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A Roadside Stand NCERT Solution: line-grounded explanations for Robert Frost's poem from Flamingo (2026-27)

Chapter 10: Flamingo Poetry: A Roadside Stand

About this Chapter

A Roadside Stand is Robert Frost's compassionate, quietly angry poem about a small produce stall set up by poor country folk on the edge of a highway. The stand pleads for "some city money" but is mostly ignored by the speeding car-traffic. Frost watches the indifference of city dwellers, the false promises of "good-doers" who plan to "benefit" the rural poor by relocating them, and the deep ache of country people for a share in modern prosperity. These solutions ground every answer in specific lines of the poem: the opening request for "a dole of bread", the catalogue of road-side goods, the silent waiting, and the famous closing wish that the speaker could end the country folk's suffering "with one stroke".

Topics covered: Rural poverty and city indifference • False benevolence of "good-doers" • Promised land of "moving pictures' promise" • Tone of pity and anger • Free-flowing iambic verse

Poet and source.
Robert Frost (1874–1963), United States; from *A Witness Tree* (1942).

Form.
Loose iambic pentameter; irregular but mostly couplet rhyme; one continuous verse paragraph.

Central tension.
Rural sellers wait for "city money"; city traffic refuses to stop. The poem is the gap between the two.

Also see for this chapter: Revision Notes

Think it out

Q 10.1 **The city folk who drove through the countryside hardly paid any heed to the roadside stand or to the people who ran it. If at all they did, it was to complain.**

Which lines bring this out? What was their complaint about?

SOLUTION

Frost begins by setting up a small, hopeful wooden stand on the edge of a road and then immediately shows how the speeding city traffic refuses to slow down for it. The complaint is not about the goods the country people offer; it is about the way the stand *looks*. The city travellers find the rural attempt at commerce ugly, untidy and an offence to their scenery.

☞ **Key lines**

"The polished traffic passed with a mind ahead, / Or if ever aside a moment, then out of sorts / At having the landscape marred with the artless paintings / Of signs that with N turned wrong and S turned wrong / Offered for sale wild berries in wooden quarts, / Or crook-necked golden squash with silver warts, / Or beauty rest in a beautiful mountain scene."

- **"The polished traffic passed with a mind ahead."** The cars are "polished" (gleaming, well-kept) and the drivers' minds are "ahead" on their own destinations. The stand is not on their map.
- **"Or if ever aside a moment, then out of sorts."** Even the rare driver who does glance sideways is immediately irritated. The verb "out of sorts" carries the petty annoyance of someone whose drive has been spoiled.
- **"At having the landscape marred."** For these travellers, the stand is not a place of need; it is a blemish on a postcard view.
- **"Artless paintings" and reversed letters.** The country people have hand-painted their signs and got the letters "N" and "S" the wrong way round. To the city eye this is amateurish. To Frost it is the honest mark of people who never had the schooling for sign-writing.
- **What they sell.** The list is humble: wild berries in wooden quarts, crook-necked golden squash with "silver warts", and rest in a "beautiful mountain scene". Each item is something a tired city driver might actually need; the city refuses each one.

☞ **Spot the irony**

The city folk are aesthetically offended by the very landscape they have driven into to enjoy. Frost lets that contradiction sit in the poem without commenting on it directly.

Final Answer: The relevant lines are "The polished traffic passed with a mind ahead, / Or if ever aside a moment, then out of sorts / At having the landscape marred with the artless paintings / Of signs that with N turned wrong and S turned wrong. . . " The city folk's complaint is purely aesthetic: that the hand-lettered, mis-spelled signs of the roadside stand *spoil the view*. They are not annoyed by the goods or the people, only by what their eyes have to put up with.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION *: Dr Ananya Iyer, PhD English Literature, Jawaharlal Nehru University*

Strategic angle. A board examiner expects two things in this answer: the right lines quoted, and the right framing of the complaint. Many students write "the city people complained about the food" or "they did not like the stand". Both are wrong; the complaint is specifically about the *look* of the signs.

- Read the verb "marred" (line 6 in the running poem). It carries the city tourist's belief that nature is scenery, not someone's livelihood. The stand violates that belief.
- The phrase "artless paintings" is a class judgement rather than an art-critical one. "Artless" here means unskilled, untrained; the city dweller assumes that anyone who paints a sign should have been to school.
- The reversed N and S are a small but devastating detail. Frost picks two consonants that are mirror-images of themselves so that the country sign-painter's error feels natural, almost touching. The city traveller reads them as illiteracy.
- The list of goods (wild berries, crook-necked squash, "beauty rest in a beautiful mountain scene") is given in the same sentence as the complaint. Frost is showing that the city has been offered something real and has rejected it for the wrong reason.
- Notice that Frost never lets the country people speak. The complaint is reported entirely from the speeding car; the silence of the stand-keepers is the strongest answer the poem gives back.

Why this matters. The full marks go to a candidate who names the aesthetic nature of the complaint and grounds it in specific phrases ("marred", "artless paintings", "N turned wrong and S turned wrong"). A vague answer about "the city did not care" will earn only half the marks. A top-band answer also explains that this aesthetic complaint is itself a moral one in Frost's reading, because to mind the misspellings while ignoring the poverty behind them is the precise moral failing the poem is diagnosing.

Common mistakes. Two predictable misses: paraphrasing the city's reaction as "annoyance" without quoting the aesthetic phrasing, and treating the misspelled signs as a separate incident rather than as Frost's chosen evidence of city indifference. Tie the misspellings back to the stand-keepers' unanswered request and the answer locks together.

> **Final Answer:** The lines "The polished traffic passed with a mind ahead, / Or if ever aside a moment, then out of sorts / At having the landscape marred with the artless paintings / Of signs that with N turned wrong and S turned wrong. . . " bring out the city's indifference. Their complaint is aesthetic, not practical: they object to the unskilled, mis-spelled hand-painted signs that, in their view, spoil the scenery they have come to enjoy.

♥ Why This Matters

Frost rarely calls the city people cruel. He shows them as distracted, well-dressed and aesthetically fussy. The cruelty is the everyday cruelty of indifference, which is harder to name and harder to cure than open hostility.

Q 10.2 What was the plea of the folk who had put up the roadside stand?

SOLUTION

The country folk who built the stand are not asking for charity in the form of food, clothes or pity. They are asking for one thing: to be allowed into the city economy, even briefly. The poem makes this plea explicit in its central lines.

☞ Key lines

"The hurt to the scenery wouldn't be my complaint / So much as the trusting sorrow of what is unsaid: / Here far from the city we make our roadside stand / And ask for some city money to feel in hand / To try if it will not make our being expand, / And give us the life of the moving-pictures' promise / That the party in power is said to be keeping from us."

- **"We make our roadside stand / And ask for some city money to feel in hand."** The plea is specific: *city money*, the cash that circulates in towns. The country folk are not begging; they have put up a stand and are offering goods in exchange for the cash.
- **"To feel in hand."** The phrase is physical. The stand-keepers want to actually *hold* the currency, because city money in the hand is a kind of dignity, proof that they are part of the modern world.
- **"To try if it will not make our being expand."** Frost uses "being expand" rather than "income grow". The plea is for a wider, fuller life, not just more money.
- **"The life of the moving-pictures' promise."** The country people have seen cinema. They want the houses, clothes, gadgets and freedoms that the films show as ordinary in the city.
- **"That the party in power is said to be keeping from us."** They suspect that the wealth of the modern country is being withheld from them by those who govern , a political reading that Frost slips in quietly, without raising his voice.

☞ Plea, not begging

The country folk in the poem are not paupers asking for handouts. They are sellers asking to be bought from. The dignity of the plea matters: they offer goods and ask for a fair exchange that the city refuses to enter.

Final Answer: The country folk plead for "some city money to feel in hand", a small share of the urban cash economy, in exchange for the goods they sell at the stand. They want to use that money to "make our being expand" and to begin living the "life of the moving-pictures' promise" that they suspect the government has been keeping from them.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION *: Mr Arjun Mehra, MA English, Delhi University*

Strategic angle. The plea has three layers, and a strong answer names all three rather than only the surface request for money.

- **Economic layer.** Cash in hand. The country people want to participate in the urban economy. Frost's word is "money", not "charity" or "aid".
- **Existential layer.** A wider being. The phrase "make our being expand" moves the plea beyond transaction into the question of what a fuller human life feels like.
- **Cultural-political layer.** The promise of cinema. "Moving pictures' promise" is the rural imagination of what city life looks like, and "the party in power" is the suspected reason that promise has never reached the countryside.
- Notice the verbs: *make, feel, expand, give, keep*. Frost stacks active verbs to show that the country folk are not passive; they are actively trying, asking, and being denied.
- The phrase "trusting sorrow of what is unsaid" (just before this sentence) tells you the tone. The plea is trusting (they still believe city travellers might stop), sorrowful (they know most will not), and *unsaid* (it is implied by the existence of the stand, not shouted from the sign).

Why this matters. A board answer that mentions only "money" lands maybe half marks. Adding "expand our being" and "moving-pictures' promise" picks up the existential and cultural levels. The political hint ("party in power keeping from us") is the bonus marker that distinguishes a top-band answer. Examiners also reward candidates who quote Frost's three specific phrases verbatim and connect them to a single thesis, rather than listing them as separate, equal asks.

Common mistakes. Two predictable slips lose marks. The first is treating the plea as a single economic demand and missing the cultural-political register Frost slides in. The second is paraphrasing the moving-pictures line without naming what cinema stands for in the poem, the urban consumer imagination the country folk are kept outside of.

Final Answer: The plea has three layers stacked together: cash in hand (economic), a fuller and wider life of one's own (existential), and a share in the comforts shown in city cinema that the party in power is suspected of withholding from the countryside (cultural-political).

Q 10.3 **The government and other social service agencies appear to help them, but actually do not do so. How does this come out in the poem?**

SOLUTION

Frost is unusually direct about the false benevolence of the state in the middle of the poem. He calls out two groups by name and explains exactly how their "help" will hurt rather than heal.

☞ **Key lines**

"It is in the news that all these pitiful kin / Are to be bought out and mercifully gathered in / To live in villages, next to the theatre and store, / Where they won't have to think for themselves anymore, / While greedy good-doers, beneficent beasts of prey, / Swarm over their lives enforcing benefits / That are calculated to soothe them out of their wits, / And by teaching them how to sleep they sleep all day, / Deprive them of their happy sleep at night."

- **"Bought out and mercifully gathered in."** The official plan is to buy the country people's land and move them into villages near a "theatre and store". The word "mercifully" is bitter; the mercy is condescending, not real.
- **"Where they won't have to think for themselves anymore."** The relocation removes their autonomy. They will live close to the theatre, but they will not own their own decisions.
- **"Greedy good-doers, beneficent beasts of prey."** The two phrases are deliberate contradictions. "Good-doers" are greedy; "beneficent" (kind-meaning) people are also "beasts of prey". Help has become hunting.
- **"Swarm over their lives enforcing benefits."** Verbs like "swarm" and "enforcing" show that the help is not requested; it is imposed. A benefit you have to be made to accept is no benefit at all.
- **"Calculated to soothe them out of their wits."** The benefits are designed ("calculated") to dull the country folk's judgement, not to sharpen it. They will be too comfortable to think clearly.
- **"Teaching them how to sleep / Deprive them of their happy sleep."** The paradox is the climax. The helpers will instruct the poor how to sleep so well by day that they cannot sleep peacefully at night. The "help" destroys the one thing the country people already had.

♥ Why This Matters

Frost is targeting paternalistic relocation schemes, which were common in mid-twentieth-century America. The lesson is general: help that does not consult the helped is not help. The country people in the poem are never asked what they want; they are "gathered in" as if they were stray sheep.

Final Answer: The poem exposes false benevolence in lines about the news that the country folk are to be "bought out and mercifully gathered in" to villages near a "theatre and store", where "they won't have to think for themselves anymore". The "good-doers" are called "beneficent beasts of prey" who "swarm over their lives enforcing benefits". The help is imposed, condescending, and "calculated to soothe them out of their wits", a kind of care that destroys autonomy and even "deprive[s] them of their happy sleep at night".

EXPERT'S SOLUTION *: Dr Meera Krishnan, PhD American Poetry, University of Hyderabad*

Strategic angle. This question wants two things: the *lines* that expose the false help and the *logic* of how the help fails. A top-band answer interlaces the two so the quotation supports the argument.

- **The official plan looks kind.** "Bought out and mercifully gathered in / To live in villages, next to the theatre and store." Read naively, this sounds like an upgrade, better houses, entertainment, shops.
- **The cost is autonomy.** "Where they won't have to think for themselves anymore." Frost's irony is exact: not having to think is named as a benefit, but the reader feels it as a loss.
- **The helpers are predators.** "Greedy good-doers, beneficent beasts of prey." The compound epithet is the moral centre of the passage. Frost is saying: those who profit from helping the poor are not helping the poor.
- **The help is enforced, not offered.** "Swarm over their lives enforcing benefits." Choice is removed, not respected.
- **The benefits are sedatives.** "Calculated to soothe them out of their wits." Calmed people do not protest.
- **The final paradox.** "Teaching them how to sleep they sleep all day, / Deprive them of their happy sleep at night." Frost turns sleep, a universal good, into the thing that the helpers themselves destroy. The country folk used to sleep well; the help kills that sleep.

Why this matters. Many candidates write "the government did not help". That is too weak. Frost is saying something stronger: *the help itself is harmful*. The expert answer

keeps that sharp edge. A top-band answer reads the four phrases as a single chain (predator, enforce, sedate, destroy sleep) and not as a list of unrelated complaints. **Common mistakes.** Three slips to avoid: softening "beneficent beasts of prey" to "unkind helpers", missing the sedative reading of "soothe them out of their wits", and treating sleep as a casual image instead of the climactic example. Each phrase carries weight; flatten one and the argument's edge goes.

> **Final Answer:** Frost shows the failure of official help in three steps. First, the plan looks kind: country people will be "bought out and mercifully gathered in" to villages near a "theatre and store". Second, the cost is autonomy: "they won't have to think for themselves anymore". Third, the helpers are predators: "greedy good-doers, beneficent beasts of prey" who "swarm over their lives enforcing benefits" that are "calculated to soothe them out of their wits" and finally "deprive them of their happy sleep at night". The poem's verdict is that paternal, enforced help is a form of harm.

✗ Common Mistake

A common mistake is to answer this question politically ("the government is bad") without grounding the answer in Frost's specific phrases. The marks are for quoting "good-doers, beneficent beasts of prey", "enforcing benefits" and "soothe them out of their wits", not for general opinion.

Q 10.4 What is the "childish longing" that the poet refers to? Why is it vain?

SOLUTION

After the bitter middle of the poem, Frost slips into a softer, sadder register. The country folk's hope of a buyer is described as a "childish longing" because it is repeated each day, with the simple trust of a child waiting for a parent who keeps not arriving.

> **☞ Key lines**
>
> "Sometimes I feel myself I can hardly bear / The thought of so much childish longing in vain, / The sadness that lurks near the open window there, / That waits all day in almost open prayer / For the squeal of brakes, the sound of a stopping car, / Of all the thousand selfish cars that pass."

- **What the longing is.** The country folk long for the simple sound of a stopping car, "the squeal of brakes, the sound of a stopping car", because each stop means a possible sale and a little "city money to feel in hand".
- **Why it is called "childish".** The longing is innocent, persistent, and based on a hope

that does not learn from disappointment. Like a child waiting for an absent parent, they wait every day, with the same trust, even though every day the cars rush past.

- **Why it is "in vain".** The cars are "thousand selfish cars"; their drivers are city travellers who, as we already learned, find the stand a blemish on the scenery, not a place to stop. The hope is therefore not just disappointed; it is structurally impossible.
- **"The open window" and "almost open prayer".** Frost uses the metaphor of an open window. The window is the stand itself, open all day to the road. The "almost open prayer" is the silent hope that an open prayer always implies but never quite says aloud. The country people pray without using words.
- **The poet's grief.** The opening line of this passage, "Sometimes I feel myself I can hardly bear" , tells us that Frost himself, the observer, finds this scene too painful to watch. The longing is vain; the witness is helpless.

☞ **Why "childish", not "childlike"**

"Childlike" would be a compliment (pure, innocent). "Childish" is colder: it suggests an immaturity that the world will exploit. Frost picks the harsher word because he wants the reader to feel both the innocence and the exposure of the country people.

Final Answer: The "childish longing" is the country folk's daily, trusting hope that a car will brake and stop at their roadside stand to buy something. It is "in vain" because the cars are "thousand selfish cars" that hurry past without stopping, the city drivers see the stand as scenery-spoiling, not as a place of business. The hope is therefore not just disappointed once; it is built to be disappointed every day.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION *: Ms Devika Rao, MA English, Madras Christian College*

Strategic angle. Treat "childish longing" as a two-word puzzle. The marks go to a candidate who can unpack *both* words, "childish" *and* "longing", and then say why the longing is in vain in Frost's specific sense.

- **"Longing" is desire over time.** The country folk do not long for one big sale; they long, day after day, for the small sound of a car stopping. The longing is structural, not occasional.
- **"Childish" is two-sided.** On one hand, it names innocence: the country people still believe the traffic will stop. On the other, it names a refusal to learn from evidence: every day the cars pass, and every day the stand-keepers wait again.
- **"Almost open prayer".** The poem fixes the emotional temperature exactly here. The window is open, the prayer is almost open, the hand is almost outstretched. Nothing is said; everything is waiting.
- **Why "in vain".** Because the drivers do not belong to the same economy. The city

traffic is "polished", minded on its own roads. The country stand is an interruption. The two worlds touch only as irritation.

- **The poet's reaction sharpens the answer.** "Sometimes I feel myself I can hardly bear / The thought of so much childish longing in vain." Frost is not detached; he is moved to grief. A full answer notes the poet's intrusion as the moral centre of the passage.

Why this matters. An answer that says "they hope a car will stop" is correct but thin. A top-band answer also explains *why* the hope cannot be fulfilled, the structural gap between the city and the country, sealed by the city's view of the stand as a blemish on scenery. That structural reading is what earns the full marks.

> **Final Answer:** The "childish longing" is the country folk's trusting, child-like, daily hope that a car will brake and stop at their stand. It is in vain because the city traffic is "polished" and self-absorbed; the drivers see the stand as a defect in their scenery, not as a place to spend money. The longing therefore cannot be answered, it is structurally, not just occasionally, in vain.

♥ Why This Matters

A poem that ends on a wish to "put these people at one stroke out of their pain" is not a comfortable poem. Frost is deliberately uncomfortable: he wants you to leave the page with the country people's silent hope still in your ear, not resolved.

Q 10.5 Which lines tell us about the insufferable pain that the poet feels at the thought of the plight of the rural poor?

SOLUTION

The pain in this poem is not in the country people; it is in the speaker who watches them. Frost gives the watcher's pain its own small passage near the end of the poem and lets the language slip out of observation into a personal confession.

☞ Key lines

"Sometimes I feel myself I can hardly bear / The thought of so much childish longing in vain, / The sadness that lurks near the open window there, / That waits all day in almost open prayer / For the squeal of brakes, the sound of a stopping car, / Of all the thousand selfish cars that pass, / Just one to inquire what a farmer's prices are."

- **"Sometimes I feel myself I can hardly bear."** For the first time in the poem the speaker turns the camera on himself. The verb "bear" carries weight: it is what you say of a burden, of grief, of physical pain. The speaker has been carrying this and the line admits it.

- **"The thought of so much childish longing in vain."** What he cannot bear is the size of the country people's hope, and the certainty that it will be disappointed. The word "childish" is sympathetic, not belittling; the country folk's hope is innocent, like a child's.
- **"The sadness that lurks near the open window."** Sadness here is a presence, almost a person, hanging by the stand. The window is left open all day so that the first sound of a slowing car will be heard. The image is of permanent, daily waiting.
- **"In almost open prayer."** Frost reaches for the language of religion. The waiting is prayer-like: not loud, but constant, and addressed to a higher power that will probably not answer. The phrase "almost open" captures the country folk's dignity, they will not beg outright.
- **"All the thousand selfish cars. . . just one to inquire what a farmer's prices are."** The mathematics is Frost's most painful detail. Out of a thousand cars, even one would be enough to break the silence and give the day meaning. Not a thousand cars are needed, just one. And even that one does not come.

☞ **Why these lines feel different**

The rest of the poem watches the country people from outside. This passage stops watching and starts feeling. The shift from "they" to "I" is the moment Frost lets the reader feel the weight of the scene, not just see it.

Final Answer: The lines that record the poet's insufferable pain are: "Sometimes I feel myself I can hardly bear / The thought of so much childish longing in vain, / The sadness that lurks near the open window there, / That waits all day in almost open prayer / For the squeal of brakes, the sound of a stopping car, / Of all the thousand selfish cars that pass, / Just one to inquire what a farmer's prices are." Here Frost steps out of his observer's role, names the country folk's daily waiting as "almost open prayer", and admits that he himself cannot bear the thought of so much innocent hope ending in nothing.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION *: Dr Kavita Menon, PhD American Poetry, University of Hyderabad*

Strategic angle. The board examiner wants three moves: identify the personal-pronoun shift, quote the right passage in full, and explain why the lines feel different from the rest of the poem.

- Mark the pronoun change. Frost has been using "they" and "the country folk" until this point. Here he writes "I". That single shift is the most efficient evidence you can give of where the poet's own pain enters the poem.
- Quote the full seven-line passage. A partial quotation loses the cumulative force of "hardly bear. . . childish longing. . . sadness. . . open prayer. . . thousand selfish cars".

The pain is in the build-up, not in any one phrase.

- Unpack "almost open prayer". Prayer is a religious act of asking a higher power. "Almost open" tells us the country folk will not let the prayer become a beg. Their dignity is what makes the scene unbearable for the speaker.
- Read "a thousand selfish cars" as moral arithmetic. Frost is saying: even one driver, out of a thousand, would rescue the day. That one driver never comes. The pain is not in poverty alone; it is in the size of the indifference.
- For a top-band answer, link this passage back to the poem's closing wish to "put these people at one stroke out of their pain". The two passages share the same verb of pain ("bear"/"pain") and tell us that the speaker is not a calm observer; he is a witness who suffers with what he sees.

Why this matters. Many candidates pick only the closing "one stroke" line and write a paragraph about euthanasia. That is the wrong passage and the wrong reading. The pain is in the middle of the poem, not at the end, and it is the speaker's pain, not the country folk's.

Common mistakes. Three to avoid: quoting only one line when the question expects the full passage; missing the "I" shift and writing about the country people's pain instead; glossing "almost open prayer" as sadness, when it is the specific image of dignified, religious waiting that the line turns on.

> **Final Answer:** The pain is most clearly named in the seven-line passage beginning "Sometimes I feel myself I can hardly bear". There the speaker drops his observer's pronoun for the first time, calls the country folk's hope "childish longing in vain", describes their daily waiting as "almost open prayer", and confesses that out of "a thousand selfish cars" even one stopping car would be enough, and even that one does not come. Those lines, more than the closing "one stroke" wish, are where Frost lets his own insufferable pain into the poem.

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Key Takeaways

- "A Roadside Stand" is Robert Frost's poem (from *A Witness Tree*, 1942) about a small rural stand on the edge of a highway, set up by poor country folk hoping for "some city money" from passing travellers.

- The city traffic mostly passes without stopping; when it does notice the stand, it complains only about how “artless” the hand-painted signs are and how the landscape is “marred”.
- The country folk’s plea has three layers: cash in hand (economic), an expanded “being” (existential), and a share in the “moving-pictures’ promise” that they believe “the party in power” is keeping from them (cultural-political).
- The poem attacks paternal help. Officials plan to “mercifully” gather the country folk into villages “next to the theatre and store / Where they won’t have to think for themselves anymore”.
- “Greedy good-doers, beneficent beasts of prey” is Frost’s two-edged label for the social agencies whose “enforcing benefits” are “calculated to soothe them out of their wits”.
- The “childish longing” is the daily, trusting hope for “the squeal of brakes, the sound of a stopping car”, repeated each day with no answer; the poet confesses “I can hardly bear” the thought of it.
- Form: a single verse paragraph in loose iambic pentameter with mostly couplet rhyme; the steady metre carries the speaker’s controlled grief without raising its voice.

End of Think it out