The Tuft of Flowers

POEM TEXT

I went to turn the grass once after one
Who mowed it in the dew before the sun.

The dew was gone that made his blade so keen
Before I came to view the levelled scene.

I looked for him behind an isle of trees;
I listened for his whetstone on the breeze.

But he had gone his way, the grass all mown,
And I must be, as he had been,—alone,

'As all must be,' I said within my heart,
'Whether they work together or apart.'

But as I said it, swift there passed me by
On noiseless wing a 'wildered butterfly,

Seeking with memories grown dim o'er night
Some resting flower of yesterday's delight.

And once I marked his flight go round and round,
As where some flower lay withering on the ground.

And then he flew as far as eye could see,
And then on tremulous wing came back to me.

I thought of questions that have no reply,
And would have turned to toss the grass to dry;

But he turned first, and led my eye to look
At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,

A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared
Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared.

I left my place to know them by their name,
Finding them butterfly weed when I came.

The mower in the dew had loved them thus,
By leaving them to flourish, not for us,

Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him.

But from sheer morning gladness at the brim.

The butterfly and I had lit upon,
Nevertheless, a message from the dawn,

That made me hear the wakening birds around,
And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground,

And feel a spirit kindred to my own;
So that henceforth I worked no more alone;

But glad with him, I worked as with his aid,
And weary, sought at noon with him the shade;

And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech
With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.

'Men work together,' I told him from the heart,
'Whether they work together or apart.'

SUMMARY

One time, I started to flip the grass (to help dry it out) after someone else had already cut it in the cool, dewy early hours before sunrise.

The same dew that made the mower's grass-cutting scythe so sharp had evaporated before I arrived and took in the freshly-mowed field.

I searched for the mower behind an isolated patch of trees. I listened for the sound of him sharpening his blade in the gentle wind.

But he had already left, the grass having been cut, and I was alone in the same way he had been alone before I arrived.

"Just like everyone is ultimately alone," some deep part of me thought, "Whether they work alongside each other or separately."

Yet even as I said this, a confused butterfly quickly flew past me on silent wings.

It seemed to be looking, relying on memories that had faded overnight, for some sleeping flower that it enjoyed yesterday.

I watched him fly in a circle as if circling around some flower that was dying in the grass.

He flew so far away that I almost lost track of him, but then, on shuddering wings, he flew back to me.

I thought about things I might ask that have no answers, and I would have turned around to resume my work flipping the grass so that it could dry out in the sun.

But the butterfly turned first, his flight drawing my eye to a tall bunch of flowers next to a creek.

There was a vibrant bunch of blossoms that the mower's blade had left uncut, growing next a reed-filled creek that the mower's blade had revealed.

I went over to them to figure out what they were, and discovered they were butterfly weed.

That early morning mower had loved them by letting them live and thrive, though not for my and the butterfly's sake.

The mower didn't spare the flowers so that we would think of him when we saw them. Instead, he did so out simply because he was so overwhelmed with happiness that morning.

Even so, the butterfly and I had happened upon a sort of message left for us from that morning.

This message made me become aware of the birds waking up all around me, and I heard the mower's long blade falling quietly to the ground.

I felt a connection between the mower's spirit and my own, and thus from that point on, I no longer worked alone.

Instead, in sharing such joy with him, I worked as if he were there helping me, and when I grew tired at noon I looked to sit with him in the shade.

And in this dream we talked as if we were brothers, even though I hadn't thought I'd ever be able to speak to him.

"People work together," I told him, and meant it, "Whether they work alongside each other or separately."

THEMES

ISOLATION AND CONNECTION

"The Tuft of Flowers" follows one man's movement from loneliness and isolation to a sense of connection. The poem's speaker is a lonely mower whose job is to spread out the grass that someone else has cut so that it can dry in the sun. He doesn't ever bump into his fellow mower, and thinks that even if he did, it wouldn't change his feeling of isolation; he believes that people can't ever really know what's going on inside someone else's head, and thus are essentially alone in the world "Whether together or apart," the speaker initially believes, people are always somehow separate from one another.

Just as the speaker comes to this conclusion, however, he catches sight of a tuft of flowers that his fellow mower must have spared. His appreciation of these flowers and his affection for the person who left them behind makes the speaker realize that he's not entirely alone after all. While people may never really know what's going on in each other's hearts, the poem ultimately suggests, they can still find comfort in recognizing kindred spirits.

The poem begins with the speaker working in a field and looking around for the mower who was working earlier in the day, perhaps hoping for a little human connection. But he doesn't see him: though the two men's jobs overlap, they remain isolated. Describing himself as "alone [...] as all must be," the speaker even suggests that such loneliness and isolation are an inherent part of being human. T o the speaker, people can't ever really know what someone else is feeling inside. And because of this, it doesn't matter whether they're next to each other or miles apart: it will still be impossible to share the deepest parts of themselves.

But the sight of a tuft of flowers the earlier mower spared reveals the way in which people *are* connected. A shared sense of beauty, this moment suggests, can cut through human isolation. Though the other mower isn't there to explain his motive for leaving the flowers uncut, it isn't difficult for the speaker to guess: he feels a sudden joy in looking at them, and can imagine the "sheer morning gladness" that moved the other mower to stop and set aside his blade. He and the earlier mower, he realizes, must have shared both a concern for the butterflies that feed on these flowers and an appreciation for the beauty of the flowers themselves.

The sight of these flowers makes the speaker realize that, though their paths do not cross, he and this other worker are "kindred" spirits, who both had the same thoughts and feelings as they looked at the flowers and the butterflies. Knowing this, he no longer feels alone : "whether they work together or apart," he concludes, people can still connect through a shared sense of wonder and beauty.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-42

NATURE AND HUMANITY

The poem suggests that even the smallest encounters with nature can help people feel more connected with the earth and with each other. The lonely speaker feels concerned for a butterfly that seems to be looking for flowers that have been recently mowed down. He's thus both relieved and moved to see that an earlier mower has spared a tuft of flowers, seemingly on the butterfly's behalf. Seeing that he and the earlier mower both appreciated the beauty of nature makes the speaker feel like part of a bigger whole. In this way, the poem suggests that paying attention to nature and sharing in its delights can foster a sense of joy and connection.

While he feels isolated at first, the speaker feels immediate empathy for a butterfly—suggesting that the natural world can help remind people that they're not actually alone in the world. When this butterfly sweeps past the lonely speaker, seeming to search for a flower that has been mowed down, the speaker empathizes with the butterfly's predicament. Perhaps he even relates to the little creature: at the beginning of the poem, he, too, was looking for something he couldn't find (the other mower). His sense that he can understand the butterfly's feelings connects him to the natural world around him.

The speaker is thus overjoyed when he discovers the earlier mower has carefully left behind a clump of flowers: not only will these flowers feed the butterfly, but they also suggest that his connection with the natural world links him to other people. These aren't just any old flowers, either, but a patch of "butterfly weed," suggesting that the first mower must also have taken delight in both the flowers and the butterflies that feed on them. The flowers prove that somebody else looked at the beauty of nature felt the same concern and empathy that the speaker did.

Seeing the flowers thus makes the speaker feel that he and his fellow mower are linked through their appreciation of nature. The speaker's arrival at a sense of "brotherly" connection with his fellow worker suggests that a shared joy in nature can help people understand their deeper connection to the world and to each other. The poem shows that people, butterflies, and flowers all "work together" in the same interconnected world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-42

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I went to turn the grass once after one
Who mowed it in the dew before the sun.
The dew was gone that made his blade so keen
Before I came to view the levelled scene.

The speaker has arrived to "turn the grass" after someone else mowed it much earlier in the morning, "before the sun" had fully risen and the grass was still damp with dew. This turning is part of the process of making hay; it's the speaker's job to flip the grass over so that it will dry out.

This job does not require him to see the mower, who is long gone by the time the speaker comes to "view the levelled [that is, freshly cut] scene." And as the speaker looks out, presumably on a field or some other expanse of grass, and the reader perhaps already gets a sense of his loneliness as he prepares to do his job.

The sounds of these lines elevate the speaker's direct, straightforward language, infusing the lines with gentle music. Note the assonance, consonance, and alliteration of lines 3-4, for example:

> The dew was gone that made his blade so keen
> Before I came to view the levelled scene.

There's even an internal rhyme here between "made" and "blade," that combines with the ringing sharpness of the word "keen" to make the mower's gleaming scythe vivid for the reader (a scythe is sharp tool used to cut grass—there were no riding mowers in Frost's time!).

The poem also quickly establishes an orderly rhythm with the use of iambic pentameter. This means there are five iambs per line, poetic feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable: da-DUM. When read aloud, the poem thus has a pleasantly bouncy rhythm to it:

> I went | to turn | the grass | once af- | ter one
> Who mowed | it in | the dew | before | the sun.

Notice that the use of iambs isn't entirely strict: the second foot in the second line contains two unstressed beats, for example. But for the most part, the poem follows this unstressed-stressed rhythm closely, creating a measured, and maybe even soothing, tone. The use of the word "once" in the first line of the poem suggests the upcoming narrative arc of the poem: it rings faintly of "once upon a time," alerting the reader to the poem's intention of telling a story.

The poem's rhyme scheme also becomes quickly apparent: each stanza is a rhyming couplet. More specifically, they're something called heroic couplets (rhyming pairs of iambic pentameter):

- Heroic couplets were made famous by Chaucer and later used by 17th and 18th century poets writing about the heroic deeds of great men.
- This history lends an interesting undercurrent to this poem about a man who is simply getting ready to turn the grass to dry: clearly there's more at stake in this poem than what immediately presents itself in these opening lines.
- And, as the name suggests, the heroic couplet form means that these lines are bound together by rhythm and rhyme that ring out loudly and clearly to readers.

LINES 5-10

I looked for him behind an isle of trees;
I listened for his whetstone on the breeze.
But he had gone his way, the grass all mown,

And I must be, as he had been,—alone,
'As all must be,' I said within my heart,
'Whether they work together or apart.'

The speaker's solitude comes more into focus in lines 5-10. The speaker is looking and listening for the other worker, the earlier mower, hoping to catch sight of him and, it follows, to have some kind of human interaction. Instead, the speaker is left alone with his work, and he even comes to the conclusion that his solitude isn't unique: it's simply part of being human.

The poem uses parallelism in lines 5-6 to create a sense of anticipation and longing. The speaker isn't just casually looking for this other person; he's actively *searching* for him, using all his senses:

> I looked for him behind an isle of trees;
> I listened for his whetstone on the breeze.

The word "isle" here suggests detachment, isolation—all of which are an indication of how the speaker himself is feeling. He's also listening for the sound of the mower sharpening his blade, hoping this noise will be carried on the wind and thus reveal to the speaker that he's not alone. Again, repetition created by the use of parallelism emphasizes the speaker's longing to see or hear some kind of evidence that this other person is still around.

But alas, he has gone, and the speaker is left alone with his thoughts. Those thoughts, in turn, take the form of an aphorism—that is, a concise saying that expresses a belief about the world, presenting it as a general or universal truth. He turns to parallelism again as he says:

> And I must be, as he had been, —alone,
> 'As all must be,' I said within my heart,
> 'Whether we work together or apart.'

The speaker accepts the idea of his solitude (the em dash before the word "alone" seems to suggest a sense of resignation, as if the speaker is finally surrendering to a long-suspected fact) as evidence of some greater truth. If he feels irrevocably alone, then so must everyone else. In other words, he tries to make sense of his sense of isolation by applying it to all of humanity.

LINES 11-14

But as I said it, swift there passed me by
On noiseless wing a 'wildered butterfly,
Seeking with memories grown dim o'er night
Some resting flower of yesterday's delight.

Right as the speaker declares that everyone is inherently alone, a butterfly flies past and shifts his attention. To the speaker, the butterfly appears to be lost and confused ("'wildered" is short for "bewildered").

The gentle sibilance here combines with muffled /f/ sounds to evoke the "silent" nature of the butterfly's flight:

> But as I said it, swift there passed me by
> On noiseless wing a 'wildered butterfly,

The alliteration and assonance of "wing a 'wildered," meanwhile, catches the reader's ear—much like the butterfly catches the speaker's attention!

The speaker imagines that the butterfly is looking for "some [...] flower of yesterday's delight"—that is, for a specific flower of which it has fond memories—but the flower is no longer there: it was mown down along with the grass earlier in the morning. And as the speaker describes the creature, he also personifies and seems to empathize with it. The speaker seems t see himself and his own desires in the butterfly's search for nectar; in this way, the butterfly itself becomes symbolic of the speaker himself and of his desire for connection.

While up until this point in the poem the syntax (or word order) has been pretty straightforward, lines 11-12 are a little more interesting. Line 11 is enjambed, and the reader has to continue across the line break into line 12 to find out what it is that's caught the speaker's attention:

> But as I said it, swift there passed me by
> On noiseless wing a 'wildered butterfly,

This creates a subtle moment of suspense: the reader experiences this moment alongside the speaker, and like the speaker, the reader's attention is diverted by something before knowing what it is. This evokes a sense of curiosity and brief wonder; the speaker is momentarily distracted from his morose conclusions about humanity by something "swift" and "noiseless."

These words, in turn, suggest that even the smallest, most fleeting elements of nature can be an opportunity for people to find connection, beauty, and purpose. With just this one tiny flourish, nature seems to have diverted the speaker, and his attention is now channeled outward rather than inward, in empathy rather than self-pity.

LINES 15-18

And once I marked his flight go round and round,
As where some flower lay withering on the ground.
And then he flew as far as eye could see,
And then on tremulous wing came back to me.

Now invested in the butterfly's search for nectar, the speaker watches the butterfly fly "round and round" searching for a flower that is no longer there. The use of diacope here (the repetition of the word "round") not only paints a vivid picture of the butterfly's movement around the field, but also suggests the fruitless nature of this search:

- The butterfly goes around in circles without finding the flower it saw the day before.
- This, in turn, the speaker's own feelings of not being able to find what he is looking for.

The speaker then imagines the butterfly's precious flower "withering on the ground," imagery that suggests the speaker's concern for the butterfly.

Noticeably, line 16 veers away from the poem's established use of iambic pentameter: rather than the 10 syllables following an unstressed-stressed pattern that characterizes the other lines in the poem, this line has 12 syllables and an irregular stress pattern:

> As where | some flow- | er lay | wither | ing on | the ground.

This irregularity underscores a kind of emotional low point in the poem. The speaker resonates with the butterfly's inability to find what it is looking for; he imagines the flower cut down, dried up, unable to provide nectar. What will the butterfly do without its source of nectar? The speaker, too, feels cut off from the things that would nourish him, provide him sustenance—connection with other people, perhaps; a sense of belonging.

The speaker's isolation is emphasized in the following line when he describes the butterfly flying away "as far as eye could see." The speaker is once again being left alone. Yet the butterfly comes back, "on tremulous wing," to the speaker: it seems they are connected. The butterfly's quivering wings indicate a vulnerability: the butterfly, too, needs others to survive.

The use of anaphora in lines 15-18 adds to this sense of connection:

- The repeated use of the word "And" at the beginnings of lines implies that each of these snapshots of the butterfly's movement are not isolated events, but rather part of an ongoing, continuous story.
- Anaphora provides the poem momentum, but it also provides a sense of things accumulating, like a rock rolling along gathering moss; the more the speaker pays attention to the butterfly, the more connected he feels to the world.

Alliteration, too, provides a subtle sense of things being related to one another: the repeated /f/ sounds at the beginnings of "flight," "flower," "flew," and "far" contributes to feel that the speaker is being pulled along by his sense of connection to the butterfly.

LINES 19-22

I thought of questions that have no reply,
And would have turned to toss the grass to dry;
But he turned first, and led my eye to look
At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,

The butterfly's movement back and forth across the field causes the speaker to think of "questions that have no reply." Literally, he doesn't know where the butterfly is going to find nectar now that the flowers in the field have been cut down. But this statement also suggests the speaker pondering grand, unanswerable questions about life itself—perhaps what its purpose is if people are, as the speaker believes them to be, inherently alone in the world.

The speaker then almost turns to go back to his work, and back to his solitude for that matter, but instead he allows his gaze to be led by the butterfly to "a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook." Seeing as "the tuft of flowers" also serves as a title for this poem, it is clear this moment is central to the poem!

Fittingly, then, sonic devices draw readers' ears to this moment. Note how consonance and assonance intensify the speaker's language, building on the imagery of the butterfly arriving at this clump of flowers and signaling the importance of what is going on in the poem:

> And would have turned to toss the grass to dry;
> But he turned first, and led my eye to look
> At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,

The word "tuft" here feels particularly intentional; this isn't a single flower or a smattering of flowers or a whole field of blooms, but rather a "tuft." This word implies that though these flowers appear separate on the surface, they are all growing from the same base. They are connected at the root. They are individual, but also joined. The "tuft of flowers," it follows, symbolizes connection between things that appear to be separate (like, as the reader will soon learn, the speaker and the mower).

LINES 23-26

A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared
Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared.
I left my place to know them by their name,
Finding them butterfly weed when I came.

The speaker describes the tuft of flowers as "a leaping tongue of bloom." This metaphor suggests that the flowers are communicating with the speaker, letting him know that he is connected to everything around him. Perhaps they're offering a "reply" to the unanswerable questions he was thinking about just a few lines back!

The imagery here is joyous: the blooms aren't just sitting there, but rather seem to be leaping out of the ground, and the speaker can't help but feel called to them. This joy comes across through sound as well: bouncy /b/ consonance ("bloom,"

"Beside," "brook"), long /ee/ assonance ("leaping," "reedy"), and sibilance (the /s/ sounds in "scythe," "spared," and "Beside") all contribute to the *feeling* that the speaker is experiencing joy at the sight of these flowers.

Also note the use of parallelism in lines 23-24:

> A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared
> Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared.

The parallel grammatical structures here draw attention to the repeated element connecting them: the scythe. Of course, it isn't the scythe that "spared" the tuft of flowers or "bared" the brook; it was the person holding the scythe—the other mower—that is responsible for these actions.

In this moment, then, the speaker becomes aware of the other mower's intentions even though that person isn't here to explain why he did what he did. And the mower's intentions become clearer when the speaker heads over to find out kind of flowers he's looking at: when he discovers that they are "butterfly weed," he realizes that the mower left them not just because they were beautiful, but because he knew that these flowers were a source of nectar for the butterflies.

LINES 27-30

The mower in the dew had loved them thus,
By leaving them to flourish, not for us,
Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him.
But from sheer morning gladness at the brim.

Having discovered that the tuft of flowers by the brook is in fact "butterfly weed," the speaker suddenly imagines the other mower "in the dew" (i.e., early in the morning, before the dew had evaporated in the sun) loving the flowers and leaving them to live and "flourish" (or thrive).

The speaker realizes that the mower did this not just because he found them beautiful or because he thought someone would come along and think of him (the mower), but because it brought him joy to know the butterflies would have something to feed on. The "sheer morning gladness" of being connected to other living things, of being able to make some small difference in the world, even if just for a butterfly, filled the other mower as if to "the brim."

And the speaker, now standing where the mower stood earlier in the day, looking at those very same flowers and the butterfly feeding on them just as the other mower knew it would, feels that same sense of joy. As a result, he feels connected not only to nature, but to the other mower. He sees the way the other mower's actions have reverberated, affecting not only the flowers and the butterfly, but the speaker himself.

LINES 31-34

The butterfly and I had lit upon,
Nevertheless, a message from the dawn,
That made me hear the wakening birds around,
And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground,

The joy that the speaker experiences in response to seeing the "butterfly weed" and imagining the mower standing there only a few hours before him feels to the speaker like "a message from the dawn." Again, this hearkens back to those unanswerable questions from line 19; it's as though the natural world itself is offering a "reply" to the speaker's painful solitude.

This metaphor of a "message from the dawn" suggests again that nature is *communicating* with the speaker, reminding him that he exists in connection with the flowers and the butterfly and the other mower—that despite how it may seem, he isn't alone at all.

The personification of the dawn (the speaker grants it the ability to send a message) suggests that nature is filled with benevolence. In other words, the speaker feels like nature is watching out for him; the flowers don't feel random but rather intentional, like a sign.

This message, in turn, alerts the speaker to "the wakening birds"; where before he felt alone, now he is aware that he is in fact surrounded by life. What's more, the speaker imagines the other mower's "long scythe whispering to the ground." This gentle auditory imagery gain suggests that the speaker isn't alone: though he can't see or literally hear this other person, he can still feel his presence.

LINES 35-40

And feel a spirit kindred to my own;
So that henceforth I worked no more alone;
But glad with him, I worked as with his aid,
And weary, sought at noon with him the shade;
And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech
With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.

The speaker imagines the other mower to be "a spirit kindred to his own." In other words, even though he still technically can't peer into this person's mind or heart, the speaker now believes that the mower is more like him than he had previously supposed. After all, they both care about the wellbeing of the butterfly, and they both stood in front of those flowers with joy in their hearts.

It turns out that this seemingly small overlap is enough to make the speaker feel as though he "worked no more alone." Instead, the speaker feels his joy connecting him to the other mower, as if they were experiencing this gladness at the same time.

The speaker even says that he "worked as with [the other mower's] aid." Even though the other mower isn't there *physically*, the speaker now feels as if they share a common purpose, and this shared purpose makes it seem as if this other person is there in spirit.

Finally, the speaker, worn out from his labor, goes and looks for

a shady place to sit down, and—still imagining himself to be in the other mower's company—dreams of having a "brotherly" conversation with this person. The word "brotherly" again implies this newfound sense of kinship: the speaker feels that he and the other mower have more in common than not. While he had not previously "hoped to reach" the thoughts or feelings of this person, he now knows that at least in some small way, he has glimpsed into the innermost part of the other mower's heart. They are no longer strangers.

LINES 41-42

> *'Men work together.' I told him from the heart,*
> *'Whether they work together or apart.'*

The poem's final couplet is a rewording of the aphorism that appeared in lines 9-10. Where before the speaker had been feeling isolated and resigned himself to the belief that "whether they work together or apart," people are essentially alone, he now changes his tune.

The speaker declares that, regardless of how things appear on the surface, people can work together towards the same goals with a shared sense of purpose. They don't need to physically work together to be together.

The repetition of this aphorism—with a big twist, of course—draws attention to what has changed: namely, the speaker's core belief about the human condition. Where before he had uttered a rather hopeless statement to himself, he now feels compelled to reach out to another person—even if only in spirit, in imagination—and communicate his belief "from the heart."

In other words, he is reaching toward connection; he no longer believes the boundaries of the heart and mind are impossible to go beyond. He's seen the way that something as simple as concern for a butterfly and joy over a clump of flowers can inspire a sense of connection and joy. He's felt the impact of another man's simple yet meaningful action and knows that he too can be part of a world where people have the best interests of nature and each other in mind.

Ending the poem with an aphorism also clearly indicates the kind of moral lesson the poem intends for the reader to take away: nature is beautiful and engaging with it provides people with opportunities for connection and joy, not only with the earth, but also with each other.

SYMBOLS

THE BUTTERFLY

The butterfly symbolizes the speaker himself, and more specifically his longing for connection.

Just as the speaker comes to the conclusion in that he is utterly alone in the world, a butterfly flies past, seeming to interrupt his train of thought. Rather than continuing to focus on his own isolation, the speaker instead considers the predicament of the butterfly.

- The speaker personifies the creature, seeming to project his own fears and desires onto the butterfly's "'wildered," or bewildered/confused, movements.
- The speaker identifies with the butterfly's search for "some resting flower of yesterday's delight" and worries that this flower is most likely "withering on the ground"—in other words, that the butterfly won't find the nectar it seeks.
- The butterfly, like the speaker, seems isolated and tired, going "round and round" in search of a flower that may not exist, much like the speaker asks "questions that have no reply."

But the butterfly then leads the speaker to the "tuft of flowers" growing next to a creek. The speaker's encounter with these flowers, in turn, allows him to feel a sense of connection with another person—to find a "reply" of sorts. Just as the butterfly finds nourishment in the "leaping tongue of bloom," the speaker finds comfort and strength in this "message" from the mower.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-18:** "swift there passed me by / On noiseless wing a 'wildered butterfly, / Seeking with memories grown dim o'er night / Some resting flower of yesterday's delight. / And once I marked his flight go round and round, / As where some flower lay withering on the ground. / And then he flew as far as eye could see, / And then on tremulous wing came back to me."
- **Line 21:** "But he turned first, and led my eye to look"
- **Line 26:** "Finding them butterfly weed when I came."
- **Line 28:** "not for us,"
- **Line 29:** "Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him."
- **Lines 31-32:** "The butterfly and I had lit upon, / Nevertheless, a message from the dawn,"

THE TUFT OF FLOWERS

The flowers in this poem symbolize the joy and sense of connection experienced by both the speaker and the mower who chose not to cut them down.

- When the speaker sees the flowers at the end of the poem, he feels this spark of joy precisely because they remind him that he's not really as alone as he might think. Despite literally working by himself, he is still connected to other people by "sheer morning gladness"—by being able to appreciate something as simple as a clump of flowers growing by a creek.

- The flowers are a "message from the dawn" that remind the speaker of his place in an interconnected world. The speaker even describes the flowers as "a leaping tongue of bloom," suggesting that their very existence *communicates* something vital to the speaker—that they offer a "reply" to some of those unanswerable "questions" that the speaker keeps asking.
- What's more, the speaker discovers that the flowers are specifically "butterfly weed." In other words, they are sustenance for his little friend, the butterfly who led him here. Not only is the speaker experiencing joy and connection, then, but the butterfly has *also* found what it needs.

The flowers, then, symbolize not only the happiness shared by the speaker and the other mower, but also the joy of all living things whose fates are bound to one another's, regardless of whether they "work together or apart."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 22-32:** "At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook, / A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared / Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared. / I left my place to know them by their name, / Finding them butterfly weed when I came. / The mower in the dew had loved them thus, / By leaving them to flourish, not for us, / Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him. / But from sheer morning gladness at the brim. / The butterfly and I had lit upon, / Nevertheless, a message from the dawn,"

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem uses metaphors in lines 23 and 32. In the first instance, the speaker describes the clump of flowers he finds by the brook as "a leaping tongue of bloom." By comparing the flowers to a tongue, the poem implies that the flowers are capable of communication, or that they are calling out to the speaker. The poem circles back to this implication in line 32, when the speaker describes coming upon "a message from the dawn."

This second metaphor reveals that the speaker perceives nature as a benevolent force that is trying to communicate with him, alerting him to the way in which he's connected to other beings. It's worth noting here that metaphor overlaps with personification. Just as the speaker personifies the butterfly and feels empathy for its plight, he also personifies the dawn by attributing to it the ability to communicate, to send a message.

Both metaphors also subtly respond to line 19:

> I thought of questions that have no reply,

In treating the flowers as "tongues" and describing "a message from the dawn," the speaker indicates that both offer a "reply" of sorts to all those questions he has been asking.

Also note how the speaker describes the flowers not simply as a tongue but as a "leaping" tongue. The word "leaping" suggests energy, joy, and buoyancy. This metaphor thus also points to the "sheer [...] gladness" the speaker experiences in the flowers' presence. It is this gladness, in turn, that makes him suddenly aware of the birds singing around him and makes him imagine the scythe slipping from the mower's hand.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 23:** "A leaping tongue of bloom"
- **Line 32:** "a message from the dawn"

IMAGERY

The poem is filled with evocative imagery. In the first few stanzas, for example, the speaker uses both visual and auditory (that is, sound-related) imagery to brings readers into the scene:

- Readers can picture the mower cutting the grass in the early hours of the morning, when the air is cool and the grass is still covered with "dew before the sun." This contrasts with the scene the speaker comes upon, with its "levelled," or cut, grass that's already starting to dry out.
- Imagery then evokes the speaker's isolation as he looks for the mower "behind an isle of trees" (the word "isle" suggesting isolation and detachment) and listens for the sound of the mower's sharpening tool on the wind. The /w/ and /s/ sounds of "whetstone" even seem to evoke the whooshing of that tool in the "breeze," making the sound all the more immediate and present for the reader. Of course, the speaker is listening for a sound that *doesn't come*; its mention makes *silence* that surrounds him all the more apparent.

Later, in lines 11-21, imagery evokes the profound effect the presence of a butterfly has on the speaker:

- The butterfly is described as arriving "on noiseless wing" and flying "round and round" looking for "some resting flower of yesterday's delight." Readers can readily picture the creature's quiet, confused searching. This searching, in turn, mirrors the speaker's, which is perhaps why the speaker so quickly empathizes with the creature.
- The speaker imagines the butterfly's flower from yesterday "withering on the ground," suggesting the

destruction of the creature's hopes (and, by symbolic extension, the speaker's own). The butterfly is also described as coming back to the speaker on "tremulous wing," an image that suggests the butterfly's vulnerability.

Yet more imagery crops up as the speaker follows the butterfly and finds the "tall tuft of flowers beside a brook."

- Readers can picture the flowers' vibrancy, which seems to "leap" towards the speaker. It's as though these flowers are calling out to him.
- It's also important here that the speaker isn't looking at a *single* flower or a *field* of flowers, but specifically a "tuft," or a clump, of flowers. This echoes the poem's theme regarding isolation and connection, as a tuft indicates a *group* of flowers growing from the *same base*. The flowers appear separate above the surface of the ground, but are also all joined together by their roots.

These flowers, in turn, make the speaker notice the "wakening birds" singing all around him, and also cause him to imagine the other mower's "long scythe whispering to the ground."

- This auditory imagery suggests that even though the speaker is still *technically* alone in the field, he is also intimately *connected* to his surroundings.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "I went to turn the grass once after one / Who mowed it in the dew before the sun. / The dew was gone that made his blade so keen / Before I came to view the levelled scene. / I looked for him behind an isle of trees; / I listened for his whetstone on the breeze."
- **Lines 11-18:** "swift there passed me by / On noiseless wing a 'wildered butterfly, / Seeking with memories grown dim o'er night / Some resting flower of yesterday's delight. / And once I marked his flight go round and round, / As where some flower lay withering on the ground. / And then he flew as far as eye could see, / And then on tremulous wing came back to me."
- **Lines 21-24:** "But he turned first, and led my eye to look / At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook, / A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared / Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared."
- **Lines 33-34:** "That made me hear the wakening birds around, / And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground,"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem generally feels neat and tidy thanks to its steady form (rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter) and many end-stopped lines. In a few moments, however, the poem turns to enjambment to vary the poem's pacing and make certain lines' imagery all the more immediate and striking.

Note that it is only ever the first line of a couplet that ever carries over into the following line. In other words, lines are never enjambed *across* stanzas; for this reason, the poem generally has a plodding, methodical pace that mimics the mower's movement through the field. He isn't in a hurry; he's observant, and his mind seems to move in a rather orderly fashion. The mostly end-stopped lines give the reader the chance to slowly take in each piece of information just as the speaker is before moving on to the next.

The places where enjambment *does* occur creates more of a fluidity between lines. For instance, in lines 11-12, the speaker is describing the flight of a butterfly:

> But as I said it, swift there passed me by
> On noiseless wing a 'wildered butterfly,

Here, the combination of enjambment and syntax (or word order) draws attention to the butterfly's flight and the way in which it distracts the speaker from his own thoughts. Ending line 11 on a preposition increases the sense of movement between these lines; the reader has to keep going beyond the end of the line to figure out *what* has swiftly passed the speaker, just as the speaker likely noticing something is flying past him before understanding exactly what it is.

Similarly, in lines 23-24, the reader's eye is being led alongside the speaker's toward the tuft of flowers:

> But he turned first, and led my eye to look
> At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,

This time the preposition doesn't arrive until after the line break, but the reader still needs to read past the line break to figure out what the speaker is being led to look at. The fluidity of the lines here is suggestive of the way the speaker's eye naturally follows the butterfly to its destination: the flowers that will change his perception of his own place in the world.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "one / Who"
- **Lines 3-4:** "keen / Before"
- **Lines 11-12:** "by / On"
- **Lines 13-14:** "night / Some"
- **Lines 21-22:** "look / At"
- **Lines 23-24:** "spared / Beside"
- **Lines 39-40:** "speech / With"

APHORISM

Towards the beginning of the poem, the speaker uses what

sounds like an aphorism to express his belief that people are essentially alone, unable to really know what's going on in each other's heads or hearts even if they do happen to be physically close to each other:

> 'As all must be,' I said within my heart,
> 'Whether they work together or apart.'

The speaker presents this idea of essential solitude as a kind of universally accepted knowledge. In other words, this is just the way things always have been and always will be. Yet the poem immediately undercuts this aphorism with the appearance of a butterfly, which seems to interrupt the speaker's train of thought. From this point on, the poem works to show how this seeming aphorism is actually not correct.

The aphorism appears again in the poem's final couplet (the last two lines), only this time it has changed to reflect the speaker's new, opposite belief: that regardless of whether they are physically close to one another or not, human beings not alone:

> 'Men work together.' I told him from the heart,
> 'Whether they work together or apart.'

The speaker's belief about the world and his place within it has shifted thanks to his interaction with the natural world. And because his new belief in humanity's connection is expressed so concisely as a conclusion to the poem, it is this belief itself that the reader is likely to take away with them. In other words, this is a poem with a moral!

Where Aphorism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "'As all must be,' I said within my heart, / 'Whether they work together or apart.'"
- **Lines 41-42:** "'Men work together.' I told him from the heart, / 'Whether they work together or apart.'"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is present throughout the poem, elevating the speaker's language and, in doing so, lending importance to what might at first seem like a very ordinary scene. For example, the speaker repeats the /n/, /w/, /t/, and /s/ sounds in the first line:

> I went to turn the grass once after one

There's also assonance here, with that quick repetition of the long /ah/ sound in "grass" and "after." Taken together with the poem's steady meter and rhyme scheme, things feel musical from the start.

- The same thing happens in the second stanza, with the internal rhyme of "made" and "blade" and the shared /v/ sounds of "view" and "levelled." Again, sonic devices combine to fill the poem with music.

Other moments are even more intense in their use of consonance. Take lines 11-12, when the speaker first sees the butterfly that changes everything:

> But as I said it, swift there passed me by
> On noiseless wing a 'wildered butterfly,

The gentle, breathy /s/ and /w/ sounds here suggest the butterfly's "swift," delicate movement, while also simply calling attention to an important moment in the poem. Assonance again enhances the effect; note how attention-grabbing "wing a 'wildered" is thanks to both those /w/ sounds and short /ih/ sounds.

Later, lines 21-24 are simply overflowing with shared sounds:

> But he turned first, and led my eye to look
> At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,
> A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared
> Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared.

All this consonance makes sense when considering that the speaker in this moment discovers the flowers that change his entire mindset. Using more consonance is like turning up the volume on the poem; the speaker can suddenly see and hear all the beauty in the world around him.

Other moments of consonance evoke the imagery at hand:

- The whoosh of the sibilance in "listened for his whetstone," for instance, suggests the whistle of the sharpening tool "on the breeze."
- The sibilance of "toss the grass" in line 20 works similarly, evoking the hiss of the dry grass, while that in "nevertheless a message" in line 32 suggests that this "message" is a hushed, quiet secret.

Broadly speaking, all this consonance makes the poem sound more *poetic*. Part of what makes this poem so effective is that on the one hand, it *is* really ordinary: anyone at all might walk through a field while working and see a butterfly and then a patch of flowers. Nothing *extraordinary* happens in the poem, yet the speaker's entire worldview shifts by the end of it: he goes from believing himself to be totally alone in the world to feeling that he is connected to others through his observations of, and feelings toward, nature.

Consonance helps to underline just how profound this experience is for the speaker; it clues the reader in to the fact that no matter how ordinary this experience might seem, there is something meaningful about it.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "went to turn," "grass once," "after," "one"
- **Line 3:** "dew," "made," "blade," "keen"
- **Line 4:** "Before," "came," "view," "levelled"
- **Line 5:** "looked," "isle"
- **Line 6:** "listened," "whetstone"
- **Line 7:** "he had," "gone," "his," "grass"
- **Line 8:** "must," "be," " he had," "been"
- **Line 9:** "within"
- **Line 10:** "Whether they work together"
- **Line 11:** "said," "swift," "passed"
- **Line 12:** "noiseless," "wing," "'wildered"
- **Line 13:** "Seeking," "memories," "dim"
- **Line 14:** "Some resting," "yesterday's"
- **Line 16:** "where," "flower," "withering"
- **Line 17:** "flew," "far"
- **Line 20:** "turned to toss," "grass"
- **Line 21:** "turned first," "led," "look"
- **Line 22:** "tall tuft," "flowers," "beside," "brook"
- **Line 23:** "leaping," "tongue," "bloom," "scythe," "spared"
- **Line 24:** "Beside," "reedy brook," "scythe," "had bared"
- **Line 25:** "know," "them," "name"
- **Line 26:** "Finding," "butterfly," "weed when"
- **Line 27:** "mower," "dew," "loved," "them thus"
- **Line 28:** "leaving"
- **Line 32:** "Nevertheless," "message"
- **Line 33:** "made me," "wakening"
- **Line 34:** "hear his," "scythe whispering"
- **Line 35:** "spirit," "kindred"
- **Line 36:** "So," "henceforth"
- **Line 37:** "with," "worked," "with"
- **Line 38:** "weary," "with"
- **Line 40:** "With one," "had," "hoped"
- **Line 41:** "together," "him," "heart"
- **Line 42:** "Whether they work together"

ALLITERATION

Like consonance, alliteration adds music and emphasis to the poem, elevating its language and calling readers' attention to specific words and phrases.

Take the shared sounds of "blade so keen / Before I came" in lines 3-4, which emphasizes both the mower's work and absence. In the next stanza, the /l/ sounds of "looked" and "listened" emphasize that the speaker longs to find some sign of the mower, and in doing so to feel less alone. Later, gentle /f/ sounds connect the words "flew" and "far" in line 17, making the butterfly's delicate flight seem all the more immediate.

The clearest moments of alliteration in the poem overlap with broader consonance. As noted in that latter's device's entry in this guide, the speaker's discovery of the flowers leads to some of the most sonically rich lines in the entire poem. Much of this is due to alliteration:

> But he turned first, and led my eye to look
> At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,
> A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared
> Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared.

All the alliteration here alerts the reader to the intense beauty of this particular moment.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "went," "to turn," "once," "one"
- **Line 3:** "blade," "keen"
- **Line 4:** "Before," "came"
- **Line 5:** "looked"
- **Line 6:** "listened"
- **Line 7:** "he had," "gone," "his," "grass"
- **Line 8:** "be," "he had," "been"
- **Line 9:** "within"
- **Line 10:** "Whether," "work"
- **Line 11:** "said," "swift"
- **Line 12:** "wing," "wildered"
- **Line 13:** "Seeking"
- **Line 14:** "Some"
- **Line 17:** "flew," "far"
- **Line 20:** "turned to toss"
- **Line 21:** "led," "look"
- **Line 22:** "tall tuft," "beside," "brook"
- **Line 23:** "bloom," "scythe," "spared"
- **Line 24:** "Beside," "brook," "scythe," "bared"
- **Line 25:** "know," "name"
- **Line 26:** "weed when"
- **Line 27:** "loved," "them thus"
- **Line 28:** "leaving"
- **Line 33:** "made me," "wakening"
- **Line 34:** "whispering"
- **Line 37:** "with," "worked," "with"
- **Line 38:** "weary"
- **Line 40:** "With one," "had," "hoped"
- **Line 41:** "together," "told"
- **Line 42:** "Whether," "work," "together"

ASSONANCE

Assonance shows up a few times alongside consonance and alliteration, adding to the poem's rhythm and music. It's rarer than the latter two sonic devices *within* lines themselves (though, of course, it's essential of poem's steady end rhymes—discussed in the Rhyme Scheme section of this guide).

Sometimes this assonance actually combines with consonance to form internal rhymes, as with "made" and "blade" in line 3. The rhyme here calls readers' attention to the mower's task (i.e., cutting the grass with a sharp "blade," or "scythe").

The shared sounds of "Whether" and "together" in lines 10 and 42, meanwhile, make the speaker's pronouncements about

humanity's solitude all the more memorable. The words' sounds, and thus the speaker's message, stick out to the reader's ear.

Most of the poem's assonance falls in lines 11-16, however, as the speaker is imagining the butterfly's predicament and feeling empathy for the creature's situation. The repetition of vowel sounds in these lines elevates the speaker's language, hinting to the reader that this moment is very important. Short /ih/ sounds in "swift," "wing," and "wildered,"; /eh/ sounds in "resting" and "yesterday's"; and /ow/ sounds in "round," "flower," and "ground" all fill the scene with delicate music that reflects the butterfly's beauty.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "grass," "once," "after," "one"
- **Line 3:** "made," "blade"
- **Line 4:** "came"
- **Line 5:** "behind," "isle"
- **Line 10:** "Whether," "together"
- **Line 11:** "it," "swift"
- **Line 12:** "wing," "wildered"
- **Line 14:** "resting," "yesterday's"
- **Line 15:** "round," "round"
- **Line 16:** "flower," "ground"
- **Line 21:** "turned first," "my eye"
- **Line 32:** "Nevertheless," "message"
- **Line 35:** "spirit kindred"
- **Line 42:** "Whether," "together"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism appears a few times in the poem. In the first instance, the speaker says:

> I looked for him behind an isle of trees;
> I listened for his whetstone on the breeze.

The parallel grammatical structures of "I looked for" and "I listened for" (which, thanks to the repetition of "I," are also an example of anaphora) add to the poem's rhythm and create a sense of apprehension and vigilance. The speaker is really longing to see or hear some evidence that he is not alone. The parallelism here also implies an order to the way the speaker is searching for this other person. First he *looks* for him, and then when he can't see him, he *listens* for him, hoping that even if this person is out of sight, perhaps he's still close enough to overhear the sound of him sharpening his scythe on the breeze.

In lines 8-9, the speaker compares his solitude to the other worker's, then uses parallelism to extrapolate (or extend) his situation into a universal one: "I" becomes "all":

> And I must be, as he had been,—alone,
> 'As all must be,' I said within my heart,

In other words, the speaker is trying to use logic to explain why he feels so isolated. He decides that his isn't a unique experience; it's simply the condition of human beings everywhere. If he believes that everyone is inherently cut off from each another, then perhaps it will be easier for him to accept his own sense of isolation.

Finally, in lines 23-24, the parallel grammatical structures of "bloom the scythe had spared" and "brook the scythe had bared" draws attention to the repeated element in both these phrases: the scythe, and the human being wielding it. This person made the *choice* to cut away the grass that had once concealed the brook from view, while at the same time leaving the flowers to grow. Parallelism draws attention to the human ability to cut through isolation and reveal the interconnectedness that's always been there.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "I looked for him behind an isle of trees; / I listened for his whetstone on the breeze."
- **Line 8:** "And I must be"
- **Line 9:** "'As all must be,'"
- **Line 23:** "A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared"
- **Line 24:** "a reedy brook the scythe had bared."

ANAPHORA

The poem's use of anaphora is fairly subtle. In addition to the repetition of "I" at the start of lines 5-6 (discussed in the parallelism entry of this guide), the word "And" is repeated at the start of a handful of lines throughout the poem.

Because this repetition is intermittent (in other words, it isn't used at the beginning of *every* or even *most* lines), and because the word that is being repeated ("And") is a conjunction (it serves the purpose of joining other words together), it doesn't draw a lot of attention to itself. Instead, it provides momentum for the poem; the poem is, after all, quite narrative in nature—it's relaying a story. The continual use of the word "And" at the beginnings of lines implies that the reader needs to keep going, that the poem hasn't reached its conclusion yet.

In lines 34-39 in particular, the anaphora creates a sense of the speaker's feelings of gladness accumulating (or gathering) into the belief that he isn't alone. The repeated conjunction "And" at the beginnings of lines suggests connectivity; after all, the purpose of this particular conjunction is to join words together, showing the ways that they are related.

Anaphora works together with the poem's punctuation to create the feeling of the speaker being caught up in his gladness and joy. While periods show up frequently throughout the poem, usually appearing every 2-4 lines, they are noticeably

absent in this part of the poem: lines 31-40 are all one sentence, easily the longest in the poem, leading right up to the poem's final two lines. Anaphora in these lines allows the poem to evoke the way that the speaker is just overflowing with joy and a sense of connection.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "I"
- **Line 6:** "I"
- **Line 15:** "And"
- **Line 17:** "And"
- **Line 18:** "And"
- **Line 34:** "And"
- **Line 35:** "And"
- **Line 38:** "And"
- **Line 39:** "And"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification plays a big role in the poem, reflecting the speaker's growing understanding that he isn't entirely alone in the world.

The speaker first personifies the butterfly that appears in line 12, imagining the creature's "memory" of some flower it drank from before that flower was cut down by the mower. The speaker imagines the butterfly's delight being replaced by bewilderment once its food source is removed.

- By personifying the butterfly, the speaker is able to feel empathy for its situation and becomes invested in its search for more flowers.
- This investment is what allows him to eventually understand his own place in an interconnected system: in paying attention to the butterfly's predicament, he discovers he's not as alone as he thought he was.

Later, in lines 31-32, the speaker describes the way that both he and the butterfly, upon finding the flowers, discovered a "message from the dawn."

- By personifying the dawn by attributing it with the ability to send a message, the poem suggests that the speaker feels that the earth itself is communicating with him. Watching the butterfly discover the "butterfly weed" by the brook, which had been left alive on purpose by the previous mower, the speaker is alerted to the ways that he is connected to other beings. Even though he, the other mower, and the butterfly are all going about their separate business, their actions affect each other.
- Personification elevates the butterfly and the dawn to the same importance as other humans, showing that sometimes the way back to connection with other humans is through connecting with nature first.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "Seeking with memories grown dim o'er night / Some resting flower of yesterday's delight."
- **Lines 21-22:** "But he turned first, and led my eye to look / At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,"
- **Line 32:** "a message from the dawn"
- **Line 34:** "his long scythe whispering to the ground"

VOCABULARY

Isle (Line 5) - An island.

Whetstone (Line 6) - A stone used for sharpening cutting tools.

'Wildered (Line 12) - An abbreviation of "bewildered." Confused or mystified.

O'er (Line 13) - A contraction of the word "over."

Tremulous (Line 18) - Shaking, quivering, or trembling.

Tuft (Line 22) - A clump or bunch of strands with a common base.

Scythe (Line 24, Line 34) - A tool with a long, curved blade used for cutting grass or crops.

Kindred (Line 35) - Similar in kind; related or connected.

Henceforth (Line 36) - In the future; from this point forward.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Tuft of Flowers" is made up of 21 rhyming couplets. More specifically these are heroic couplets, because they're written in iambic pentameter (more on that in the Meter section of this guide).

This neat and tidy form gives the poem a feeling of orderliness and restraint, which, in turn, suits the poem's narrative quality (i.e., the fact that the poem is telling a story). The concise quality of the couplets lends itself to the direct and soothing tone of the poem; the speaker is trying to convey something very specific, something that he finds helpful and hopeful. In this way, the poem invites the reader to journey through this specific memory with the speaker and arrive at the same moral or lesson that the speaker himself did.

METER

The poem is written in iambic pentameter, meaning that, for the most part, each line contains five iambs. These are metrical feet

that follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (so when read aloud, the line will have a noticeable da-DUM sound). The first line is a perfect example of this meter in action:

I went | to turn | the grass | once af- | ter one

By and large the poem sticks to this pattern, lending the speaker's story a sense of calm, steady rhythm. And when the poem does occasionally veer away from this meter, it never does so too drastically. Line 10, for example, begins with a trochee, or a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable (and also features another trochee in its fourth foot):

Whether | they work | togeth- | er or | apart

Lines 13 and 26 both begin with a trochee ("Seeking" and "Finding") as well, a sonic connection that emphasizes the relationship between these concepts within the poem. The poem is interested in the relationship between seeking and finding connection, so it makes sense that these words would stand out when read aloud!

Others line contain an extra syllable, but minor variations like this aren't uncommon in long metered poems. One moment of variation that is particularly interesting, however, comes in line 16. This line contains two extra syllables, and its metrical feet are also irregular: its opening iamb is followed by a spondee (two stressed beats in a row), another iamb, a pyrrhic (two unstressed beats in a row), and a final iamb:

As where | some flow- | er lay | with- | er- | ing on | the ground.

The disrupted meter in this line seems to coincide with a low point in the poem: both the speaker and butterfly are lost, disconnected, alone, unable to find what they are searching for. Yet the meter is restored in the very next line; this moment of isolation and despair doesn't last.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is made up of 21 rhyming couplets, and thus follows a rhyme scheme:

AA BB CC DD

...and so on. Technically these are called heroic couplets—that is, matching pairs of rhyming iambic pentameter (more on what iambic pentameter is in the meter section of this guide). What's important to note here is that each couplet maintains a steady rhythm and that its end rhymes ring out clearly to the reader. This rhyme scheme is very tidy and forceful: there's no overlooking those end rhymes, especially since the poem uses only full rhymes as opposed to half or slant rhymes.

The heroic couplet was traditionally used by poets in the 17th and 18th centuries in poems describing the great deeds of heroic figures—thus the name! On its surface, "The Tuft of Flowers" doesn't seem to have anything to do with such poems, so it's worth considering what Frost might have intended when he chose to use this somewhat antiquated rhyme scheme.

One possibility is that with the heroic couplet, lines appear dramatically in pairs: each line is bound by meter and rhyme to another. This would seem to emphasize the speaker's burgeoning belief that no one is ever really alone—that no matter how things appear on the surface, everyone and everything is deeply connected to everyone and everything else. No line, and therefore no person, is really separate from any other.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is someone whose job it is to "turn the grass" during the process of making hay—that is, to rearrange the grass after it has been cut by a mower so that it can dry out in the sun. (Note that, back when Frost wrote this poem, mowing was done by hand—not farm tools!)

The speaker's job is an isolating one, given that there's no interaction with the person who came by earlier in the day to actually mow the grass. And the speaker is someone who, at the beginning of the poem, not only feels disconnected from other people, but believes this isolation is just part of being human. He does not initially "hope to reach" anyone else because he thinks that people are all more or less cut off from each other—that they are inherently alone in their innermost thoughts and feelings. The poem then follows this person's transformation into someone who believes just the opposite: that whether people physically work "together or apart," they are deeply connected to each other and to the earth itself.

Note that Frost himself considered his collection, *A Boy's Will*, and this poem in particular, as being autobiographical in nature. (This is why we've referred to the speaker as male throughout this guide; do note that the speaker is never gendered in the poem itself, and can certainly be read as being a woman.) Frost went through a period of time when he withdrew from society, but his love for nature and philosophy ultimately led him towards feeling *more* connected with other people—a process this poem testifies to.

SETTING

The poem takes place in a field filled that was mowed earlier in the day. The speaker's job is to rearrange this freshly cut grass so that it can dry out in the sun (part of the process for making hay). The sun has already caused the early morning dew to evaporate—a reminder that seemingly all traces of the earlier mower's presence have disappeared by the time the speaker shows up to do his job. The scene feels empty and deeply lonely,

as the speaker can neither see his fellow worker nor hear "his whetstone on the breeze."

The setting shifts once the speaker catches sight of a butterfly. The butterfly appears bewildered; its food source, it seems, has been cut alongside the grass. The speaker follows the butterfly to a "reedy brook," next to which he finds a clump of flowers (specifically "butterfly weed") that the earlier mower left behind. The speaker takes this as a "message from the dawn"—that is, from the mower and the natural world itself—and then hears birds singing all around him as well as the sound of the other mower's scythe "whispering to the ground." These new sounds contrast with the poem's earlier silence, and remind the speaker that he isn't alone after all.

At this point in the poem, the line between the poem's physical setting (the mown field later in the morning, the speaker standing beside a brook) blurs with the speaker's imagination: he is thinking of the other mower, standing in this same spot at dawn when the dew is still fresh. Likewise, the poem ends in the speaker's imagination; later in the day, after he's completed his work, he "seeks the shade" and dreams of sharing it with the other mower as they engage in "brotherly speech." In this way, the poem moves from a literal setting in which the speaker is physically alone to a setting in which the speaker is still physically alone yet mentally dreaming of connection.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Tuft of Flowers" appeared in Robert Frost's first collection, *A Boy's Will*, published in 1913 in England (and reprinted in the United States in 1915). The title of the book is a reference to "My Lost Youth" by famed New England poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, which includes the lines:

> A boy's will is the wind's will
> And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.

According to Frost, *A Boy's Will* is highly autobiographical; the poems in the book more or less cover a period of five years in the poet's life in which he retreated from society and later found his way back. The title, then, is perhaps a reference to this time of defiant introspection, and "The Tuft of Flowers" in particular captures the spirit of Frost's return to society.

The collection's broader themes include humanity's relationship to the natural world, rural life, philosophy, and individuality—all of which are themes that Frost would return to again and again throughout his life. These themes also link Frost with other New England poets such as Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William Wordsworth.

Frost's poetry rather uniquely straddles the line between the traditions of 19th century American poetry and the experimentation of 20th century Modernism. Compared to the very deliberate departures from traditional forms and techniques that his contemporaries (such as T.S. Eliot) were making, Frost was not particularly interested in innovation for innovation's sake. While many poets in the aftermath of the first World War were breaking away from formal restrictions, Frost typically used more conventional meter and rhyme. At the same time, he used frank, contemporary language that tied his work in some ways to the Imagist poets.

Frost himself consistently shied away from associating with any one particular school of writing. Instead, his work is notable for its incorporation of various traditions and techniques while also remaining highly accessible, earning him the distinction of being the most recognized American poet of the 20th century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though he lived through both World War I and II and saw many significant social and political shifts in his lifetime, Frost hardly ever wrote directly about history or politics. Instead, Frost's poetry is known for dealing with rural New England life and identity. Having lived and worked on a New Hampshire farm from 1900-1912, Frost's interest in rural life, nature, and New England is an extension of his time working the land in what he considered to be the best part of America.

With an eye for austerity and tragedy, Frost's work is known for its realism, particularly as it pertains to the difficulties of rural life and the indifference of nature. Like many poets of his time, Frost had a somewhat pessimistic view of the modern world that was perhaps intensified by his own significant personal losses. His father died of tuberculosis when he was only 11, leaving behind eight dollars for the family to survive on. His mother died of cancer five years later, in 1900, and in 1920 his younger sister was committed to a mental hospital, where she later died. Mental illness plagued his family, and both Frost and his wife struggled with depression.

In spite of, or more like because of, these personal trials, Frost wrote diligently of individuals searching for meaning and finding, most often in nature, some kind of mirror for their own situations. His poems tend to highlight ordinary moments in which extraordinary or profound insights occur, and despite their straightforward and colloquial language, can often be interpreted in myriad of ways ("The Road Not Taken" and "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening," two of his most famous poems, are perfect examples).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Hear the poem read aloud by the poet himself. (https://vimeo.com/41123182)
- Frost's Life and Work — Check out a biography of Frost

and read more of his famous poems via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost)

- The Scythe — A video showing what mowing the grass looked like before lawnmowers were invented! (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4l7ke2laTKQ&t=5s)
- Interview with the Poet — Robert Frost interviewed by Richard Poirier for the Paris Review's Art of Poetry series. (https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4678/the-art-of-poetry-no-2-robert-frost)
- Making Hay — Learn more about the process of making hay—from mowing to turnin (https://www.farmingmagazine.com/dairy/forages/haymaking-101-mowing-tedding-and-raking/)

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

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