

A Roadside Stand

by Robert Frost

Class 12 Flamingo Poetry Chapter 10

About the poet

Robert Frost (1874 to 1963).

American poet of rural New England.

Plain diction, conversational rhythm,
dark undertones. 4 Pulitzer Prizes.

Famous works : The Road Not Taken,
Stopping by Woods, Mending Wall.

About the poem

Published in 1947 in 'Steeple Bush'.

Set during the long shadow of the
Great Depression. A small farmer puts
up a wayside stall to sell produce -
nobody stops. Frost uses the scene
to indict urban indifference.

52 lines, mostly iambic pentameter,

loose rhyme : ABAB CDCD interleaved.

One continuous verse paragraph.

Opening : the stand

"The little old house was out with
a little new shed in front..."

A farmer's family has built a flimsy
roadside stall ~~near~~ at the edge
of the highway. Squash, wild berries,
a sign painted ~~crookedly~~ 'crookedly'.

stand = small + flimsy + ignored ← key image

The sign 'pleads pathetically' for
the cash that might lift their
spirit. Frost's word choice -
"pathetically pled" - signals pity,
not contempt.

The rural-urban binary

Two worlds collide in the poem :

* roadside folk - poor, hopeful,
invisible to cars

* city traffic - fast, indifferent

Traffic that won't stop

"... the polished traffic passed with a mind ahead, or if ever aside a moment, then out of sorts..."

The cars are 'polished' - shining, urban, well off. Their drivers have 'a mind ahead' - already past the stand in thought. *

If anyone does glance aside they are 'out of sorts' - irritated by the ugly painted signs, the wrong arrows : the S turned wrong, the N also. Aesthetic complaint, not a moment of sympathy.

polished cars >> roadside life

<- contrast

Frost calls* it a 'wrong to the wood' - the rural landscape itself is wronged by the speeding traffic that won't even slow down for a tank of pure water.

The promise of the city

"The polished traffic ...
... the moving pictures' promise
that the party in power is said
to be keeping from us."

Key phrase - 'moving pictures'
promise'. Refers to cinema, the
glossy images of city wealth shown
in films. Country folk see these
and dream of the 'flow of cities'
- the cash and ease of urban life.

cinema \Rightarrow illusion of plenty

\leftarrow the lure

But the promise is empty. The
party in power 'is said to be
keeping' it from them. Pleas to
the political authority go ~~ignored~~ unanswered.

Frost's tone here is bitter. The
countryside is sold a dream that
never arrives. Their stand keeps
dwindling away.

The false benefactors

A second target of Frost's anger - the 'greedy good-doers' who plan to relocate rural families :

"... to relieve them of the cost of dwelling out of doors, ... swarm over their lives enforcing benefits..."

*

Officials and reformers gather the poor into planned villages, near theatres and stores. Sounds kind. Frost sees it as a polite robbery.

The country folk lose their land, their independence, even their sleep - the do-gooders are said 'to teach them how to sleep'.

aid -> control + dependence

<- Frost's bite

Charity that strips away dignity is no charity at all.

The climax

"... I can't help owning the great relief it would be to put these people at one stroke out of their pain."

A startling moment. The speaker confesses he sometimes wishes he could end the country folk's misery in one stroke - then catches himself for the cruelty of the thought.

the thousand selfish cars

Earlier in the poem he wrote :

"... a thousand thoughtless cars that flash by..."

*

1000 cars - not one stops

<- climax

*

When one finally does pull in, it is only to ask the way, or to back round in the driveway.

Tone shifts

1. Pity

opening - the pathetic plea of the crooked sign.

2. Irony

the 'polished' cars vs the unpainted stand.

3. Indignation

aimed at city drivers and at the calculated kindness of the do-gooders.

4. Confessional / guilty

he catches himself wishing for a quick end to the suffering.

Poetic craft

Alliteration - 'polished',

'pathetically pled'.

Personification - the sign 'pleads'.

Metaphor - the moving pictures'

promise. Irony throughout.

Themes

(a) Rural poverty

a small farmer pleading for the cash that city life takes for granted.

(b) Urban indifference

a thousand thoughtless cars pass.
nobody stops to help.

*

(c) False benefactors

officials who 'help' the poor by stripping their independence.

Quick revision

Q. Why is the stand 'pathetic' ?

A. The sign is crooked, the goods are humble, and nobody stops.

Q. Whom does Frost blame ?

A. Both city drivers and the calculating 'good-doers' of officialdom. Both fail the rural poor.