Birches

POEM TEXT

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.

SUMMARY

Whenever the speaker sees stooped birch trees, which stand out against the surrounding upright trees, the speaker likes to imagine that they're bent this way because a young boy has been holding onto their thin upper branches and then, with the flexible trees in hand, swinging to the ground. That said, the speaker knows that swinging from the trees doesn't actually cause them to stay bent down the way ice-storms do.

Most people, the speaker posits, have seen birch trees covered in ice on bright mornings after a winter's rain. Birches like this scratch against one another in the wind, the ice around the branches glinting as it begins to crack. Before long, the sun heats up the ice-covered branches and causes the fine layers of ice to fall, breaking across the hard crust that the snow has created on the ground. Falling and breaking like this creates so many shards of ice that one might think some kind of sphere in heaven has shattered and fallen to earth. The birches get so weighted down by the ice that they sink to the level of scraggly, unhealthy ferns. They never break under this strain, though they also never return to their previous height after having been bent for so long. This is why passerby will notice such trees curving toward the ground for years after they've been bent, their leaves hanging down in the same way that hair might drape from the heads of young girls when they toss it forward

while on their hands and knees, leaving it to hang like that as it dries in the sun.

At this point, the speaker returns to the original focus of the poem, having gotten wrapped up in describing the effect of ice storms. Originally, the speaker meant to say that it's preferable to imagine that a boy bent the birch trees by swinging from them on his way to tend to his family's cows. This boy, the speaker imagines, lived too deep in the woods to play baseball in town, and instead had to find his own source of entertainment, amusing himself all through the year. Gradually, the boy bent all the birches on his father's property by swinging from their tops, which made the trees flexible and droopy. He did this so much, in fact, that there weren't any birches in the area that hadn't succumbed to him.

The boy learned how to safely swing from the birch trees, learning that it's important to not jump before reaching the part where the trunk is most flexible, since otherwise the tree could snap and fall quickly to the ground. The boy maintained his composure as he climbed all the way up to the highest branches, moving with the same care one might use when slowly filling a cup to the very top or even just beyond the top. Then, when he reached the top of the tree, he jumped out and swung his legs gracefully through the air as he gradually sailed to the ground.

The speaker used to be the kind of boy who swung from birch trees like this, and now fantasizes about one day swinging from the birches again. This fantasy crops up when the speaker becomes overwhelmed by the details and frustrations of everyday life—an experience that is like trying to navigate through a stretch of woods without any kind of trail, as trees and spider webs assault the speaker's face, which gets scratched by a small stick that cuts across the eye.

The speaker says that it would be nice to escape earth for a bit and then, after a little while, return and start all over again. This is not to say that the speaker wants some kind of omniscient being to misinterpret and partially fulfill this wish by taking the speaker away from earth for good without any chance of return. The speaker believes that earth is the only place to fully enjoy things like love, and there's no other place where things might be better than they are here. The speaker wants to die by climbing a birch tree, scaling its dark branches and its snow-covered trunk in the direction of heaven, until the speaker got so high that the tree could no longer support the weight and slowly bent over to place the speaker back on the ground. This feeling of escaping earth while also returning to it, the speaker says, would be very nice. There are worse things than being someone who swings from birch trees.

THEMES

THE JOY OF CHILDHOOD

"Birches" explores children's ability to find joy and wonder in everyday life. The speaker contemplates ice-covered birch trees that have stooped to the ground, imagining that they're bent because a young boy has been climbing them, jumping off while holding their thin uppermost branches and then drifting slowly back to the ground. This, the speaker imagines, is what the young boy does to entertain himself when he's on his way to care for his family's cows—a task that would otherwise probably be boring and mundane. In this way the poem becomes a celebration of youthful spontaneity and joy—qualities that the poem implies are no better embodied than by imaginative, care-free children.

The speaker particularly admires how children are able to find ways of having fun even when they're in seemingly boring circumstances. For example, the speaker imagines that the boy swinging from the trees lives too far from town to play baseball, meaning that he's left to his own devices to keep himself entertained. This, however, doesn't stop the boy from fully enjoying life. Instead of mindlessly completing his chores, the boy finds an inventive way of harnessing joy, turning to his surroundings and finding a way to thrill himself by swinging from the trees. This childlike ability to squeeze happiness and excitement out of life, the speaker implies, is a marvelous thing.

What's more, the speaker subtly suggests that these kinds of life experiences aren't just fun, but important parts of the coming of age process. "He learned all there was / To learn about not launching out too soon," the speaker says, suggesting that the boy knows not to jump before reaching the flexible part of the tree, since this might cause the tree to snap when he jumps, thus sending him plummeting to the ground.

On a broader level, this teaches the boy how to seek excitement and thrills safely—especially since the idea of "not launching out too soon" can be applied to many areas of life, ultimately emphasizing the importance of patience and thinking things through. In turn, the speaker applauds children's ability to enjoy life while also insinuating that this process of having fun is an essential part of growing up, since it informs the way children learn to navigate adulthood.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 17-20
- Lines 23-42

THE TEDIOUS REALITY OF ADULTHOOD

The speaker frames adulthood as mundane, stressful, and bogged down by boring details and responsibilities. This is why the speaker covets the imaginative period of childhood, when it is easier to ignore the drudgery of everyday life in favor of a more inspired, fun-loving outlook. In turn, the speaker implies that the humdrum realities of adult life chip away at people until they no longer stop to enjoy the world in creative, spontaneous ways.

Even though the speaker knows that the birch trees are bent because they're covered in ice, the speaker prefers to think that a boy has been swinging through them and causing them to droop. This, in turn, is a sign that the speaker is nostalgic for childhood and wants to ignore the boring details of everyday life. The speaker is well aware that a boy "swinging" from the trees wouldn't actually "bend" the wood in this way, yet still says, "I should prefer to have some boy bend them," revealing an intentional effort to deny reality. The speaker demonstrates a desire to view the world with excitement and wonder instead of always thinking logically.

Of course, it's not always so easy for the speaker to view the world this way. Indeed, the speaker *wants* to imagine a child swinging through the trees, but ends up launching into an extensive account of how ice builds up on branches. The speaker describes this as "Truth br[eaking] in" and interfering with this fantasy, an idea that shows how hard it is to prioritize imagination over reality as an adult.

This, then, suggests that the speaker is literally *unable* to ignore reality in favor of a more exciting, whimsical worldview, especially since it isn't until after this long-winded description of icy branches that the speaker finally imagines a cheerful child having fun in the woods. Consequently, readers see that even the speaker—who actively wants to escape the boring details of the real world—feels the pull of logic and reason, which distracts from more fun, imaginative perspectives.

Nonetheless, the speaker hopes to somehow regain a lighthearted and creative worldview. With this in mind, the speaker "dream[s] of going back to be" the kind of person who swings through trees. However, something is standing in the way: the boring but inarguable facts of reality. In keeping with this, the speaker is most likely inhibited by old age, since it's undeniably hard for frail old people to shimmy up trees.

What's more, there seems to be some kind of emotional block keeping the speaker from acting spontaneously—perhaps because adulthood has stamped out the speaker's will to seek out thrills or childish delights. Either way, what's clear is that adulthood has changed the way the speaker moves through the world, making it harder to set aside practical "considerations" in favor of excitement, joy, or pleasure.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24
- Lines 41-47

DEATH, SPIRITUALITY, AND ESCAPE

In some ways, the speaker appears ready to embrace death, expressing a certain willingness to leave life behind. And yet, the speaker also rejects the theoretical allure of heaven in favor of the pull of earthly life. It becomes clear that the speaker longs to experience the transcendent feeling of escape that death would provide, but doesn't ultimately want to give up the pleasures of being alive—and with it, the possibility of again experiencing love, wonder, and joy.

The speaker uses simple metaphorical imagery to illustrate the desire to escape life as it is. Throughout the poem, the speaker talks about a young boy climbing birch trees and then sailing to the ground after reaching the flexible treetops. For the most part, the speaker talks about this in order to demonstrate the extent to which children are capable of finding joy in life. However, the idea of climbing a tree only to be set back down on the ground after reaching the top is *also* a metaphor for the desire to get away from the speaker's own current existence while also knowing that this escape will not be permanent.

In keeping with this, the speaker says that it would be nice, to "get away from earth for awhile." This suggests that the speaker wouldn't mind being removed from everyday life, which has perhaps become monotonous and unrewarding in the speaker's old age.

However, the speaker apparently has no interest in leaving life behind in favor of an afterlife, as evidenced by the fact that the speaker only wants to climb "*toward* heaven"—not actually *to* heaven. As such, it's clear that the speaker wants the cathartic and liberating feeling of escaping adult life but is completely uninterested in any kind of true death or religious transcendence, since this would mean permanently giving up earthly existence—something the speaker has no intention of doing.

After all, the speaker thinks that life on earth is worth sticking around for, saying, "Earth's the right place for love: / I don't know where it's likely to go better." Although the poem doesn't focus on love, this assertion showcases the speaker's belief that earthly life is full of good things like love that are worth living for, even when one yearns to leave other aspects of life behind. What the speaker is after, then, isn't death, but the opportunity to get some distance from the drudgery of life so that the beautiful parts of existence—like love or childish wonder—can be experienced anew. "That would be good both going and coming back," the speaker says, confirming the impulse to both leave life behind *and* regain it—a dynamic exemplified by a flexible birch tree's ability to give one the satisfaction of

climbing and descending at the same time.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 48-59

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

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.

The poem begins with the simple image of bent birch trees, which stoop toward the ground and create a stark juxtaposition with the other surrounding trees that stand straight and tall. Right away, this contrast takes on symbolic meaning: those "straighter darker trees" represent normality and the boring nature of everyday life, whereas the bent birch trees represent (at least in the speaker's mind) something more interesting and exciting (an admittedly vague idea that will become clearer as the poem proceeds).

To that end, the speaker goes on to say, "I like to think some boy's been swinging them." By saying this, the speaker reveals a desire to view the surrounding environment with a sense of intrigue. Rather than glancing at the bent trees and quickly moving on, the speaker creates an interesting backstory for *why* they're stooped like this. This, in turn, suggests that the speaker is an imaginative person who looks for evidence of joy and childish excitement in the world.

However, the speaker also acknowledges that the act of swinging from birch trees wouldn't actually make the trees look bent in the way they do now. Rather, "ice-storms" are what cause the trees to stoop like this. By pointing this out, the speaker reveals an awareness of reality—an awareness that ultimately interferes with the more fun, delightful idea of a young boy swinging through the trees. In this moment, then, a tension arises between the speaker's attempt to view the world with the imaginative, curious eyes of a child and the speaker's inability to ignore the much more boring and mundane details of reality.

These opening lines also establish the speaker's use of iambic pentameter, a meter in which each line contains five iambs (metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, creating a da-DUM da-DUM rhythm). Consider, for example, the first two lines:

When I | see birch- | es bend | to left | and right,
Across | the lines | of straight- | er dark- | er trees

The iambic rhythm of these lines sounds bouncy and consistent, giving the poem's opening a feeling of predictability that is also musical and somewhat lulling—a dynamic that reflects the speaker's contemplative mood.

The first line also features the alliteration of the /b/ sound, which appears in the words "birches" and "bends." This /b/ sound also returns in lines 3 and 4, when the speaker says:

I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay

This use of alliteration gives the lines a strong, rounded sound that is balanced by the softness of sibilant sounds like the /z/ and /s/ sounds, which appear throughout this section:

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. [...]

The softness of these sibilant sounds gives the speaker's language a smooth, flowing feel. This sibilance might even subtly evoke the sound of branches swishing in the wind.

LINES 5-11

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—

The speaker launches into a detailed description of what birch trees look like when they're encased in ice. The speaker has already said, "I like to think some boy's been swinging them," ultimately suggesting that inventing a fun, imaginative scenario for why the trees are bent is more compelling than fixating on the *real* reason that the trees are stooped. As previously mentioned, this shows readers that the speaker is the kind of person who wants to find wonder and joy in life instead of always focusing on the boring details of reality.

And yet, even after demonstrating this desire to ignore reality, the speaker can't help but get lost in a vivid description of the *true* reason the trees are bent. This suggests how hard it can be for adults to view the world in the fun-loving, whimsical way of children.

That said, the speaker's description of the ice-covered branches is actually quite beautiful. Using vivid imagery, the speaker stunningly recreates the multi-colored effect of sunlight bouncing off branches that are wrapped in a fine layer of ice. What's more, the speaker references the pleasant

"click[ing]" sound that these ice-covered branches make when they "stir" against one another in the wind. And then, the speaker says, these sleeves of ice crack and fall away from the branches when the sun becomes warm enough to melt them, sending cascades of delicate, glass-like ice sprinkling to the snow, which is itself topped with a layer of ice.

These descriptions are so detailed and carefully worded that it almost doesn't matter that the speaker has accidentally fixated on reality instead of fantasizing about the more imaginative idea of a child swinging from the birch trees! Although it's true that the speaker has failed to ignore reality, it's also true that the speaker has managed to make real life seem nearly as wonderful and exciting as a fantasy world. This, in turn, suggests that the speaker is uniquely capable of finding joy in life, even as an adult who wishes the world were more fantastical and full of child-like happiness.

Part of what makes these lines so rich and vivid is the speaker's language, which often sounds very elevated and poetic. Consider, for example, the alliteration and consonance with the repetition of the /k/ sound in line 9:

> As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.

This sound is very prominent, carving out the words "cracks" and "crazes," both of which help the speaker describe what it's like to watch and listen to icy branches jangling against each other. There is also a fair amount of sibilance in this section of the poem, especially in lines 10 and 11 (on the /s/ sound as well as the /sh/, /th/, and /z/ sounds):

> Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal
> shells
> Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust–

All these soft sounds gives this moment a hushed, shimmering effect that is reminiscent of the sound of icy "shells" falling off branches and "shattering" onto the frozen surface of the snow. By carefully controlling the sound of the language so that it feels particularly musical, then, the speaker manages to make this description of the trees seem intriguing and beautiful, even if the speaker generally finds reality boring or dull in comparison to more imaginative, child-like ways of viewing the world.

LINES 12-16

> *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:*

The speaker continues to describe the ice-covered trees, using a metaphor to compare the ice that falls off the branches to shards of "broken glass" that have to be "swe[pt] away." Then, in line 13, the speaker broadens the scope of this metaphor, suggesting that there are so many pieces of glass-like ice on the ground that one might almost think the "inner dome of heaven" has toppled to the earth. This is a somewhat ambiguous idea (one that is a possible reference to the religious concept of the firmament), though it's likely that the speaker is simply using this phrase in a more general sense, ultimately trying to imbue the fallen pieces of ice with divine qualities, thereby turning the otherwise ordinary and unremarkable facts of reality into something that feels special and full of wonder.

Returning to the image of the trees themselves, the speaker notes that the ice weighs them down so much that their tops are "dragged to the withered bracken," meaning that they bend until they are level with ferns that have "withered" and shrunk. Despite how much they've been "dragged" down by the ice, though, the birch trees don't break. This, in turn, creates an image of resilience. Considering that the poem treats birch trees as a symbol of childhood wonder and joy, the fact that these trees are so durable suggests that the free-spirited sense of possibility that defines childhood can, in fact, last forever, even if reality and the adult world often interfere.

On the other hand, the stooped trees might also represent the ways in which the drudgery of adulthood beats people down and make it difficult to lead a spontaneous, uplifting life. For that matter, the birch trees don't break, but they also "never right themselves," thus staying bent toward the ground forever. In turn, the speaker implies that it's *possible* to retain a youthful joy in life, but adulthood and the real world also tend to wear people down.

The speaker's use of iambic pentameter varies a bit in this section. For example, line 13 contains two extra syllables; instead of featuring five iambs (metrical feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, da-DUM), the line contain several variations:

> You'd think | the in- | ner dome | of heav- | en had | fallen

The rhythm of the poem changes here, since line 13 has an extra foot. Indeed, the line is in iambic pentameter until it reaches the last word, "fallen," which is a trochee (a foot consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable). As such, the line doesn't adhere to the poem's use of iambic pentameter, since the speaker briefly uses hexameter in this moment by adding an extra foot, creating a line of six feet.

This is all to say that the poem contains variations within the broader meter, and these variations add a certain freshness to the rhythm, ultimately ensuring that the speaker's pace doesn't become lulling or boring—a fact that reflects the speaker's desire to deviate from the mundane realities of the world in order to live a more spontaneous, fulfilling life.

LINES 17-20

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.

Still describing what the birch trees look like when they're bent to the ground, the speaker points out that these trees can be found dragging their leaves years after they first stoop. The speaker uses a simile that likens the trees and their dangling leaves to "girls on hands and knees that throw their hair / Before them over their heads to dry in the sun."

This image of girls tossing their wet hair serves as yet another way for the speaker to associate the birch trees with youthfulness. This isn't a very common way for people to dry their hair, of course, but it is exactly this sort of off-beat, unpredictable quality that perfectly exemplifies the fun and spontaneous nature of youth. As such, the speaker once again presents the birch trees as a representation of youthful joy.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are quite musical. In this case, the speaker threads the assonant /ee/ sound throughout lines 17 through 19, forming an overall feeling of unity:

> 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

This assonance also pairs with the speaker's use of alliteration, as the speaker transitions from the /ee/ sound to the alliterative /h/ sound in lines 19 and 20:

> Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
> Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.

In this moment, the combination of the /ee/ sound and the /h/ sound creates a textured, layered effect that contributes to the richness of these lines. In this way, the speaker's language sounds particularly controlled, thereby reflecting the speaker's thoughtful, meditative mood. These lines are also full of enjambment, pushing the reader forward and adding a sense of exciting momentum.

LINES 21-27

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.

The speaker personifies "Truth," referring to reality as a woman who has interjected and derailed the speaker's train of thoughts. This characterization makes sense, considering that the speaker originally said, "I like to think some boy's been swinging [the trees]," but then went off on a long description of the *real* reason the trees are bent.

In this moment, then, the speaker says that "Truth broke in / With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm," acknowledging that the poem has gone slightly off-topic while also suggesting that the facts of the real world are often quite hard to ignore—as evidenced by the idea of "Truth" actively interrupting the speaker's more imaginative train of thought.

Going on, the speaker envisions a boy swinging in the trees. This boy, the speaker imagines, lives too far away from town to play on a baseball team, so he has to find ways to keep himself entertained. This, the speaker says, is his only source of "play," meaning that this hypothetical boy is forced to be very self-sufficient when it comes to keeping himself preoccupied. As such, the act of swinging in the trees becomes a creative way for the child to find joy in a life that might otherwise feel mundane and boring. And this, in turn, spotlights the childish ability to enjoy even the most unexciting circumstances.

There is a fair amount of alliteration in these lines. First, the speaker repeats the /b/ sound in lines like "But I was going to say when Truth broke in" and "I would prefer to have some boy bend them." Perhaps even more prominently, though, the speaker alliterates the /f/ sound in lines 24 through 26:

> 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

Together, the alliteration of the /b/ and /f/ sounds create a balanced effect that makes these lines feel especially musical. To add to this, there is a faint but still detectable internal slant rhyme between the word "town" in line 25 and the word "found" in line 26, as the speaker echoes the assonant /ow/ sound along with the consonant /n/ sound. All in all, this combination of alliteration, assonance, consonance, and subtle rhyming makes these lines stand out, as the rich sounds reflect the fact that it pleases the speaker to think about a child playing in the trees.

LINES 28-32

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.

The speaker imagines that the trees the boy climbs are on the property of the boy's father. By climbing them each day, then, the boy "subdue[s]" them, gradually causing them to bend to the ground. The speaker highlights that this process happens little by little, using diacope in line 28 to repeat the word "one"

in the phrase "one by one"—a phrase that underlines the notion that it takes time for all the trees in the area to stoop. Similarly, the speaker uses an anaphora in line 31, saying:

> And not one but hung limp, not one was left
> For him to conquer. [...]

This repetition of the phrase "not one" emphasizes that, although it takes time for the boy to bend the surrounding trees, he ends up managing to "conquer" every single birch tree. This, in turn, functions as a metaphor for the idea that sometimes it truly is possible to triumph over the real world—after all, this young boy has managed to literally bend his physical surroundings to his will, an idea that is surely appealing to the speaker, who is so overwhelmed by the real world that even the act of imagining a fun, make-believe scenario is made difficult by the intrusion of "Truth." In other words, the speaker values the fact that the boy's fun-loving spirit changes the outside world and not the other way around.

The speaker also uses sibilance in line 28, using not only the /s/ sound, but also the /f/, /th/, and /z/ sounds:

> One by one he subdued his father's trees

This enhances the line's musicality while also infusing the poem with the gentle sound of tree branches brushing against one another.

What's more, the speaker uses a caesura in line 31 to insert a brief pause: "And not one but hung limp, || not one was left." This gives the line a contemplative feel, making the speaker's words sound meditative and thoughtful. This is only accentuated by the fact that the following line also includes a caesura, which appears after the phrase "For him to conquer." As such, the speaker's pacing sounds measured and slow—an effect that aligns with the speaker's nostalgia for the joys of childhood.

LINES 32-40

> *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.*

Describing all the things the boy learns from climbing birch trees, the speaker frames this act of play as something that becomes an important part of the boy's coming of age process. After all, the boy learns about how to safely pursue various thrills. The boy learns that he must patiently climb to the very top of the tree, where the wood is flexible, before jumping to the ground, since "launching out too soon" would mean holding onto a part of the tree that is too stiff, therefore causing it to snap.

The boy learns to keep his "poise" while climbing trees, understanding that impulsively leaping off too soon could be disastrous. This, in turn, is a metaphor for what it's like to navigate life: rather than acting quickly out of excitement, it's better to remain levelheaded and cautious – even when doing something daring and exhilarating. In other words, it's always best to keep one's "poise."

And if this metaphor weren't clear enough, the speaker offers a simile, saying that the careful way the boy learns to climb trees is comparable to the act of filling a cup until the liquid is level with, or even a little above, the top of the cup. Needless to say, pouring like this requires a lot of precision and care. It is with this kind of concentration and carefulness, the speaker indicates, that the boy learns to climb the trees in a safe, effective way. It becomes clear that the boy's simple act of play is actually very informative and influential, teaching him to be rational and wise.

However, this is not to say that the boy lets this cautious mindset overshadow his ability to enjoy life. Rather, he learns to be careful like this so that he can thoroughly enjoy the thrill of jumping off the trees without having to worry about breaking the trunk. Upon reaching the top of the tree, he triumphantly jumps off and swings his legs as his body sails through the air—a happy image that captures his fun-loving spirit.

On the whole, then, climbing and jumping from birch trees teaches him important life lessons about being careful and intentional while also still providing him with a thrilling experience. In turn, he strikes a perfect balance, managing to still enjoy life while acknowledging logistical details that might prevent certain people (say, for example, the speaker) from fully embracing such thrills.

On another note, these lines are fairly consonant, as the speaker repeats the /l/ sound several times in lines 32 and 33: "He learned all there was / To learn about not launching out too soon." The speaker also uses alliteration by repeating the /k/ sound in lines 34 through 36:

> And so not carrying the tree away
> Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
> To the top branches, climbing carefully

This creates a hard sound, but not one that becomes unpleasant, since the speaker offsets this otherwise harsh sound with sibilance, repeating the /s/ and /z/ sounds in line 37 to soften the overall effect: "With the same pains you use to fill a cup." This line also includes the pleasing assonant repetition of the /oo/ sound, which appears in the phrase "you use." In turn, the speaker's words sound unified and musical.

The speaker's musicality becomes especially apparent in line 40. The /ow/ sound repeats in the words "down" and "ground," and this creates an internal slant rhyme that once again adds a sense of unity to the poem while also emphasizing the word "ground," which—as the last word of an end-stopped line—creates a feeling of return and solidity.

LINES 41-47

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.

The speaker's nostalgia for childhood becomes even more obvious. The speaker likes to imagine a boy swinging in the birches, it seems, because this is exactly what the *speaker* used to do as a child. By imagining some unknown boy doing this, the speaker tries to recapture the feeling of being young and free. This is why the speaker says, "And so I dream of going back to be," expressing a desire to return to the joy of youth while also indicating that the speaker has, in adulthood, stopped living the life of a "swinger of birches."

With this in mind, this section of the poem implies that the mundane realities of adulthood are capable of overshadowing a person's capacity to enjoy life like a carefree child. The speaker notes that it's especially rewarding to daydream about swinging from birch trees when the ins and outs of adult life become overwhelming, presenting the speaker with too many "considerations" that make life seem like "a pathless wood." This simile compares life to the experience of walking through a dense forest, where branches scratch the walker's face.

On the whole, this simile—which actually becomes more of a metaphor by its end—depicts the realities and hardships of adulthood, suggesting that life can be difficult to confront and even harder to navigate. In the same way that branches and "cobwebs" smack people in the face as they try to walk through a "pathless wood," then, various obstacles in life make it hard to simply move forward.

All in all, the speaker's thoughts imply that adulthood stamps out the easy spontaneity that people are able to embody in childhood. Whereas a young boy is capable of turning a walk in the woods into a fun and exhilarating experience, adults like the speaker get bogged down by little things like cobwebs and branches in the face. This, in turn, is why the speaker is nostalgic for childhood and all the unbothered happiness that comes along with it.

There is also a fair amount of consonance, sibilance, and alliteration in these lines. For instance, lines 41 through 43 feature sibilant sounds alongside the /w/ and /b/ sounds:

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

Phrases like "back to be" and "when I'm weary" give the lines a strong and unified sound while emphasizing important words like "back" and "weary."

LINES 48-52

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.

The poem shifts somewhat when the speaker says, "I'd like to get away from earth awhile / and then come back to it and begin over." This suggests that the speaker wants to experience the feeling of escape, romanticizing the idea of leaving earth behind. This doesn't mean that the speaker wants to die; rather, the speaker wants to escape earth only to *return* once more and "begin over." This, in turn, implies that the speakers wants to transcend everyday life without actually giving it up.

A certain sense of circularity thus emerges in the poem, as the speaker wants not only to "come back" to earth, but also to "begin over." This aligns with the speaker's nostalgia for the joys of childhood, making it clear that the speaker would gladly start life from the beginning again if this made it possible to relive the wonders of youth. This idea fits well with the metaphorical image of climbing a tree only to be set down on the ground again.

This section also has certain spiritual implications, since the speaker says, "May no fate willfully misunderstand me / And half grant what I wish and snatch me away / Not to return." In these lines, the speaker seems to reference some kind of omniscient being, using the word "fate" to refer to a god-like being who has the power to "snatch" the speaker away from life.

Although the speaker wants to experience some kind of transcendent escape from life, the speaker *doesn't* want to fully leave life behind—something the speaker makes a point of clarifying, just in case a "fate" or god-like being is listening. In this way, it becomes clear that the speaker isn't interested in dying simply to experience an afterlife, rejecting that kind of spirituality in favor of life on earth.

The speaker threads the assonant long /ay/ sound throughout these lines, repeating this sound in the words "away," "may," and "fate." This gives the words a tight-knit, musical quality that pairs nicely with the consonance of /n/ and /m/ sounds that also appear in this section:

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.

In addition, there are also brief moments of alliteration, like when the speaker says "come back to it and begin over" or "half grant what I wish." Together, these devices make the speaker's language sound appealing and pleasant, thereby helping the speaker express a sense of appreciation for life.

LINES 52-56

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,

The speaker likes the idea of escaping the mundane reality of everyday life, but doesn't want to die or go to heaven. This is why the speaker says, "Earth's the right place for love: / I don't know where it's likely to go better." In essence, the speaker expresses a preference for regular life over the promise of some kind of afterlife. Although living in an afterlife might be quite nice, the speaker believes that there are things worth sticking around for on earth—things like "love," for instance, and the spontaneous joys that children are so capable of embodying.

Thinking this way, the speaker says, "I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree." In some ways, this is the speaker's way of acknowledging that life will inevitably end someday. As such, the speaker wants to leave earth behind while doing something joyous and thrilling: climbing a tree, which reminds the speaker of childhood and happiness. If life has to end, the speaker implies, then one ought to go out doing something joyful and pleasing.

However, the speaker isn't actually embracing the idea of death. This becomes clearer in the poem's final lines, but for now the speaker's use of italics in the phrase "*toward* heaven" suggests that, although this moment might *seem* like an acceptance of death's inevitability, the speaker still resists the idea of fully leaving life behind. After all, the speaker doesn't want to climb a birch tree in order to *reach* heaven, but simply wants to climb *toward* heaven.

In turn, readers sense that the speaker has no intention of ever actually entering the afterlife, instead preferring to focus on real life even while escaping normal existence by doing something thrilling and spontaneous like climbing a snow-covered birch tree.

These lines are characterized by the speaker's repetition of the consonant /r/ and /l/ sounds:

[...] 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, [...]

Both of these consonant sounds are muscular and assertive, giving the speaker's declaration "Earth's the right place for love" a particularly strong and decisive quality, which ultimately conveys the speaker's unwavering desire to stay amongst the living.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are also quite musical, as the speaker's language remains poetic and rhythmic. This is enhanced by the diacope that appears between lines 54 and 55, when the speaker repeats the words "climbing" and "climb." Furthermore, the alliteration of "black branches" also gives the speaker's words a textured feeling that contributes to the overall pacing. And as if this isn't enough to make the overall sound of this section stand out, the speaker uses an internal slant rhyme between the word "likely" in line 53 and the words "birch tree" in line 54. All in all, then, these lines come together to form a cohesive sound that gives readers the impression that the speaker's language is very controlled and, thus, carefully considered.

LINES 56-59

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.

These lines expand upon the speaker's idea of climbing "*toward* heaven" without ever actually reaching it. Although the speaker has already said, "I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree," it now becomes even more obvious that the speaker doesn't actually intend to die; rather, the speaker wants to escape life on earth tempo*rarily* by climbing a birch tree, all the while knowing that the tree will bend with the speaker's weight and, before long, set the speaker back down on the ground.

What the speaker is truly after isn't the kind of escape that comes with death, but the mere *feeling* of getting away from everyday life. It would, the speaker implies, be cathartic to climb out of one's own life, getting away from the mundane realities of living on earth as an adult. But it would be even better to do this while *also* getting the chance to return to that very same life with a new perspective, plopping back down and getting to do things all over again. In this way, the act of climbing birch trees until they stoop to the ground functions as a metaphor for the speaker's desire to go back to childhood and experience the joys of youth once again.

In addition, this metaphor suggests that, although the speaker often views adult life as mundane and overwhelming, the speaker wants to stay here and deal with such hardships instead of dying and going to heaven, thereby rejecting the

spiritual world in favor of a simpler earthbound existence. If a person spent an entire life merely swinging through birch trees, the speaker upholds, that wouldn't be such a bad thing; after all, such a life would be filled with child-like joy.

The speaker spotlights the consonant /b/ sound in these lines, using words like "bear," "But," "both," and "birches" to achieve a solid, assertive sound. To complement this, the speaker also uses the assonant /euh/ sound, creating musicality in the final two lines:

> That would be good both going and coming back.
> One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

This assonance creates internal slant rhymes, both between the words "would" and "good" in line 58 and between those words and "could" in line 59. As a result, the poem's last two lines have a lilting quality that draws readers through the words and toward the final end-stopped line. In this way, the speaker uses assonance and rhyming to not only make the words sound musically pleasant, but also to harness the momentum from the rest of the poem and direct it toward the piece's conclusion, ultimately giving readers a sense of satisfaction and closure.

SYMBOLS

SWINGING FROM BIRCH TREES

The poem centers around the act of swinging from birch trees—an act that symbolizes the youthful ability to find joy and excitement in seemingly ordinary, unremarkable circumstances.

This ability to seek out joy is a gift that adults have trouble embracing, as evidenced by the fact that the speaker—who actively tries to resist the boring details of everyday life—goes on a long rant about the real reason the birches have stooped, talking extensively about ice building up on the branches. That the speaker has trouble even just *imagining* a boy swinging from the birches suggests that the many "considerations" of everyday life make it hard for adults to move through the world with the same kind of wonder and excitement as fun-loving children.

The act of climbing and swinging from birch trees not only stands for youthful joy, but also the speaker's desire to *recapture* that joy. "So was I once myself a swinger of birches," the speaker says. "And so I dream of going back to be." In turn, readers see that the speaker views such behavior as a way to reignite a sense of spontaneity and happiness that unfortunately, the poem implies, diminishes as people grow older. In other words, climbing birch trees is a way to escape the tedium of adult life, therefore representing the speaker's desire to transcend ordinary, unimaginative circumstances.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "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."
- **Lines 21-32:** "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."
- **Lines 35-42:** "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."
- **Lines 54-59:** "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."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The speaker uses alliteration in small moments to enhance the sound of the poem's language. For example, take the first line, when the speaker alliterates the loud /b/ sound:

> When I see birches bend to left and right

This moment of alliteration creates a strong but somewhat staccato or choppy rhythm. In turn, the alliteration accentuates the poem's meter, since both of the prominent /b/ sounds land on stressed syllables, thereby strengthening and establishing the iambic rhythm (da-DUM da-DUM) that will run through the rest of the poem. It also simply draws attention to the poem's most important image: that of the bent birch trees, weighed down by the leftovers of an ice storm.

The alliterative /b/ sound repeats in lines 3 and 4, where the speaker also uses an alliterative /d/ sound in line 4:

I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay

These voiced consonants add texture and heaviness to the poem in this moment, subtly evoking the weighty bending of the birches themselves.

In other moments, alliteration adds a sense of lightness to the poem's lines. This is the case in lines 24 and 25, when the speaker layers the gentle /f/ and quick /t/ sounds:

As he went out and in to fetch the cows–
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball

This lively alliteration reflects the vivacity and curiosity of the boy being described. It also creates a varied and fresh sound, which keeps the speaker's language from sounding dull and predictable—something that is especially important in a poem like "Birches," which is nearly 60 lines long!

In another striking example of alliteration, the speaker turns to the hard /c/ sound to again evoke the imagery at hand:

As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel

Here, the harsh alliteration mimics the "crack[ing]" sound the ice-covered trees make as they, ever so slowly, begin melt in the sun. The /cr/ sound of "cracks and crazes" then echoes throughout the following lines with "crystal" and "crust," subtly imbuing the poem with the crackling sound of the trees.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "birches bend"
- **Line 3:** "boy's been"
- **Line 4:** "But," "doesn't," "bend," "down"
- **Line 8:** "colored"
- **Line 9:** "cracks," "crazes"
- **Line 10:** "Soon," "sun's," "shed," "crystal," "shells"
- **Line 11:** "Shattering," "snow," "crust"
- **Line 12:** "Such"
- **Line 13:** "heaven had"
- **Line 14:** "bracken"
- **Line 15:** "break," "bowed"
- **Line 18:** "ground"
- **Line 19:** "girls"
- **Line 23:** "boy bend"
- **Line 24:** "fetch"
- **Line 25:** "too," "far ," "from," "town ," "to"
- **Line 31:** "limp," "left"
- **Line 32:** "learned"
- **Line 33:** "learn," "launching"
- **Line 36:** "climbing carefully"
- **Line 39:** "flung," "feet," "first"
- **Line 42:** "back," "be"
- **Line 43:** "when," "weary"
- **Lines 44-45:** "wood / Where"
- **Line 48:** "away," "awhile"
- **Line 50:** "May," "misunderstand me"
- **Line 51:** "what," "wish"
- **Lines 55-56:** "trunk / Toward"
- **Line 56:** "till," "tree"
- **Line 58:** "good," "both," "going," "back"
- **Line 59:** "be," "birches"

CONSONANCE

Like the speaker's use of alliteration, consonance appears in "Birches" in small bursts that make the lines sound pleasing, dynamic, and distinctive. Take, for example, the speaker's repetition of the hard /k/ sound in lines 2 and 3:

Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.

This not only gives these lines a unique sound, but also subtly mimics the sound of tree branches creaking beneath a climber's weight. In keeping with this, the /k/ sound returns in line 9 when the speaker uses the words "cracks" and "crazes" to describe the effect the wind has on the ice-covered branches, which click against one another as they move.

In other sections, the speaker uses consonance as a simple connective tool to help unite lines with one another in a pleasing, cohesive way. For instance, the /w/ sound runs throughout lines 39 and 41:

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.

This /w/ sound braids its way through the lines in a way that makes the entire section feel unified. Perhaps even more notable, though, is the fact that the /w/ sound places emphasis on words like "outward," "swish," and "swinger," all of which have to do with movement. In turn, the speaker draws attention to the thrilling act of jumping out of a tree. In this way, consonance helps the speaker carve out certain words while also adding to the language's dense and poetic effect.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "birches bend"
- **Line 2:** "Across," "darker"
- **Line 3:** "like," "think," "boy's been," "swinging"
- **Line 4:** "swinging," "doesn't," "bend," "down," "stay"
- **Line 5:** "ice-storms"

- **Line 7:** “click”
- **Line 8:** “breeze,” “rises,” “turn,” “colored”
- **Line 9:** “stir,” “cracks,” “crazes,” “their”
- **Line 10:** “Soon,” “sun's”
- **Lines 10-11:** “shed crystal shells / Shattering”
- **Line 11:** “snow-crust”
- **Line 12:** “Such,” “glass,” “sweep away”
- **Line 13:** “heaven had”
- **Line 14:** “bracken”
- **Line 15:** “break,” “bowed”
- **Line 16:** “low,” “long”
- **Line 17:** “woods”
- **Line 18:** “afterwards,” “trailing,” “leaves,” “ground”
- **Line 19:** “girls”
- **Lines 19-20:** “throw their hair / Before”
- **Line 20:** “their”
- **Line 23:** “boy bend”
- **Line 24:** “to fetch”
- **Line 25:** “boy too far from town to,” “baseball”
- **Line 30:** “Until,” “took,” “stiffness”
- **Line 31:** “limp,” “left”
- **Line 32:** “learned all”
- **Line 33:** “learn,” “launching”
- **Line 35:** “kept,” “poise”
- **Line 36:** “To,” “top,” “climbing carefully”
- **Line 37:** “pains,” “cup”
- **Line 38:** “brim,” “above,” “brim”
- **Line 39:** “flung,” “outward,” “feet first,” “with,” “swish”
- **Line 40:** “way”
- **Line 41:** “was,” “once,” “swinger”
- **Line 42:** “back,” “be”
- **Line 43:** “when,” “weary”
- **Lines 44-45:** “wood / Where”
- **Line 45:** “burns,” “tickles,” “cobwebs”
- **Line 46:** “Broken,” “across,” “one,” “weeping”
- **Line 47:** “twig's”
- **Line 48:** “away,” “awhile”
- **Line 49:** “back,” “begin”
- **Line 50:** “May,” “misunderstand me”
- **Line 51:** “what,” “wish”
- **Line 54:** “by climbing,” “birch”
- **Line 55:** “climb black branches”
- **Lines 55-56:** “white trunk / Toward”
- **Line 56:** “till,” “tree”
- **Line 58:** “good both going,” “coming back”
- **Line 59:** “could,” “be,” “birches”

ASSONANCE

Assonance in "Birches" contributes to the speaker's lyrical and calculated way with words. This is often rather subtle, as is the case in the first several lines, when the speaker plays on the assonant /eh/ sound:

> 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

This assonance uplifts words like "bend" and "left," accentuating the image of birch trees stooping in various directions. What's more, this echoing /eh/ sound combines with the speaker's repetition of the long /i/ sound in words like "lines" and "like," making the opening lines sound melodic and rich.

It's also worth noting that the poem's last two lines are especially assonant. Indeed, the speaker repeats the /ah/, /euh/, and /oh/ sounds:

> That would be good both going and coming back.
> One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

In particular, the /euh/ sound that appears in the words "would," "good," and "could" is very noticeable, creating internal slant rhymes between the three words. In combination with the assonant /ah/ and /oh/ sounds ("that" and "back"; "both" and "going"), this lends the end of the poem a very satisfying sonic effect, one that ultimately creates a sense of conclusion and fulfillment.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “bend,” “left”
- **Line 2:** “lines”
- **Line 3:** “like,” “them”
- **Line 4:** “bend,” “them”
- **Line 5:** “do,” “you”
- **Line 10:** “shed,” “shells”
- **Line 12:** “heaps,” “sweep”
- **Line 14:** “dragged,” “bracken”
- **Line 16:** “So low”
- **Line 19:** “their hair”
- **Line 23:** “bend them”
- **Line 24:** “went,” “out,” “cows”
- **Line 25:** “town”
- **Line 31:** “one but hung”
- **Line 33:** “not launching,” “too soon”
- **Line 37:** “same pains you use”
- **Lines 37-38:** “cup / Up”
- **Line 38:** “above”
- **Line 39:** “flung”
- **Lines 39-40:** “swish, / Kicking his”
- **Line 41:** “was I once myself”
- **Line 42:** “dream,” “be”
- **Line 43:** “weary”
- **Line 48:** “I'd like,” “awhile”
- **Line 50:** “May,” “fate,” “willfully misunderstand me”
- **Line 58:** “That,” “would,” “good,” “both,” “going,” “back”

- **Line 59:** "could," "worse," "birches"

METAPHOR

The speaker uses metaphor to vividly describe the ice-covered trees. When, for example, the speaker discusses the way ice looks when it falls to the ground from these trees, the ice itself is described as "heaps of broken glass" that have shattered and fallen from "the inner dome of heaven." Consequently, the speaker associates the otherwise mundane image of ice falling to the ground with something much more grandiose and divine: namely, "the inner dome of heaven." All in all, then, the ice itself takes on metaphorical meaning, since it becomes clear that the speaker sees it with a sense of awe and appreciation. As such, it's reasonable to conclude that, although the speaker later rejects spirituality and the idea of going to heaven, the speaker's profound appreciation of the surrounding world is, in many ways, simply a different *kind* of spirituality – one rooted in nature and real life.

More broadly, the speaker's description of climbing birch trees turns into an extended metaphor that defines the entire poem. This becomes especially clear when the speaker says that the boy learns "about not launching out too soon," learning to maintain his "poise" when climbing the trees. This suggests that enjoying life and seeking out thrills can actually be very informative. Accordingly, the entire act of climbing birch trees as a child takes on metaphorical significance, since it becomes a way for the speaker to talk about the boy's coming of age process. In the same way that the boy has to learn to be patient and cautious while climbing the birches, he will have to learn to be levelheaded and controlled in life itself.

What's most interesting about the birch tree metaphor, though, is that it changes ever so slightly as the poem progresses. In the middle of the poem, the speaker uses the metaphor to illustrate the ways in which childhood joy can lead to valuable life lessons. By the end of the poem, however, the speaker uses the act of climbing birch trees until they stoop to the ground as a metaphor for the speaker's own desire to experience the feeling of escaping everyday life without fully leaving it behind. The image of a person climbing a tree only to be set back down on the ground is very circular, and this sheds light on the fact that the speaker wants to transcend the mundane realities of life on earth while also getting to experience them anew.

In this sense, the poem's central subject – the act of climbing birch trees and riding them to the ground – is a metaphor not only for the youthful ability to find (and *learn* from) moments of spontaneous joy, but also for the speaker's complicated attachments to life on earth.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away / You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen."
- **Lines 32-38:** "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."
- **Lines 45-47:** "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 54-57:** "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."

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker personifies reality and all of the little details that make up the world as it is. "But I was going to say when Truth broke in / With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm," the speaker says, referring to "Truth" as a woman and suggesting that she has interrupted the speaker's train of thought with distracting details about "ice-storm[s]."

This treatment of reality—or "Truth"—as an actual person capable of distracting people like the speaker sheds light on the speaker's struggle to transcend the mundane details of everyday life. The speaker has already said, "I like to think some boy's been swinging [the trees]," voicing a desire to envision an imaginative, playful scenario. However, the speaker ends up getting side-tracked by the fact that the trees are actually bowed because they're covered in ice, not because a boy has been swinging from them. In turn, it becomes clear that the speaker has a hard time ignoring the logistical details of reality. To illustrate this dynamic, then, the speaker personifies reality itself as a "matter-of-fact" woman who butts in and makes it difficult for the speaker to gravitate toward a more inventive mindset.

As a result, readers come to view reality as not only overwhelming, but also as inescapable. This, in turn, is why the speaker later says, "I'd like to get away from earth awhile." In other words, because "Truth" keeps butting in and forcing the speaker to think realistically, the speaker yearns for a break from the uninteresting aspects of everyday life.

With this in mind, the speaker's decision to personify reality as a distracting, "matter-of-fact" person makes sense, since this ultimately demonstrates how hard it can be as an adult to move through the world with the innocent, creative, and fun-loving perspective of a child.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-22:** "But I was going to say when Truth broke in

/ With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm"

CAESURA

The caesuras in "Birches" help the speaker control the rhythm and pacing of the poem. For example, look to line 5, when the speaker deliberately pauses in the middle of the line:

> As ice-storms do. || Often you must have seen them

The speaker has just noted that swinging from birch trees doesn't permanently bend the trunks like ice-storms do. Having made this point, the speaker then pauses, and this subtly makes the speaker's language sound measured and controlled—qualities that, in turn, create a contemplative feeling.

Other caesuras are even more prominent, like the one found in line 32. Consider the way the speaker comes to a stop after talking about how the boy exerts himself over the birch trees:

> And not one but hung limp, not one was left
> For him to conquer. || He learned all there was

There are actually two caesuras in these lines, since the speaker also pauses after the word "limp." Comparatively speaking, though, this caesura is a lot less noticeable than the one that comes after the word "conquer." All the same, both caesuras work together to establish a slow, plodding overall pace. And when the speaker pauses after saying that there aren't any trees left for the boy to "conquer," readers are encouraged to sit for a moment with the idea that the boy has triumphed over his otherwise boring and mundane surroundings. In this sense, then, the speaker's use of caesuras helps control the rhythm of the poem while also subtly carving out and accentuating certain ideas.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "do. Often"
- **Line 7:** "rain. They"
- **Line 8:** "rises, and"
- **Line 15:** "break; though"
- **Line 16:** "long, they"
- **Line 18:** "afterwards, trailing"
- **Line 27:** "winter, and"
- **Line 31:** "limp, not "
- **Line 32:** "conquer. He"
- **Line 35:** "ground. He"
- **Line 36:** "branches, climbing"
- **Line 38:** "brim, and"
- **Line 39:** "outward, feet," "first, with"
- **Line 52:** "return. Earth's"
- **Line 56:** "heaven, till"

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker juxtaposes the joy-filled, imaginative world of childhood with the uninspiring, mundane realities of adulthood.

This comparison emerges in multiple ways throughout the poem, as the speaker begins by expressing a desire to imagine a boy swinging through the birch trees but then ends up thinking about the *actual* reason the trees are bowed (which is that they're covered in ice). Finally, though, the speaker manages to stop thinking about the effect of ice-storms on the birch trees. The joyful thoughts that follow—about a boy happily swinging through the birches—provide a stark contrast between the adult tendency to focus on boring realistic details and the youthful tendency to seek out amusement and fun.

On a smaller level, the speaker also draws a juxtaposition between heaven and life on earth. While it's true that the speaker wants to "get away from earth awhile," the speaker is uninterested in going to heaven. This is why the speaker only wants to climb "*toward* heaven," hoping never to reach it because "earth's the right place for love."

The speaker doesn't think things could possibly "go better" in heaven, essentially framing earth as the best place to experience joyful things like love and youthful happiness. In turn, a contrast arises between everyday life and the afterlife, as the speaker implies that although earth has its fair share of annoyances, dealing with these things is ultimately more rewarding than entering some kind of idealized afterlife.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "I like to think some boy's been swinging them. / But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay / As ice-storms do."
- **Lines 21-23:** "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"
- **Lines 41-47:** "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."
- **Lines 50-53:** "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."

SIBILANCE

"Birches" is a very sibilant poem. Take, for example, lines 1-3:

> 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.

These lines include several sibilant /s/ sounds. This creates a soft, almost swishing or rustling sound that makes the language sound poetic and smooth while also bringing to mind the gentle sound of trees swaying against one another. These lines also include many /z/, /f/ and /th/ sounds, which are closely related to (and often included as part of) sibilance. Words like "birches," "left," "trees," and even "them" contribute to the section's calming and serene sound.

Another notable moment of sibilance comes in lines 9-12, when the speaker uses the /s/ sound along with the /sh/, /th/, and /z/ sounds:

> 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

The sheer amount of sibilance in this section pairs well with the subject at hand. After all, the speaker describes ice-covered branches scratching against each other and shards of ice sprinkling onto the snow's crust—all things that would make the kind of hissing, shimmering sound that the sibilance achieves in these lines.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "see"
- **Line 2:** "Across," "straighter"
- **Line 3:** "swinging"
- **Line 4:** "swinging," "stay"
- **Line 5:** "ice," "storms," "must," "seen"
- **Line 6:** "ice," "sunny"
- **Line 9:** "stir," "cracks"
- **Line 10:** "Soon," "sun's," "makes," "crystal," "shells"
- **Line 11:** "Shattering," "snow," "crust"
- **Line 12:** "Such," "heaps," "glass," "sweep"

SIMILE

In lines 36 through 38, the speaker compares the cautious way the young boy climbs trees to the act of slowly filling a cup with water—a simile that makes it easier for readers to envision the boy's concentration and patience.

Similarly, the speaker's assertion that life is sometimes like "a pathless wood" compares the experience of moving through the world to the experience of getting lost in a dense thicket of branches. By likening life to a forest without a clear path forward, the speaker encourages readers to picture an overwhelming and slightly ominous landscape. And this, in turn, gives readers a sense of how the speaker views the experience of everyday life as an adult.

The speaker also uses a simile in lines 18 through 20 to compare the bent birch trees and their leaves to "girls on hands and knees that throw their hair / Before them over their heads to dry in the sun." This simile is somewhat difficult to make sense of, in part because it is so oddly specific. What, exactly, the bent birch trees have in common with girls drying their hair is hard to say, other than that the leaves hang down like hair.

However, it's arguable that the speaker uses this simile as yet another way to associate the birch trees with youth. By creating the image of girls flipping their wet hair forward, the speaker subtly hints at an entire unspoken scene in which the girls have gone swimming and are now casually air-drying by a pool, lake, or stream. This implied scene is full of the kind of youthful spontaneity that the speaker values so highly. As such, the speaker uses this simile to imbue the birch trees with a sense of youthful joy.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-20:** "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."
- **Lines 36-38:** "climbing carefully / With the same pains you use to fill a cup / Up to the brim, and even above the brim."
- **Line 44:** "And life is too much like a pathless wood"

REPETITION

The speaker sprinkles small moments of repetition throughout the poem, usually as a way of either emphasizing certain words or enhancing a section's rhythm and sound. The first instance of this appears in lines 3 and 4, when the speaker uses a diacope to repeat the word "swinging" within the space of just a few words:

> I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
> But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay

This repetition spotlights the word "swinging," which is a particularly important word in "Birches," given that the entire poem is based on the speaker's thoughts about a boy swinging through the birch trees.

The speaker uses diacope again in lines 23 and 25 by repeating the phrase "some boy." By doing this, the speaker calls attention to the fact that this is only a daydream—the speaker doesn't have a *specific* boy in mind, but rather a hypothetical, imagined boy.

In other moments, the speaker uses diacope in casual phrases like "one by one" and "over and over," letting the repetition that

is built into such phrases indicate a sense of incremental progress and recurrence. Similarly, the speaker uses an anaphora in line 31 to accentuate the fact that none of the birch trees in the area have been left untouched by the boy: "And not one but hung limp, not one was left / For him to conquer."

In another moment, the speaker uses an epistrophe, repeating the word "brim" at the end of two successive clauses: "Up to the brim, and even above the brim." This repetition intensifies the sense of care being described; the speaker imagines a boy climbing as carefully as one might "fill a cup" to it's very top, and then even a little *more* than that, without spilling.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "swinging"
- **Line 4:** "swinging"
- **Line 23:** "some boy"
- **Line 25:** "Some boy"
- **Line 26:** "play"
- **Line 27:** "play"
- **Line 28:** "One," "one"
- **Line 29:** "over," "over"
- **Line 31:** "not one," "not one"
- **Line 32:** "learned"
- **Line 33:** "learn"
- **Line 38:** "brim," "brim"
- **Line 54:** "climbing"
- **Line 55:** "climb"

VOCABULARY

Birches (Line 1, Line 41, Line 54, Line 59) - A thin kind of tree that tends to grow in northern regions. Many birch trees have tops that are so flexible that a person can pull them all the way to the ground without breaking the trunk.

Many-colored (Line 8) - In this case, the speaker uses the phrase "many-colored" to imply that the ice on the branches catches the sunlight and glints in the brightness, casting an array of colors.

Stir (Line 9) - Movement. The speaker means to say that the ice-covered branches move against each other in the wind.

Crazes (Line 9) - For something to be "crazed" means that it is out of control and wild. In the context of the poem, the speaker uses the word to suggest that the ice-covered branches go crazy with movement in the wind.

Enamel (Line 9) - A smooth, glass-like surface that coats the exterior of something. The speaker uses "enamel" to refer to the layer of ice wrapped around the branches.

Snow-crust (Line 11) - A thin layer of ice on the surface of the snow.

Heaps (Line 12) - Piles.

The inner dome of heaven (Line 13) - The speaker implies that heaven is made up of multiple spheres and that the smallest, most protected sphere has fallen to earth. This is most likely just a way for the speaker to talk about heaven in vivid terms, but it *could* be a fleeting reference to the Biblical idea of the firmament, which has to do with the ways in which heaven and earth are separated.

Withered (Line 14) - Shriveled and shrunken.

Bracken (Line 14) - A kind of fern.

Load (Line 14) - The weight of the ice.

Bowed (Line 15) - Stooped.

Subdued (Line 28) - For something to have been "subdued" means that it has been overcome or and controlled. In this case, the boy overcomes and triumphs over the birch trees by bending them so frequently.

Poise (Line 35) - Composure. The speaker means to say that the boy always kept his wits about him as he climbed the birches.

Brim (Line 38) - The uppermost edge of an object. The "brim" of a cup is the top rim from which people drink.

Pathless wood (Line 44) - An area of woods that doesn't have any kind of trail running through it.

Willfully (Line 50) - The word "willfully" implies that somebody will do something without caring about the consequences or even with the express intention of causing harm.

Half grant (Line 51) - In this case, the phrase "half grant" refers to the act of only partially fulfilling a wish. The speaker worries that an omniscient being will act on the speaker's wish to leave earth for "awhile" but *won't* pay attention to the second part of the wish, in which the speaker hopes to return to earth after this brief departure.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Birches" doesn't adhere to a conventional poetic form. Rather, it is a straightforward poem consisting of 59 lines. There are no stanza breaks, nor is there a set rhyme scheme.

Given that the poem's language is fairly straightforward and conversational, it makes sense that it doesn't follow a specific poetic structure. Instead, the poem presents itself simply, allowing the speaker's nostalgic thoughts to unfold in an unadorned way, like someone simply telling a story.

METER

The poem is written in blank verse, a.k.a. unrhymed iambic pentameter. This means that each line contains five iambs,

which are metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Take, for example, the first two lines:

> When I | see birch- | -es bend | to left | and right
> Across | the lines | of straight- | er dark- | er trees

There is a very strong iambic rhythm in these opening lines, giving the speaker's language a bouncy and consistent sound. This, in turn, establishes the pacing of the rest of the poem.

However, the speaker only uses iambic pentameter as a rough template upon which to base the poem's rhythm. Rather than strictly following this metrical pattern, the speaker often plays with the rhythm by using non-iambic feet. Consider, for instance, line 20:

> Before | them ov- | er their heads | to dry | in the sun.

Instead of using five iambs in this line, the speaker varies the rhythm by using two anapests, which are metrical feet consisting of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable (da-da-DUM). The line's third foot ("-er their heads") and final foot ("in the sun") are both anapests, which subtly disrupt the iambic rhythm. This, in turn, enlivens the pacing of the poem, adding a certain sense of unpredictability that makes the poem's flow feel somewhat exciting.

Similarly, the speaker sometimes uses extra syllables. For example, the last line of the poem has a sixth foot (meaning that this line is actually in iambic hexameter):

> One could | do worse | than be | a swing- | er of |
> birches.

(Note that "One could" might also be read as a trochee, stressed-unstressed; "One could".) Interestingly enough, this exact thing happens several times throughout the poem. This has the effect of making the poem sound ever so slightly disjointed without actually breaking away from the predominant rhythmic pattern. Accordingly, the speaker's language sounds fresh and surprising in small ways that keep the poem from becoming monotonous.

RHYME SCHEME

"Birches" does not have a set rhyme scheme. And while there are several moments in which the speaker uses internal slant rhymes, even these instances are few and far between. In fact, there aren't any rhymes at all until line 12, when the speaker creates an internal slant rhyme between the word "heaps" and the word "sweep." Although this is a subtle rhyme, there are so few rhymes in the surrounding lines that it actually has a very noticeable effect, ultimately making line 12 sound particularly musical.

On the whole, though, the poem's lack of rhyme aligns with its straightforward nature. Rather than centering around a rhyme scheme, the poem focuses on simply narrating the speaker's thoughts and emotions. And though the lines don't tend to rhyme with each other, the speaker still manages to achieve a sense of musicality through the poem's rhythm and through poetic devices like consonance and alliteration. The fact that there aren't many rhymes in "Birches" thus doesn't keep the poem from sounding melodic and satisfying.

SPEAKER

Many readers assume that the speaker is Robert Frost himself, an interpretation that aligns with the fact that Frost used to swing from birch trees as a youngster in New England. There isn't actually much identifying information in the poem itself when it comes to the speaker, however, apart from the fact that this is a person who lives near birch trees and winter snow.

What is clear, though, is that the speaker of "Birches" is an adult who looks back on childhood with nostalgia, wishing it were possible to recapture the same sense of joy and adventure that children exhibit. More specifically, the speaker likes to imagine that a boy has been climbing nearby birch trees and riding them to the ground, even though the speaker knows that the trees are actually bent because they've been stooped by ice. This reveals the speaker's tendency to look beyond the surrounding circumstances in order to focus on more imaginative realities.

It also eventually becomes clear that the speaker used to swing from birches as a child but no longer does this as an adult. This, in turn, suggests that adult life has stamped out the speaker's tendency to seek out childish joy, though the speaker hopes to one day become "a swinger of birches" again.

SETTING

The poem takes place in a birch-filled forest during winter. The birches are bent, stooping toward the snowy ground due to the weight of the ice encasing their limbs. It's also fair to say that these woods are in a relatively remote area, since the boy the speaker imagines lives "too far from town" to join a local baseball team.

More specifically, the poem likely takes place somewhere in New England. After all, birch trees tend to grow in northern areas, and Robert Frost himself lived in New England and used to swing from birches as a child.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Frost worked on "Birches" from 1913 to 1914 and

included it in his collection *Mountain Interval*, which was published in 1916. Frost's third book, *Mountain Interval* also features the famous poems "The Road Not Taken" and "Out, Out–" and as a whole marked an important moment in Frost's career. Indeed, poems like "Birches" and "The Road Not Taken" signaled a slight departure from his earlier poetry, which often took the form of dramatic monologues. By contrast, the poems in *Mountain Interval* were more meditative, often set in nature and drawing upon the naturalistic and philosophical themes that had already defined Frost's writing.

The poems in *Mountain Interval* paved the way for poems like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "New Hampshire," both of which Frost published in 1923. In all of these poems, Frost dwells upon rural landscapes and uses naturalistic imagery to evoke profound thoughts about the human condition. To a certain extent, this use of imagery aligns with the fact that Frost was loosely associated with the Imagist movement that took hold in 1912, as famous Imagists like Ezra Pound praised his work.

However, Frost wasn't *that* influenced by his association to this particular branch of Modernism, instead focusing on his own project of developing what he called the "sound of sense"—a phrase he used to describe his efforts to capture meaning and significance through the sound of colloquial language.

"Birches" was partially inspired by a poem called "Swinging on a Birch Tree" by the 19th-century poet Lucy Larcom. But whereas Larcom's poem is short, light, and cheerful, "Birches" is long, thoughtful, and somewhat melancholy, ultimately sharing more in common with the work of a poet like John Keats, whose poems did, in fact, influence Frost with their Romantic themes and contemplative tone.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Frost wrote "Birches" while living in England in the years before World War I. By the time it was published in the August 1915 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, though, the war had already been raging for a full year. During this time, Frost returned to the United States and bought property in New Hampshire, where he wrote and taught extensively.

This history is notable not because the pre-war atmosphere crept into "Birches," but precisely because the poem *lacks* any acknowledgment of the war. This is significant because World War I hung heavily over poets at that time, challenging them to figure out how, exactly, to write about humanity in the midst of terrible violence.

With this in mind, the slow and thoughtful tone displayed in "Birches" strikes an interesting chord, since the meditative and peaceful atmosphere of the poem is at odds with the fact that the world was erupting into chaos during its composition. Rather than focusing on political tensions and what felt like a jarring upheaval of order in the world, though, "Birches" centers around broader themes of nostalgia and joy, spotlighting fundamental aspects of the human condition instead of concerning itself with current events.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Robert Frost Farm — Read about Robert Frost's legacy in New England – where he swung from birches as a boy—and the farm that bears his name! (https://www.robertfrostfarm.org/about)
- Robert Frost Reads "Birches" — Hear the poet himself read "Birches" in this old recording. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBw-OaOWddY)
- Birch Swinging — Check out this video of somebody demonstrating how to swing from a birch tree. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97Jt4m_IBzk&t=1s)
- The Poet's Life — For more information about Robert Frost, take a look at this brief overview of his life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost)
- Frost and the "Sound of Sense" — Learn more about Frost's thoughts on "sound of sense," a term he used to describe the significance of sound in poetry, especially when applied to straightforward but impassioned language. (http://udallasclassics.org/wp-content/uploads/maurer_files/Frost.pdf)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

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

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