Fire and Ice

POEM TEXT

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

SUMMARY

The speaker weighs up two different scenarios for the end of the world. Some people think the world will end in fire, whereas others think ice is more likely. Based on the speaker's experiences with desire, he or she tends to agree with those who believe fire is the more likely scenario. If the world were to end twice, however, the speaker feels that, based on his or her knowledge of human hatred, ice would be an equally powerful method of destruction—and would do the job sufficiently.

THEMES

HATRED, DESIRE, AND THE END OF THE WORLD

Despite its light and conversational tone, "Fire and Ice" is a bleak poem that highlights human beings' talent for self-destruction. The poem is a work of eschatology—writing about the end of the world—and poses two possible causes for this end: fire and ice. The speaker uses these natural elements as symbols for desire and hatred, respectively, arguing that both emotions left unchecked have the capacity to destroy civilization itself.

The speaker begins by relating that, when it comes to how the world will end, "some" people favor fire and "some" ice. At this early stage of the poem, these two elements could easily relate to a natural disaster. For example, a potential world-ending "fire" could be something like the asteroid that most likely destroyed the dinosaurs; and ice could relate to a future ice age, or the extinguishment of the sun. But as soon as those more naturalistic ends to the world are suggested, the poem changes direction and makes it clear that fire and ice are *symbols*—not of *natural* disasters, but of humanity's ability to create disasters of its own.

By "fire" the speaker actually means "desire"—and from the speaker's limited personal experience, the speaker knows desire to be a powerfully destructive force. Humanity, then, could bring about the end of the world through passion, anger, violence, greed, and bloodlust. Indeed, the "fire" now seems like an image of warfare too. (Indeed, the poem was written shortly after then end of World War I.)

Though the speaker feels "fire" is the likely way for humanity to destroy itself and the world, the speaker also feels that human beings' capacity for destruction is so great that it could bring about this destruction more than once. (This is tongue-in-cheek, of course, as once would certainly be enough.) Here, the speaker presents "ice" as another method for ending it all, aligning it with hatred.

Ice works differently from fire in this eschatological prediction. Human destruction doesn't have to be bright, noisy, and violent—hate can spread in more subtle ways. Ice has connotations of coldness and indifference, and so a possible reading here is that the end of the world could be brought about by *inaction* rather than some singular major event. A contemporary reading could map climate change onto "ice" here: if people fail to act over humanity's effect on the climate, it will gradually, but assuredly, bring about destruction.

By the poem's end, though, the choice between "ice" and "fire" starts to seem a little false—particularly as the speaker's tone is so casual and even glib ("ice is also great"). Ice and fire, though utterly different in the literal sense, here represent one and the same thing: the destructive potential of humanity. Either method will suffice to bring about the inevitable end of the world. In just nine short lines, then, "Fire and Ice" offers a powerful warning about human nature. Finally, it's important to notice something that *isn't* in the poem: any hint of a possibility that humanity *won't* end the world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.

The opening two lines of "Fire and Ice" establish two important aspects of the overall poem. Firstly, they make it clear that this

poem is a work of *eschatology*—writing about the end of the world. Secondly, they establish the poem's conversational tone, which is deliberately a little at odds with the gravity of the subject matter.

The first two lines also set up the poem's key antithesis, as the speaker considers whether "fire" or "ice" will bring about the end of the world. At this early stage in the poem, the symbolic meaning of these two elements is not yet apparent. Indeed, the speaker talks in very simple language, almost as if gossiping about someone or something: "Some say." This is all about luring the reader into a false sense of security, before the poem unleashes the disarming depth of its thought.

The lines are balanced by anaphora, the two "some says" allowing for the antithesis to be established—on one side there is fire, and on the other ice. The laidback tone masks that the end of the world is actually one of mankind's longest and most hotly contested debates: people have been predicting the end of the world pretty much since it began (or since the human race began). What's interesting about the set-up here is that, despite the casual tone, the poem has already smuggled in a rather bleak idea. Though the speaker presents two choices, they both essentially amount to the same thing: the end of the world. There is no third option in which the world is not destroyed.

The poem hasn't yet drawn the link between these apocalyptic scenarios and humanity's likely role in them, but as that becomes clear throughout the poem the sense that humankind is fated to destroy itself grows stronger and scarier. The casual tone could also be considered ironic, in that it doesn't really match the subject matter—perhaps suggesting that, though it's a hot topic, arrogant humankind doesn't *really* believe the end of the world is coming (not any time soon, at least).

LINES 3-4

From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.

It's in lines 3 and 4 that the poem starts to develop its symbols and contextualizes the opening lines. The conversational tone of lines 1 and 2 is confirmed by the introduction of the first person pronoun in line 3, indicating that the poem is the speaker's personal opinion. This is part of the poem's subtle irony: the speaker is essentially conjecturing—which means making a guess—about the end of the world as if talking about which sports team might win the league next season.

The speaker brings their own experience into play, focusing on fire particularly. The speaker tells the reader that, in the speaker's opinion, fire is the more likely of the two elements to bring about the end of the world. This doesn't mean literal fire—or at least, doesn't *only* mean literal fire—because the speaker draws a link between fire and desire. Fire, of course, can symbolize desire, and so here it becomes clear that the speaker is talking more about the traits of human nature that fire often represents—and that these are the likely causes for the end of the world. Talking generally, then, the speaker could be referring to any one, or a combination, of greed, passion, anger, violence, and bloodlust.

It's easy to read this as a specific reference to humankind's capacity for self-destruction for war. The poem was written between the two World Wars and the possible end of the world was certainly on people's minds. (And though the poem predates the atomic bomb, it is hard for contemporary readers not to think of that incredible and fearsome destructive power.)

Here, the poem is also gently enacting the very processes that it describes. If warfare and mass destruction depend on the entrenched divisions of one set of people from another, then the poem subtly demonstrating this process itself. That is, the speaker is siding with "those who favor fire"—humanity is divided crudely into two camps: fire and ice. In a way, the poem plays out the process of division in order to gently hint at the role division—the failure of people to empathize with their fellow human beings—will play in this end-of-world scenario.

There are also a couple of interesting smaller details in these two lines. The enjambment between them momentarily quickens the pace of the poem, suggesting inflamed passion and heated emotion (line 3 could easily have had a comma at the end). The alliteration in the two /f/ sounds of "favor fire" is intended to suggest the flickering of a flame, as though the poem itself heats up in this discussion of metaphorical fire. Finally, because of the antithesis of the opening lines, lines 3 and 4, in dealing specifically with fire, set up the anticipation for the "ice" section to follow (lines 5 to 9).

LINE 5

But if it had to perish twice,

Line 5 is a deceptively simple line that masks a complicated idea. Here, the speaker begins to qualify the opinion put forward in lines 3 and 4. They say that, if the world had to end *twice*, then ice would work just as well as fire.

The line is both ironic and an oxymoron. It's ironic in its absurdity. The speaker imagines some scenario in which the world is obligated to end twice, and then comments that ice would be "great" in that scenario. The casual, conversational tone—"But if it had to"—is at odds with the subject matter, which is no less than the end of the world itself!

But the line is also utterly oxymoronic. To "perish" is to be destroyed completely—to die. Nothing that is alive can die twice, so it doesn't make any logical sense for the world to "have to" perish more than once. Of course, this isn't an error, but a deliberate use of paradox to illustrate a point. In essence, the speaker is saying that humankind's capacity for self-destruction is so immense that it could destroy the world not just once, but twice (if it was logically possible), and perhaps even more than that. Furthermore, the line allows the poem to

discuss the other way in which the world might end—ice. Not only has humankind got enough destructive power to destroy the world more than once, it has multiple ways in which it could do it. This leads the poem into its concluding lines.

LINES 6-9

I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

Lines 6-9 offer up the second half of the poem's key antithesis between fire and ice. Lines 3-4 expanded on fire, with a mere 13 words hinting at a range of interpretive possibilities. Now, the poem turns its attention to ice.

Whereas fire was associated with desire, ice is linked to hate. The reader learns little about the speaker's identity, but the speaker has known "enough of hate" to confirm that it, too, could lead to the end of the world. Furthermore, there's no suggestion that the speaker's experience of hate is anything unusual—it might just be the experience of hate that most people have within a lifetime.

If fire is a symbol of more obvious human destruction—like warfare—then ice is more subtle. It represents the way that human beings can hate one another, and become indifferent to one another's fate. Essentially, ice symbolizes indifference and emotional coldness.

The poem here dials up the irony. Its literal content is not a warning against hate (as represented by ice), but a kind of endorsement. If fire doesn't end the world, ice would be "great" for the job! Note that great here has connotations of immense power in addition to being a stronger version of "good." Hate, in other words, is just as potentially destructive as desire (which it should be remembered is a stand-in for things like greed, bloodlust and anger as well). The irony helps develop the poem's serious underlying point: that humanity is bound to destroy its world. The speaker's casual tone makes this message quieter but ultimately more powerful, because it also hints at mankind's ability to ignore its own capacity for destruction. If it weren't for words like "fire," "ice," "desire," and "hate," nothing about the tone of the poem would suggest any sense of panic and anxiety about the end of the world.

The poem here makes brilliant use of sibilance, which sends a chill through the lines:

> But if it had to perish twice,
> I think I know enough of hate
> To say that for destruction ice
> Is also great
> And would suffice.

This makes sense, as the poem is talking about a kind of metaphorical freeze in which humans are no longer able to show one another emotional warmth. And, in fact, the final word *contains* the "ice" within it, making the poem end in this frozen state.

SYMBOLS

FIRE

At first, the poem seems like it could be discussing natural disasters as events that might bring about the end of the world. The "fire" of line 1 could be interpreted as a meteor event, for example—the kind that most likely devastated the dinosaurs. But from line 3 onwards, it becomes clear that the "fire" in this poem is more symbolic than literal (though the former doesn't exclude the latter). The speaker directly links "desire" with "fire," which asks the reader to call on the symbolic associations that they have with the element.

Accordingly, fire comes to stand for inflamed passion, greed, bloodlust—scenarios in which humanity brings about destruction by acting rashly and violently. War, of course, would be a prime example, and so the poem is gently suggestive of the kind of wars the could bring about the end of the world.

It's also important to remember the positive associations of fire: warmth and light. These symbolic qualities *don't* feel very present in the poem, underscoring the speaker's implicit belief that, one way or another, humanity is fated to bring about the end of the world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** " fire,"
- **Lines 3-4:** "From what I've tasted of desire / I hold with those who favor fire."

ICE

In line 2, the end-world scenario brought about by ice could be interpreted as an ice age or the death of the sun. But from line 3, when the symbolic association between fire and desire is established, it becomes clear that the ice is also not primarily—or exclusively—literal. Indeed, from line 5 onwards, the poem makes the connotations of ice more clear. The speaker draws a link between ice and hate, putting forward the proposition that ice is "also great" for bringing about the end of the world. Though "fire" might be a kind of hate too, the hatred symbolized by ice is more about indifference or a failure to empathize.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** " ice."
- **Lines 7-9:** "To say that for destruction ice / Is also great /

And would suffice."

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is used in the first two lines, helping to establish the poem's antithesis between fire and ice. Essentially, the anaphora is used to set dividing lines between two different types of people. On the one hand, there are those who believe that the world will end in fire; on the other hand, some people believe it will end in ice. Whereas anaphora is often used to build a sense of rhetorical power (e.g., in Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech), here it's used to underplay the seriousness of the subject (which is nothing less than the annihilation of all humanity!). This because what the anaphora actually repeats—"Some say"—is distinctly conversational in tone, even perhaps a little gossipy. There is very little sense of panic or anxiety.

But, digging a little deeper, the anaphora is actually representative of both fire *and* ice. The anaphora is a linguistic act of division; fire and ice represent acts of division too. Whether it's by fire or ice, the world will end because of a collective failure of humanity—the inability of people to see themselves in others in service of an us vs. them mentality. Subtly, then, the anaphora hints at these coming divisions.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Some say"
- **Line 2:** "Some say"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used rather sparingly in "Fire and Ice." It's present in the first two lines, in part with the repeated /s/ of "Some say." This is part of the poem's sibilance, and works throughout to create the sound and sense of coldness (which is one of the ways the world could end). These lines also feature alliteration of /w/ and /i/ sounds with "world will" and "in ice," making these two lines sound almost like old sayings—like quaint aphorisms, rather than bold proclamations about the end of the world.

The other important example of alliteration is in line 4. Here, the final two words of the line both begin with /f/. The /f/ sound is often associated with fire, as is evident by the number of f-words that are in the same conceptual realm: flicker, flame, fiery, flare, inferno, fumes, conflagration, and son. The alliteration of "favor fire" is sudden and obvious, which is deliberately suggestive of a flame bursting into life. Indeed, there is something hellish in the way that these two words alliterate together, as though a flicker of humanity's future destruction has found its way into the poem.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "S," "s," "w," "w"
- **Line 2:** "S," "s," "i," "i"
- **Line 4:** "f," "f"
- **Line 5:** "i," "i"
- **Line 7:** "i"
- **Line 8:** "I"

ANTITHESIS

As the title suggests, "Fire and Ice" is a poem of opposites—at least at first glance. Lines 1 and 2 make the antithesis clear: some people believe the world will end in fire, will others believe it will be ice. There are, then, two distinct camps.

Though the poem quickly reveals that its focus is on the *symbolic* associations of fire and ice, the elemental properties are important in creating the sense of opposition. There aren't really two things more unlike each other in the world than fire and ice: one is hot, one is cold; one has high energy and the other low. This helps the poem build a sense of division that hints at humankind's capacity for destruction.

The antithesis then develops its more symbolic side as the poem goes on. The speaker equates desire with fire and hate with ice, but believes them both to be "great" for bringing about the end of the world. In essence, this highlights different aspects of the worst of human nature. Fire is passion and anger, which might cause the kind of warfare that would bring about an end-of-days scenario, whereas ice is more about indifference and emotional coldness. Ultimately, though, the antithesis is not about creating two unrelated opposite ideas. The poem is instead trying to show two sides of the same coin: human destruction. In this sense, then, the antithesis resolves into a terrible *synthesis* by the end of the poem.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say in ice."
- **Line 3:** "desire"
- **Line 4:** " fire."
- **Line 6:** "hate"
- **Line 7:** "ice"

ALLUSION

There are two popular theories about the inspiration behind this poem. One of these is that it was based on a conversation Frost had with a scientist, who explained that the world would end either when the sun explodes and incinerates the planet or when the sun dies and the planet no longer has the energy it needs to support life. The other theory is that the poem is a riff on Dante's *Inferno*.

Dante Alighieri was was an Italian poet in the 14th century

whose most famous work is *The Divine Comedy*, of which the *Inferno* is a part. Essentially, the *Inferno* is a journey into Hell. Different sections of Hell punish different types of sins—and these punishments differ too. Indeed, fire and desire are connected throughout, and Satan is depicted in an icy environment.

In Dante's terrifying portrayal of Hell, there are nine of these different sections. There are also nine lines in Frost's poem. And given that the line breaks are deliberately chosen—rather than governed by an overall scheme—it seems that the number of lines is also a deliberate choice. Perhaps, then, this is a subtle allusion to Dante.

Another key aspect of Dante's poem is the form itself. Dante used his own formal invention, the *terza rima*, for his poem. Essentially, terza rima denotes a three-line stanza (tercet) that rhymes ABA; the following stanza uses the "B" as its outer rhymes, and adds the next rhyme sound, as in BCB. Frost's poem almost—but not quite—follows a similar scheme if divided into tercets (ABA; ABC; BCB). It's a subtle connection, but another intriguing allusion to consider.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9

METAPHOR

"Fire and Ice" rests heavily on the metaphorical associations of the two titular elements. Initially, the predictions of lines 1 and 2 could apply to the end of the world in a relatively literal way (i.e., they could reference some sort of natural disaster). But from line 3 onwards, the poem starts to make its metaphorical intentions clear. The speaker links fire to desire and ice to hate, thereby asking the reader to bring their own associations with the two elements into their understanding of the poem.

Fire turns into a metaphor for humanity's capacity for impulsive destruction—through war, greed, blood lust, and so on. Ice is also transformed, and speaks metaphorically of humankind's capacity for hatred and indifference. The poem's symbolic language allows it to envision two broad, starkly different yet equally devastating ends for the earth—and to transform common, yet distinctly negative, emotions into immensely powerful forces. In doing so, it implies the destructive potential of emotions that people might otherwise cast off as minor or inconsequential.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 6-8

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used between lines 3 and 4, and line 6 through to line 9. Generally speaking, the enjambment helps with the overall control of the phrase lengths. Frost has deliberately gone for a conversational, almost casual tone that creates tension with the subject matter (the end of the world and humanity's destructive capacity). Just as phrases in a conversation vary in length, so too do the sentences in "Fire and Ice," rather than sticking to a rigid scheme based on fitting into a certain poetic line length.

While the lines themselves vary between tetrameter (four metrical feet per line) and dimeter (two feet per line), the difference in actual phrase length is even more pronounced. Compare the first and last phrases written out in prose:

> "Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice."

vs.

> "But if had to perish twice, I think I know enough of hate to say that for destruction ice is also great and would suffice."

The enjambment therefore allows for a variation in the length of the poem's sentences, reflecting how people actually speak (as opposed to a more forcefully controlled sense of poetic line; the speaker doesn't allow line length to dictate the length of the speaker's thoughts). This allows the poem to strike a conversational tone that helps support the poem's irony (the casual tone vs. the serious subject matter).

Enjambment also creates a sense of quickening pace between lines 3 and 4. This is effective, because the speaker is talking about "desire" and "fire"—the ways in which human passions themselves can be quickened, and how much destructive potential lies therein.

Likewise, the four enjambed lines at the end of the poem create a sense of inevitability. They build momentum as the poem approaches its conclusion, reminding the reader that the poem itself is about the *ultimate* conclusion: the end of the world.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "desire"
- **Line 4:** "I"
- **Line 6:** "hate"
- **Line 7:** "To ," "ice"
- **Line 8:** "Is ," "great"
- **Line 9:** "And"

IRONY

"Fire and Ice" is steeped in irony, which functions by placing two incongruous (unsuited) elements in tension. The first of these is the subject matter: no less than the end of the world! The second is the tone in which this subject matter is

presented, which is casual and conversational. In other words, the poem presents a serious subject in a seemingly non-serious way.

The poem sounds more like an informal discussion between friends than a work of eschatology (writing about the end of the world). This is noticeable in "Some say," "I hold with those," the oxymoronic "But if it had to perish twice," "Is also great," and "And would suffice." The first two examples are more characteristic of a debate about something far less serious—like sports, for example.

The irony reaches its peak in the last two lines. In line 8, "Is also great" sounds more like someone making a restaurant recommendation than considering possible apocalyptic scenarios. Principally, this is because most people do not think of the end of the world as something "great"—the predictions made speak of immense and almost unimaginable suffering (which is perhaps why they're presented in this way in the first place). The irony also creates a comic distance between the poem's ideas and the reality of the end of the world, whenever and however it may come. It makes it seem as though, for all the speaker's predictions, the end of the world is actually quite unlikely—and this in turn perhaps hints at mankind's arrogance, whether it be in relation to its capacity for self-destruction or a failure to take quick and decisive action over climate change. In other words, the irony makes it sound kind of like it's all going to work out alright—which is completely at odds with the actual content of what the poem is saying.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Some say"
- **Line 2:** "Some say"
- **Line 4:** "I hold with those"
- **Line 5:** "But if it had to perish twice,"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Is also great / And would suffice."

OXYMORON

"Fire and Ice" has one oxymoron, which is found in line 5. Here, the speaker proceeds with the third stage in the poem's logical discussion about the end of the world (the first reports what "some say," and the second specifies the speaker's own opinion). After declaring fire—and its symbolic associations—to be the more likely cause of the end of the world, the speaker moves on to consider the "merits" of ice for such a scenario. At this point, the speaker uses a deceptively simple oxymoron that contains an unsettling and profound idea. The speaker says that, *if* the world had to perish twice, then ice (which represents hate and indifference) could also work just as well as fire to bring about this end.

The sentence is illogical, because to perish is, by definition, to cease existing—if the world was to perish, it would be dead and never coming back. A person, for example, can't die and then die again—and nor can the world. But this isn't an accidental slip in the logic of the speaker's argument. The speaker is making a serious point about humankind's capacity for destruction. That is, not only could humanity destroy itself once, but, such is its talent for annihilation, it could even end the world *twice*. Hypothetically, it could do end the world a third and a fourth time too.

Where Oxymoron appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "But if it had to perish twice,"

SIBILANCE

There are sibilant sounds throughout "Fire and Ice," but it's in lines 5 to 9 that they become most pointedly deliberate. Sibilance is often associated with quietness and coldness, particularly in the way that the sound seems to mimic the sound of wind and/or whispering. And this is exactly how it is deployed in "Fire and Ice," intensifying during the discussion of ice (a sibilant word itself) specifically. In these lines, the speaker is trying to conjure an image of a world in which hate dominates—and the way that this might bring about the end of the world. The lines evoke a cold, almost inhospitable environment—and in the sibilance of the lines the reader can hear the chill of icy winds:

> But if it had to perish twice,
> I think I know enough of hate
> To say that for destruction ice
> Is also great
> And would suffice.

The sibilance makes the line feel hushed and colder, especially when contrasted with the flickering flames evoked by the alliterative "favor fire" of line 4. Indeed, the entire poem ends on a sibilant sound which is suggestive of the end of the world itself. That is, the sound that the poem uses to represent the end of the world through "ice" is given the literal final word of the poem.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "S," "s"
- **Line 2:** "S," "s," "c"
- **Line 3:** "s," "s"
- **Line 4:** "s"
- **Line 5:** "sh," "c"
- **Line 7:** "s," "s," "ti," "c"
- **Line 8:** "s," "s"
- **Line 9:** "s," "c"

VOCABULARY

Tasted (Line 3) - The speaker is using this word metaphorically, to mean "known" or "experienced."

Hold (Line 4) - Here, this means "side with." The speaker is expressing agreement with "those who favor fire."

Favor (Line 4) - Prefer or side with.

Perish (Line 5) - To perish is to be destroyed and/or to die.

Great (Line 8) - "Great" here means not just simply very good, but also powerful. In other words, ice isn't just an "excellent" way to end the world, it's also a substantial and strong means of destruction.

Suffice (Line 9) - Be adequate or function well enough.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Fire and Ice" is tight and compact, packing a lot into its nine lines, but it does not follow a specific poetic form. Even so, the structure is intriguing, and the poem essentially unfolds in three stages.

The first stage is lines 1-2, which establishes the antithesis between fire and ice and also sets the poem up as a kind of conjecture—a rough prediction for future events.

Lines 3-4 express the speaker's own belief that fire is the more likely cause of the world's end.

Lines 5-9 explain that, though the speaker sides with fire, ice (hate) would be equally "great." In fact, humanity probably has enough capacity for destruction to end the world multiple times over.

The poem is, in a sense, about weighing fire against ice and seeing which one is more destructive. This sense of balance is reflected by the form, with the first two lines establishing the two different elements, and the rest of the poem divided into a discussion of each in turn.

The fact that the poem has nine lines is significant in itself. Dante's *Inferno*, a 14th century poem about Hell, is thought to have influenced Frost's poem. In Dante's poem, Hell has nine different sections—the same number of lines as "Fire and Ice."

METER

Every line in "Fire and Ice" is iambic (meaning it follows an unstressed-stressed, or da DUM, syllable pattern). Some are tetrameter: lines 1, and lines 3-7. The other lines—lines 2, 8 and 9—are in iambic dimeter. The tetrameter lines have four stresses, e.g. line 1:

Some say | the world | will end | in fire,

This first line is immediately followed by a line of dimeter, which has just two stresses:

Some say in ice.

Both, then, are iambic—indeed, every foot in the entire poem is an iamb. The consistent iambs coupled with the varying line length create a breezy, conversational tone. This is part of the poem's overall irony, in which the speaker discusses a grave and serious subject in a manner that seems out of step. In fact, the poem sounds more like the speaker is weighing up something far more innocuous—like which restaurant to eat in or where to go on holiday. The meter helps facilitate this sense of flow. This combines with simple vocabulary to create a poem that works its unease in a subtle but arguably more powerful way than if it were to address the gravity of the end-world scenario head on.

RHYME SCHEME

"Fire and Ice" has a tight-knit rhyme scheme. In fact, there are no end words in the poem that are *not* rhymed. The scheme runs as follows:

ABAABCBCB

In general, the pure-sounding rhymes create an easy flow to the poem, which helps it establish its conversational tone. Because of the variations in meter, the reader doesn't know exactly when the rhymes will come, but can sense that they will do so eventually. This approximates the sound of light verse, which is poetry of a humorous nature. This is part of the poem's overall irony, which is built by the tension between the subject matter and the way in which it is being presented. That is, a deeply serious subject with a slightly frivolous tone.

There's another important thing to know about the rhyme scheme. It's thought that the poem might have been partly inspired by Dante's *Inferno*, a 14th century epic poem about a journey through Hell. The *Inferno* makes use of Dante's own formal invention, the terza rima: this is a poetic composition based on three-lined stanzas (tercets), in which the rhyme scheme is ABA / BCB / CDC / DED and so on. Frost's poem almost—but not quite—fits this scheme if its nine lines are divided into groups of three: ABA / ABC / BCB. In Dante's depiction, Hell has nine circles/sections. The number of lines in this poem, then, is also evidence that there might be an allusion at play.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "Fire and Ice" is given no name, age, nor gender, but the speaker's tone nevertheless is an important aspect of the poem. Essentially, the speaker is presenting the reader with a personal opinion about how the world will end, and gently provoking the reader into considering such an epic subject. The

speaker's tone, which is conversational and casual, contrasts with the seriousness of the subject matter, which thus develops the poem's sense of irony. This irony is effective because it helps disarm the reader—the speaker converses with the reader almost as if they are friends. This casual tone is most noticeable in the phrases "some say," "I hold with," and "Is also great."

There is a sense in which the speaker is just an average person—not in terms of being from any particular demographic, but in the way that the speaker relates to "desire" and "hate." The speaker has experienced *some* desire, and known *some* hate—much like most people do through the course of their lives. Perhaps, then, the poem is meant to relate a general attitude towards the end of the world, suggesting that every member of humanity has the capacity to contribute to the arrival of the apocalypse. Indeed, this suggests that the end of the world will be a collective failure.

SETTING

"Fire and Ice" has a non-specific setting. It is partly set in the imagination of the speaker, who is considering whether "fire" or "ice" will be most effective in bringing about the end of the world. It's also a kind of conversation between the speaker and the reader. Indeed, the conversational tone employed by the speaker is part the poem's powerful irony. Perhaps the most important aspect of the poem's setting has to do with time. The poem is an effort to imagine the future and the end of the world itself. It is set in the present, then, and provokes the reader into thinking how far away such cataclysmic events might really be.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Fire and Ice" is one of Robert Frost's most famous poems (though perhaps not quite as famed as "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" or "The Road Not Taken"). While "Fire and Ice" might diverge from the bulk of Frost poems by not being obviously set in a natural environment, it shares his common preoccupation with questions that go to the heart of what it means to be human.

Broadly speaking, Frost is considered one of the most important poets of the 20th century. Indeed, he was that rare thing: immensely popular with both the public *and* the critics. Such was his popularity that he was at one point dispatched to Russia by President Kennedy in an effort to ease tensions between the two countries. Together with Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot, he is one of the most read (and perhaps most misunderstood) poets of the age.

In this poem, Frost examines humanity's potential to bring about the end of the world. This makes the poem a work of *eschatology*—writing about the end of the world—and thus places it within a literary tradition as old as literature itself. That is to say, humankind has been predicting and pondering the end of the world practically since the world—or humanity's place within it—began. Most eschatology is also theology (that is, religious), and the Bible's Book of Revelation is a prime example within the Christian tradition.

On that note, a link is often drawn between "Fire and Ice" and one of the most famous poetical religious texts of all: Dante's *Inferno*. In the *Inferno*, which was written in the 14th century, the poet himself takes a tour of Hell. While, as expected, this is a place of heat and flames, there's ice there too—in fact, Satan is partly encased in a frozen lake. The nine lines of this poem perhaps echo the nine circles of Dante's Hell, and the rhyme scheme of Frost's poem is also subtly suggestive of the form Dante chose for his epic journey—*terza rima*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Fire and Ice" was first published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1920, and then in Frosts's collection *New Hampshire* (which won the Pulitzer Prize). This date, of course, sits in between the two World Wars, with WWI having ended only a couple of years earlier. For all of humanity's technological, economic, and intellectual progress, WWI was a stark reminder of its capacity for self-destruction—which was confirmed by the cataclysmic events two decades later during WWI. After WWI, humankind was forced to question whether the aforementioned innovations really counted as progress if the risk of self-annihilation remained so great—or, in fact, was on the rise. Indeed, there is something ominous about the way the poem seems to apply equally well to the historical moment in which it was written and the following decades (which saw the development of nuclear weapons and the use of the atom bomb), *and* to the contemporary era, in which humanity is forced with confronting its potentially devastating impact on the natural environment.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Documentary About the Poet — An insightful video about Frost's life. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9jbV7knSH4)
- A Reading by the Poet Himself — Robert Frost's own powerful reading of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzU7_NiApvs)
- Robert Frost's Mission to Russia — This is a fascinating article about the time President Kennedy sent Robert Frost to Russia in the 1960s in an effort to help defuse tensions. Though this trip occurred decades later than the

composition of "Fire and Ice," it was no less about the potential end of the world. (http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/99/04/25/specials/frost-last.html)

- More Poems by Frost — A number of Frost poems and an in-depth biography of the poet. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost)
- An Insightful Interview with the Poet — In this video, Robert Frost is interviewed by author Bela Kornitzer in 1952. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qem3v0zvajQ&t=760s)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- Acquainted with the Night
- After Apple-Picking
- Mending Wall
- Nothing Gold Can Stay
- Out, Out—
- Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
- The Road Not Taken

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