Dust of Snow

POEM TEXT

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

SUMMARY

The specific way in which a crow caused a sprinkle of snow to fall on me from a hemlock tree (a kind of evergreen pine) has lifted my spirits for the better, and redeemed part of a day that I had come to regret.

THEMES

HUMANITY AND THE NATURAL WORLD

"Dust of Snow" shows how nature can cheer people up by putting their problems in perspective and reminding them of the world outside their own heads. But rather than staging this idea as some grand revelation, this poem depicts it on a smaller, funnier, more relatable scale: a crow in a hemlock tree shakes snow down onto the passing speaker, in a surprise that seems to lighten the day's troubles.

The poem leaves much unsaid, but the speaker clearly sees this dust of snow as significant. This suggests that, even in its smallest actions, nature has something to teach humanity—if perhaps only through its indifference to human problems!

The speaker had "rued" (that is, bitterly regretted or resented) the day prior to this dusting. The speaker could just be having a bad day or could be experiencing something more profoundly upsetting. Either way, nature finds a way to put these bad feelings into perspective.

When the crow shakes snow down onto the speaker, it's like a cold shock of reality. It's almost as if the crow *knew* this was what the speaker needed (though, of course, it didn't!). The fact that the crow—and nature more generally—doesn't tiptoe around the speaker's bad mood reframes that mood as less important. The crow's timing is so comically perfect that it pulls the speaker out of this funk, almost as if to tell the speaker to stop worrying and look at the beauty around them.

It's not just the snow itself that "save[s]" the speaker's day, either. It's "the way" the crow makes it fall. Nature, here, is a series of actions and reactions, a system of interconnected parts. And while the event in the poem seems trivial, it links four of those parts together: the snow, the tree, the crow, and the speaker. The sudden snow thus might remind the speaker that they're part of something larger than themselves—and that their problems are small in the grand scheme of things.

That this event cheers the speaker up is amusingly ironic. Crows are often seen as bad omens, but here it's almost as if the crow has a sense of comic timing, shaking down snow just when the speaker needs it most. Rather than foreshadowing death, the crow affirms life. And rather than finding the snow-dusting unpleasant, the speaker finds it refreshing.

Still, the poem doesn't sentimentalize or exaggerate the impact of this moment. The speaker doesn't make a sweeping statement about nature's ability to save people—just an observation about how it can sometimes, in a small yet significant way, make someone feel better. (And here, perhaps, it improves the speaker's outlook by providing inspiration for this very poem.) The reader never learns what's behind the speaker's mood, just that it's temporarily brightened by the natural world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

The way a crow
Shook down on me

The poem jumps right in without any scene-setting, unfolding in a single sentence enjambed across eight lines. This structure gives the poem tension and an element of surprise, which subtly mirrors the speaker's pleasant surprise at the "dust of snow."

The poem begins with the image of a crow. Crows can be symbolically associated with death, so the first line seems as if it might signal some grim content to follow. But the focus is on "the way" the crow does something, not the crow itself. That is, it's the manner and timing with which the crow performs the poem's main action that so affects the speaker. (As it turns out,

this poem is all about timing. The speaker was in a bad mood, and this crow, by sheer chance, was in the right place at the right time to help.)

The first two lines also juxtapose the "crow" with the human speaker ("me"), setting up a subtle contrast between the instinct-driven natural world and the complex interior of the speaker's mind. As the reader learns at the end, the speaker has been lost in thought, "rue[ing]" the day for an unspecified reason. Meanwhile, the crow is just going about its business, unconcerned by the turmoil of human emotion.

Consonance links the hard /c/ sounds at the beginning of "crow" and the end of "Shook," with the harsh repetition perhaps evoking the jostling of the tree. The four /o/ sounds in "crow / Shook down on" are all slightly different, so they're not quite assonant, but the shared vowel links the words visually, making the image more cohesive.

Grammatically, though, the poem is up in the air. A main verb still awaits, as does the object of the verb "Shook down," so for a moment, the reader can only process the few elements that *are* there. This suspenseful syntax (with the suspense drawn out by line breaks) helps grab the reader's interest and maintain it throughout the poem.

LINES 3-4

The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Lines 3 and 4 reveal what fell on the speaker, and from where. Given that this poem was published in Frost's 1923 collection titled *New Hampshire*, it's reasonable to interpret the poem's setting as wintry New Hampshire, where hemlock trees and snow are common.

- Also note that this is a hemlock *tree* and not to be confused with the hemlock *plant*, which is highly poisonous and was famously used in the execution of the Greek philosopher Socrates. The tree's leaves, when crushed, smell similar to the toxic shrub, however; here, Frost may have intended to associate them with the more sinister hemlock.

Now the reader knows the basics of what happened: a crow made a branch shake, sprinkling a little snow onto the speaker below. It's a small event, and it's not until the following stanza that the speaker reveals the effect it had.

As in the first two lines, the consonance here is subtle but meticulous. The "dust of snow" gives line 3 a little sprinkling of sibilance—soft /s/ sounds that capture the softness of what fell on the speaker. Snow has symbolic associations with purity and renewal, and there's a gently refreshing quality to the /s/ sound here. Then the /ck/ in "hemlock" chimes with the earlier /k/ of "shook" and the /c/ of "crow." Perhaps the harshness of this sound amid such surrounding gentleness echoes the speaker's initially troubled state of mind. (Before this event, the speaker was cursing the day and feeling hopeless.)

Continued enjambment causes the sentence to "fall" toward its conclusion on the page, mirroring the fall of the snow itself. There's still no main verb, meaning that the first stanza remains grammatically unresolved—readers don't know what "the way a crow / Shook" has accomplished yet. So far, though, there's been a clear focus on the natural world, of which the speaker is just one small part. The first stanza seems to speak to nature's interconnectedness: crow, snow, tree, and speaker are all distinct elements of a greater whole.

LINES 5-8

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

In the second stanza, the speaker explains the significance of what's happened so far. The way the crow sent the snow tumbling strikes an emotional chord with the speaker. The speaker's heart undergoes a "change of mood." The last two lines indicate that this is a positive shift that saves "some part" of the speaker's day.

Clearly, then, the speaker's initial mood was a bad one. The lack of detail and explanation for the speaker's mood only adds power to the poem's sentiment. Maybe the speaker was just having a bad day, or maybe it's a truly terrible time in the speaker's life. Either way, the poem might suggest that nature can always brighten someone's mood, even if only for a short while.

Think about it from the speaker's perspective: imagine walking along, stewing in sadness, maybe regretting certain things that have happened to you or mistakes you've made—then, *bam!* Snow hits you. You look up and see the culprit: a mischievous crow. You'd probably feel surprised and somewhat refreshed, then laugh at nature's comic timing! Ironically, a bird that typically symbolizes death and doom has had a life-affirming influence. In line 7, the alliterative /s/ sound in "saved some" recalls the refreshing sibilance of "dust of snow" in line 3, underscoring its positive effect.

That seems to be what's happened to the speaker. The shock of snow works almost like fairy dust, transforming the speaker's inner state (if only for a short while). It's as if the crow wants to shake the speaker out of their stupor and has found just the weapon for it. Of course, the bird hasn't gone through this thought process, but its action amuses the speaker and provides a little emotional lift. There may be multiple reasons why:

- Perhaps the hit of snow reminds the speaker of nature's immense presence, and thus makes whatever the speaker was worrying about seem less

important.
- Or it could be the perfect timing of the event, happening just when the speaker was getting more and more lost in negative thoughts.
- It's also possible that the crow (traditionally an ominous symbol) and the chilly snow remind the speaker of death, thus placing life in perspective. All things—including the speaker's worries—will come to an end.
- Maybe the shock of the snow is like the arrival of an idea. That is, if the speaker is taken as Frost himself, the crow's action provides the spark of inspiration for a poem.

Of course, it could be any combination (or none) of these, too! That's part of the poem's power: its resistance to a single explanation.

In such a short poem, each word choice seems to hold the potential for larger meaning. "Saved," like "dust" in line 3, has faintly biblical associations (the Bible links "saved" with spiritual salvation and "dust" with mortality, as in Genesis 3:19: "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return"). Perhaps these echoes hint at a deeper contemplation of life's meaning and humankind's place in the world.

As with many real-life events, there's a powerful tension between the significance and insignificance of the poem's main event. On the one hand, it redeems a day that was otherwise full of regret. On the other hand, it can only save "some part" of that day, suggesting that the speaker's struggles will, in all likelihood, continue.

SYMBOLS

THE CROW

Crows can symbolize many different things in different cultures, but in English-language literary tradition they tend to represent something sinister: bad luck, evil, and/or death. Though it's not quite the same bird, think of how the raven in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" functions as a harbinger of loss and sorrow. Crows are scavenging birds, which may explain their association with death.

Here, though, the crow has a *positive* effect. It's possible that the crow's symbolic link with death (reinforced by the chill of snow) lifts the speaker's mood by reminding them to appreciate life. But it's more likely that the crow stands in for the natural world in general.

Through the speaker's accidental interaction with the crow, the poem juxtaposes human emotional turmoil with the more instinctive and indifferent behaviors of nature. It shows that human worries don't matter much in the larger scheme of things. The crow's otherness, not its ominousness, is perhaps what gladdens the speaker's "heart."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a crow"

SNOW

Snow often symbolizes purity and renewal, and in way that's what's going on here. Think of snow's real-world ability to transform a landscape. In the poem, that transformative power is applied to the speaker's mood: the snow's cold shock wakes the speaker out a stupor and redeems "some part" of a bad day. It's as if the snow is a fairy dust (and "dust" is the word choice in line 3) that magically refreshes the speaker's perspective.

More generally, the snow, like the crow, represents the non-human natural world. The speaker's comically timed interaction with nature places their troubles in a wider context. The snow thus speaks to nature's capacity to brighten people's moods and to remind them that they're part of something larger.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "The dust of snow"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration plays a minor role in "Dust of Snow," mainly underscoring connections between the poem's different elements.

For example, the /d/ in "down" (line 2) and "dust" (line 3) connects the crow's action with the snow, via a hard consonant whose repetition helps evoke the shaking of the tree branch. The /h/ in "hemlock," "has," and "heart" (lines 4-5) connects the tree (and the falling snow) with the speaker's internal state. The surprise of the falling snow perhaps reminds the speaker of their humble place in the world, making life's troubles seem (temporarily) less significant and giving them "a change of mood."

Alliteration in line 7—"saved some part"—ties in with the poem's earlier sibilance in line 3's "dust of snow." The cold snow refreshes the speaker, disrupting the focus on negative emotions. The /s/ captures this invigorating effect, standing out among the poem's other sounds; it's also a soft consonant that helps suggest the gentle dusting of snow. More subtly, it connects salvation (of "some part" of the speaker's day) with the image of the snow itself.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “down”
- **Line 3:** “dust”
- **Line 4:** “hemlock”
- **Line 5:** “Has,” “heart”
- **Line 7:** “saved some”

CONSONANCE

The poem's consonance helps reflect the speaker's interior world, and also shows how the snow positively disrupts the speaker's mood.

The first stanza, though it describes something positive and humorous, initially seems—and sounds—fairly negative. This makes emotional sense, as the speaker had been in a bad "mood," "rue[ing] the "day." Consonance reinforces this negativity with the harsh hard /c/ sound in "crow," "shook," and "hemlock" (lines 1, 2, and 4). Along with the wintry weather, vaguely sinister presence of the crow, and mention of "hemlock" (the shrub variety is famously poisonous), it seems to set up a rather bleak poem until the "change" in lines 5-6.

A dull /d/ sound also runs throughout: "down," "dust," "mood," "day," "had rued." Perhaps this speaks to the speaker's initial depression, as it's a hard consonant sound found in many English words describing negative qualities and emotions: "down," "dull," "dreary," "depressing," etc.

Given that the poem is all about the refreshing power of nature, it's no surprise that its sounds embody this sense of refreshment. The snow provides a little shock of reality that helps the speaker reframe a bad day. The soft /s/ in "dust of snow" captures this gently refreshing quality. Later, this sound is directly linked with the speaker's brief respite from their troubles: "saved some."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “crow”
- **Line 2:** “Shook,” “down on”
- **Line 3:** “dust,” “snow”
- **Line 4:** “hemlock”
- **Line 5:** “Has,” “heart”
- **Line 6:** “mood”
- **Line 7:** “And saved,” “ some”
- **Line 8:** “day,” “had rued”

ENJAMBMENT

"Dust of Snow" uses enjambment from start to finish. Its lines are so short (just 4-5 syllables) that it would probably be awkward to write it *without* some enjambment! First and foremost, then, enjambment simply helps the verse sound natural.

It also has two other major effects here:

- First, it adds tension and surprise to the poem's already suspenseful syntax (that is, its arrangement of words).
    - The reader doesn't fully know what's going on until the end of the poem, and the entire first stanza takes place without a main verb.
    - The arrival of that verb in line 5 ("Has given") marks the poem's turn from a vaguely ominous atmosphere to something more positive and life-affirming. This shift corresponds with the speaker's "change of mood."
    - Thus, enjambment helps keep the reader reading until all the poem's elements have settled into place.
- Enjambment also mimics the poem's main event: the falling "dust of snow."
    - Short lines combined with enjambment draw the reader's eye downward, so that the poem itself seems to "fall"—unbroken by line-ending punctuation—toward the period at the end.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “crow / Shook”
- **Lines 2-3:** “me / The”
- **Lines 3-4:** “snow / From”
- **Lines 4-5:** “tree / Has”
- **Lines 5-6:** “heart / A”
- **Lines 6-7:** “mood / And”
- **Lines 7-8:** “part / Of”

IRONY

The poem uses irony to play with the reader's expectations. Think of the first stanza as a kind of set-up and the second as its surprising punchline. The poem first builds an atmosphere that is wintry and vaguely threatening. Crows are typically a bad omen, winter is often associated with bleakness and death, and even the mention of "hemlock" (though this is the non-toxic tree rather than the toxic shrub) has sinister associations (e.g., the poisoning of the Greek philosopher Socrates).

But line 5 turns all of this on its head, showing that the cold shock of snow—triggered by the mischievous bird overhead—has a life-affirming effect. The poem rejects the negative symbolism of the crow, snow, and hemlock and turns them into agents of a miniature salvation, redeeming part of a day that the speaker "had rued." Ironically, then, images that typically relate to death remind the speaker of the value of life (if only for a short while).

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition occurs in the end words of the first two lines: the "crow" (line 1) is juxtaposed with the speaker, "me" (line 2). This sets up a contrast between the instinctive world of animals and nature and the more cerebral, interior world of human beings.

As the reader learns later in the poem, the speaker is in a bad way, focusing on life's troubles. The crow is like an ambassador from the natural world, reminding the speaker not to take life too seriously. It's high in the tree above the speaker, a positioning that emphasizes its "otherness" (and perhaps a kind of superiority, in that it shakes the snow down as if delivering a message from on high).

Paradoxically, though, this juxtaposition could also be read as a reminder of the speaker's own place within the natural world. Through the contrast between two very different living beings, the speaker is able to reclaim a "part" of the day that had been lost to emotional turmoil—to connect with something that doesn't care about humanity's problems.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The way a crow / Shook down on me"

VOCABULARY

Hemlock Tree (Line 4) - Hemlocks are tall trees with soft needles, native to New Hampshire.

Rued (Line 8) - To rue something is to bitterly regret it and wish it had never happened.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Dust of Snow" consists of two quatrains, or four-line stanzas. The poem is enjambed throughout so that the quatrains form one continuous sentence.

The division of stanzas lends an element of tension and surprise. Looking only at the first stanza, the reader might detect an ominous atmosphere. But like the "dust of snow" that falls on the speaker, the second stanza refreshes and reframes what has come before. The division into two stanzas thus marks out the speaker's two different moods.

The simplicity of the poem's form suggests that it isn't a grand, sweeping statement about humanity and nature. It shows nature providing the speaker with a moment of uplift, but it doesn't pretend that everything has suddenly changed for the better.

METER

"Dust of Snow" uses iambic dimeter: two feet per line of unstressed-stressed syllables (da-DUM). Here are the first two lines as an example:

> The way | a crow
> Shook down | on me

The poem uses continual enjambment to spread its single long sentence over eight short lines. The flow of the meter in line 2—"Shook down"—seems to emphasize the downward motion of the falling snow.

The simplicity of the meter makes the poem feel straightforward and to the point. Nothing major happens, and there is no huge revelation. Much is left up to the reader's interpretation. But the dimeter feels light and unhurried, with an occasional extra unstressed syllable (e.g., "a" in "From a hemlock tree") adding a jaunty "swing" to the rhythm and capturing the speaker's shift toward a positive emotion.

The short lines also assign everything in the first stanza its particular place, stressing a different element of the scene at the end of each line: line 1 = the crow, line 2 = the speaker, line 3 = the snow, line 4 = the hemlock tree. This gives the poem a haiku-like clarity while showing how these four elements are, through one mini-event, all connected.

RHYME SCHEME

"Dust of Snow" uses the following rhyme scheme:

ABAB CDCD

This simple pattern speaks to the simplicity, but also the interconnectedness, of the scene being described. A crow in a tree shakes some snow down onto the speaker—that's all that actually happens in the poem. But the comic timing of this event seems perfect, as if the crow knows the speaker needs a dose of snow to shake up a bad day. The rhymes make everything feel as if it's in its right place, coming together at just the right time. The four nouns rhymed together in the first stanza—"crow," "me," "snow," "tree"—all intersect in this one small moment of change.

SPEAKER

"Dust of Snow" has a first-person speaker, but the reader doesn't learn much about them. These are the facts:

1. The speaker was in a bad mood ("had rued" the day), but it's impossible to say how bad. This could be passing annoyance or part of a deeper depression.
2. The spell of this bad mood was broken by the cold

"dust of snow." The way the crow made it fall—at just the right time, almost as if on purpose—lifted the speaker's spirits.
3. But how long this positive effect lasts is uncertain. The speaker states that only "some part" of the day has been "saved," implying that another part is irrevocably lost.

It's tempting to read the speaker as Frost himself. The poem comes from his 1923 collection *New Hampshire*, and hemlock trees (see line 4) are common in that state, where Frost lived for many years. Perhaps, then, part of the day is saved because the crow's action provides the spark for this little poem!

SETTING

The poem paints a pretty austere winter scene, particularly in the first stanza. There are three details that relate to the setting: the "crow," the "dust of snow," and the "hemlock tree." The setting could be New Hampshire, given that this appears in Frost's 1923 collection of the same name and that hemlock trees are common in the state. But readers don't know for sure: the poem is intentionally minimalist, which prevents it from being overblown. (The little shock of snow saves some part of the speaker's day, but it doesn't necessarily have a long-lasting effect.)

The setting does, however, emphasize nature's ability to improve people's moods. The speaker, probably out for a walk, gets a reminder of the world taking place beyond the turmoil of human emotions. Nature, then, becomes a literal and metaphorical escape, however brief.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Dust of Snow" was published in Robert Frost's fourth collection, *New Hampshire* (1923). The book was a critical and commercial success and contains some of his best-known poems, including "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Fire and Ice," and "Nothing Gold Can Stay." It's divided into two sections relating to musical terminology: "Notes" and "Grace Notes":

- The first section comprises mainly long-form poems, including the titular "New Hampshire," while the second section features shorter, pithier poems.
- "Dust of Snow" appears in the second section and showcases Frost's ability to pare a poem down to its starkest elements. "Fire and Ice" provides another great example of the same approach. These shorter lyric poems have generally remained more popular than the longer blank verse poems in the other section.

"Dust of Snow" is typical of Frost in its focus on the natural world. Unlike the Romantic poets of the 19th century, Frost rarely overstates nature's positive attributes. For him, nature can modify and intensify people's interior states—but also act as an indifferent presence in human life, undermining people's hopes and cares. Here, that indifference has a positive, amusing effect. But in other poems, like "The Sound of the Trees," nature can make people feel more isolated and desperate.

In its indirect way, the poem plays with literary associations. Crows are bad omens or symbols of death in some folklore and mythology, while the word "hemlock" will make many readers think of Socrates's execution by poisoning. Here, though, the crow and the tree (which is non-toxic; the hemlock *shrub* is the killer) unwittingly join forces to affirm life rather than threaten it. When "Dust of Snow" was first published, it was titled "A Favour"—emphasizing the way the crow does the speaker a favor by sending down that cold, refreshing snow.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Dust of Snow" was written not long after the First World War, an event that shook humanity to its core. Frost's poems during this period don't usually mention the war directly (apart from one addressed to Edward Thomas in *New Hampshire*), but the sobering mood of the immediate postwar years can be felt in much of his postwar work. For example, the first section of *New Hampshire* ends with the lines: "Since man began / To drag down man / And nation nation."

Frost didn't serve in the war, instead working as a teacher and living in England for a time in hopes of advancing his literary career. He moved back to America in 1915 and settled in New Hampshire (where hemlock trees are common and crows can be found in the woods in winter).

The 1920s marked a meteoric rise in Frost's career. *New Hampshire* won him the first of his four Pulitzer Prizes and brought his work to a wide audience. Meanwhile, the decade, after its war-shaken beginnings, became a period of economic prosperity and optimism—at least until the Great Depression ended it. But Frost tends to avoid topical specifics in his poetry and focuses primarily on rural America. (The so-called Roaring Twenties was mostly an urban phenomenon.) "Dust of Snow" is no exception: it depicts a rural scene that carries emotional resonance, but doesn't engage directly with broader social or historical trends.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — A reading of "Dust of Snow." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SD2KAlVbB6c)

- Frost at Home — A 1952 interview with the poet himself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qwCEnkb2_E&t=2s)
- New Hampshire (Full Text) — A full text of the collection in which "Dust of Snow" originally appeared. (https://gutenberg.org/files/58611/58611-h/58611-h.htm)
- A Biography of the Poet — Read about Frost's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost)
- "A Lover's Quarrel with the World" — A documentary about Frost's remarkable career. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9jbV7knSH4&t=122s)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- Acquainted with the Night
- After Apple-Picking
- Birches
- Fire and Ice
- Home Burial
- Mending Wall
- Nothing Gold Can Stay
- Out, Out—
- Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
- The Road Not Taken
- The Sound of the Trees
- The Tuft of Flowers
- The Wood-Pile

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