that hints of the turmoil during that period, especially in the middle verses (Lines 11-17). Perhaps in his own way, the poem was Frost's attempt to soothe in troubled times — telling us to embrace Life's simple pleasures and find peace. It probably explains why the poet chose the

theme of escaping to **transcendence** — a state of existence that is better than the normal one.

Frost speaks as a friend sharing his inner self, adopting a first person conversation style. The poem becomes a **dramatic monologue** — a steady one-person talk to another. There's an easygoing feel with a certain wistfulness, as the poet merges his current reality with his youthful memories.

Structurally, *Birches* is a **stichic** — a poem with no stanza breaks. This gives the poem a free flowing tone, enhanced with the use of **enjambment** — a style where verses break into the next line without punctuation. The poem is chiefly written in **blank verse**— an unrhymed iambic pentameter. Along with the beat in the words, Frost uses the sense of sound to add **aural** (relating to sound) texture to the poem. We see techniques like:

**Onomatopoeia** — Words that mean what they sound.

*They **click** upon themselves (Line 8)*

*As the stir **cracks** and crazes their enamel. (Line 10)*

*Then he flung outward, feet first, with a **swish** (Line 40)*

**Sibilance** — Hissing sounds that come from words with s, z, sh and zh.

*Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells (Line 11)*

**Consonance** — Repetition of similar sounding consonant sounds in neighboring words.

*It's when I'm weary of considerations,*

*And life is too much like a pathless wood*

*Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs*

*Broken across it, and one eye is weeping*

*From a twig's having lashed across it open.*

*(Lines 44-48)*

All in all, Frost may have had a special corner for the Birch trees themselves. In *Fifty Poets: An American Auto Anthology*, he remarked that if an *ark* (In Christian belief a giant lifeboat that housed one pair of earth's living beings

during the Great Flood) was sailing and Frost were allowed to choose a single plant on board, he would select the birch tree. Thanks to the birches playing muse to Frost, we have this charming poem that teaches us to look inside for happiness.

### ‘ Explanation

There is something almost playful about the Birches. Unlike their seemingly serious counterparts — *“lines of straighter, darker trees”*— the birches do not conform, they are scattered to left and right. Their odd angles trigger the poet’s imagination and he fancies that a boy has been swinging about them. Then again, the poet’s rational side is aware that the bent birches aren’t really the aftermath of a boy’s mischief; rather this is the work of an ice storm. Reality might not lend itself to a delightful backstory, but it doesn’t lessen the beauty of the icy birches either.

Observe how the poet involves the reader in sharing experiences — “you must have seen them”. The ice storm has created a silver thaw — a glaze caused by freezing rain on an exposed surface. Stirred by the breeze, the fragile ice make clicking sounds against each other. We see the birches filled with icy prisms, turning “many colored” as they refract the winter sunlight. Birch-bark is scored with horizontal markings called ‘lenticels’ — these are the tree’s pores. The poet compares the overall effect of the ice in the scored birch-bark to ‘enamel’ in cracked glaze pottery.

As the sun further softens the ice, the birches release a shower of ice crystals to the relatively hard snow crust. We see brittleness with a hint of violence in the poet’s language — shattering, avalanching, broken glass, fallen inner dome of heaven. Old planetary models have the concept of **Celestial spheres** — an outdated belief that each heavenly body was enclosed in spheres. More significantly, these were ‘imagination based’ concepts. Science proved otherwise. So when Frost says, *“You’d think the inner dome of heaven had fallen”*, what he probably also means is that the factual world has crashed into his imaginary world, represented by the inner dome of the celestial sphere. There is an internal conflict as realism makes him shed his daydreams and reflections, indicated by the “heaps of broken glass to sweep away”.

Here, the poet contemplates the suppleness of the birches, thinking about endurance in the face of Life’s struggles. *“They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load”* — Life can sometimes weigh heavy on our creative selves

forcing us closer to ground realities. The parallel is seen in the birches bent heavy by ice towards the ‘withered bracken’, a type of fern that grows at ground level. Still bent so much, the birches do not break. And yet because they are bent for a long time, they are never quite the same — warning us of the danger of suppressing ourselves.

Then as if to move away from the serious turn of his thoughts, the poet suddenly springs up an aesthetic **simile** — a more direct form of comparison than a metaphor. Just for the sheer poetry of it, the poet now compares the perennially bent birch trees to young girls sunning out their wet hair. This is his rebellion — like the birch trees, he has to bow to reality, but he isn’t going to be broken by it. He will bounce back. He does so by letting his artistic thoughts run wild.

We keep seeing the poet alternating between whimsy and practicality. But the lines here speak of his willful choice on how he perceives the world. Despite Truth’s persistence, **personified** here like an adult, prim, precise and more often than not, a fun spoiler; the poet prefers the whimsy. The spunky lad of his imagination swings back into view. Out on an errand to bring back the cows, the boy still finds the time and inspiration for pleasure. Even in this world, work is mixed with play. We find our imaginary friend happily romping around the birches; not put out by anything, whether it be the lack of playmates, special equipment, season or circumstance. Like him, the poet too finds a carefree thrill in his own playground- his imagination. No excuses not to have fun!

Frost once remarked, “...it was almost sacrilegious climbing a birch tree till it bent, till it gave and swooped to the ground, but that’s what boys did in those days”. Nostalgia fills these lines, as the poet details the boy’s skill in climbing and swinging from the birches. We can sense the poet reliving his childhood in his daydreams. There is also a **subtext** of becoming worldly wise here where the boy practices and learns of aiming high, testing boundaries, knowing how much to push, making the most of what’s at hand and Life’s other big little lessons.

The poet acknowledges his escapist tendencies. Sometimes Life gets tough and becomes “*a pathless wood*” – another **simile** – with no guidance to ease the confusion or harshness along the way. In times like this, the poet feels the need to take a break. He has “*considerations*” or responsibilities, so physically leaving might not be an option. His mind provides an instant vacation instead, offering a refresher before he gets down to tackle Life’s challenges again.

Be careful what you wish for – The poet becomes wary of his wishful thinking. Fate is **personified** here, like a naughty sprite that could purposely twist the poet's yearnings – snatching him into a dream world with no point of return. Frost is clear that he doesn't desire to stay only in one world or the other. Love on earth anchors him and he cherishes the bonds that hold him here.

But the imaginative world still beckons. The birch trees call out to the poet, tempting him to scale the heights of his imagination, towards the carefree bliss that is '*heaven*'–but still within the borders of his sanity – "*till the tree could bear no more*". Refreshed after touching this glorious high point, the poet wants to land where he left from. The birch tree becomes the bridge between two worlds, inviting us to touch the sky yet keeping us rooted at the same time.

Sometimes, it helps to take a breather. A mini holiday can energize your soul, giving you a chance to unbend from life's harshness. It may not be an actual get-away, but even the imaginative world offers a powerful alternate reality. What's important is that there is time to let go of ourselves, to introspect. It is meaningful that the poet specifies '*both*' when he says "That would be good both going and coming back". The '*going*' offers one a chance to rejuvenate, the "*coming back*" offers the relief of a lighter, if not fresher perspective to life. At the end of the day, this poem is all about dealing with realities and still finding a happy place – even if it's in your mind, and even if it is as simple as swinging through birches in a winter wonderland.