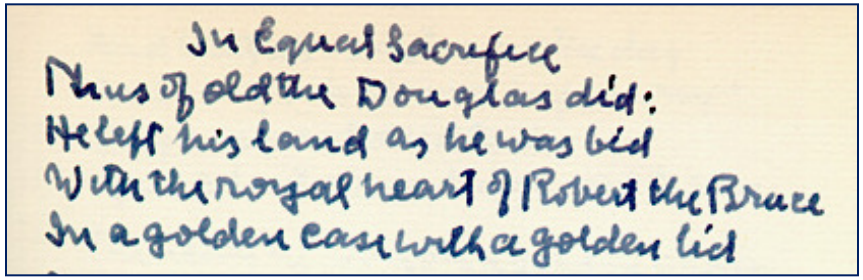
Teaching Robert Frost:
A Common Core Close Reading Seminar



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2001-02

AMERICA *in* CLASS®
from the National Humanities Center

Teaching Robert Frost

GOAL

To examine Frost's poetry through close reading and consider how it can be both reassuring and disturbing at the same moment.

Teaching Robert Frost

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FROM THE FORUM

- How does Frost express complexity through simplicity?
- What, if any, impact did Frost have on other poets?
- Why would Frost write pastoral poetry at a time of massive urbanization?
- What is Frost's relationship to the modernism of the 1920s?

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A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government
(2008)

Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism
(2000)

Teaching Robert Frost

INTRODUCTION

- Focus on two poems: “The Road Not Taken” and “Mending Wall”
  (If time, “Death of the Hired Man.”)
- Why those two?
- General remarks about Frost’s poetry

Teaching Robert Frost

Robert Frost (1874-1963) was among the major American poets of the 20th century. His achievement was distinctive and memorable. He came of age as a writer in an era when the most celebrated poetry was highly aestheticized—ornate, musical, and symbolic. And he began his career at a time when a rising new generation of modernists poets was throwing off that literary inheritance by writing complex, experimental verse that often looked nothing at all like traditional poetry. Frost took neither of these directions. Without ever abandoning traditional poetic forms, he made verse out of the everyday vernacular of New England farm communities.

Teaching Robert Frost

When his first books were published, this style made Frost almost immediately renowned. He was celebrated for the way in which he created a new, simple poetic language and for the way he reinvigorated a nearly lost tradition of pastoral poetry.

Teaching Robert Frost

Yet, his life and his career were more complex than they might first seem. Although he pursued a short, unsuccessful career as a dairy and poultry farmer during his twenties, he had been born in San Francisco and had spent his formative years in the industrial city of Lawrence, MA. When he published his first two books, *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*, he was living in England, where he had moved to get closer to the center of poetic action. He was, in short, a metropolitan poet writing about rural subjects. Likewise, his poetry, which seems at first glance naïve, simple, and often heartwarming is, by Frost's own account, often tricky, obscure, and occasionally dark and terrifying.

The Road Not Taken

Frost's poem was celebrated from its initial publication. It's first appearance was in the eminent magazine *The Atlantic*. The magazine editors and readers likely took to the poem as did Alexander Meiklejohn, the president of Amherst, who recited the poem to the student body in compulsory chapel when he announced that Frost would be coming to teach at the school. Meiklejohn told Frost that the students "applauded vigorously." Readers have been applauding the poem ever since.

Yet Frost told friends that he thought most readers didn't understand the poem. He thought they missed what he referred to as his "fooling."

“The Road Not Taken”

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I marked the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Discussion Question

- Why is this particular poem so celebrated and widely loved?

“The Road Not Taken”

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
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I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Discussion Question

- In what way is the poem “fooling” and why?

“The Road Not Taken”

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And be one traveler, long I stood
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Discussion Questions

- How does the sentiment expressed in the last three lines of the poem fit with the thoughts expressed in the second and third stanzas?

“The Road Not Taken”

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Discussion Question

- The poem may be more complex than it first seems. For instance, how many time frames does it refer to?

“The Road Not Taken”

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Discussion Question

- What are the differences among the psychological states the speaker describes when referring to these three time frames?

“The Road Not Taken”

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Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Discussion Questions

- In the last stanza, the speaker anticipates himself in the future. What does he mean to imply about himself when he says, “I shall be telling this with a sigh.”

“The Road Not Taken”

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
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I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Discussion Question

- What tone does he create by the repetition of “I”?

“The Road Not Taken”

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
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And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
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I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Discussion Question

- Why does he say “ages and ages hence”?

“The Road Not Taken”

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
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I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Discussion Question

- What tone is created by the repetition? How might it affect our sense of the speaker’s personality?

“The Road Not Taken”

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
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I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Discussion Question

- Which path does the title refer to? Does that affect our understanding of the poem or of the speaker?

Mending Wall

"Mending Wall" is like "Road Not Taken" in that it reveals a quality Frost took pride in: his "innate mischievous," as he once put it. He told his friend the fellow poet Louis Untermyer that he "should like to be so subtle at this game as to seem to the casual person altogether obvious. The casual person would assume I meant nothing or else I came near enough meaning something he was familiar with to mean it for all practical purposes. Well, well, well."

Mending Wall Context

"Mending Wall" provided the opening to Frost's second book of poetry, the break-out collection *North of Boston*. The title of that book referred to the territory of northern New England, then a region in the midst of a long decline. As other poems in Frost's book revealed, the New England farming economy was in severe decline during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Much of the region's population migrated to other opportunities, and many farms were sold or were converted to vacation properties for visiting urbanites. It was not unusual at the time for observers to remark on the poverty and low education levels of the region and to view it as a world being left behind by modernization. (Consider, for example, Edith Wharton's depiction of Starkfield in *Ethan Frome*, or, for a different, but possibly useful comparison, think of what "north" signifies in *Game of Thrones*.) Frost himself told an interviewer that his "intention" with the poem was "fulfilled with the characters portrayed and the atmosphere of the place."

Mending Wall

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:

There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."

“Mending Wall”

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
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To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them
made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.

(lines 1-15)

Discussion Question

- Who are the speaker and his neighbor?

“Mending Wall”

He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, “Good fences make good neighbours.”
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
“*Why* do they make good neighbours? Isn’t it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Lines (24-31)

He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father’s saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, “Good fences make good neighbours.”
(lines 41-45)

Discussion Question

- Why does Frost have the neighbor repeat his father's saying twice?

“Mending Wall”

…The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
(lines 9-14)

Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That wants it down.” I could say “Elves” to him,
But it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
(lines 28-36)

Discussion Questions

- In the 12th line of the poem, the speaker says something that seems inconsistent with what he says later. Why does the speaker “let my neighbor know”?
- We can perhaps break this question down. Why does the speaker want to rebuild the wall?
- And what does he want from his neighbor?

“Mending Wall”

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
“*Why* do they make good neighbours? Isn’t it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That wants it down.” I could say “Elves” to him,
But it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father’s saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, “Good fences make good neighbours.”

(lines 24-41)

Discussion Question

- What is the difference between the speaker’s attitude (as reflected, say, by his references to “elves” and “spell[s]”) and the neighbor’s attitude?

“Mending Wall”

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
(lines 1-4)

Discussion Questions

- The opening line of the poem is famous and often quoted. Why might Frost have chosen such unusual phrasing?
- What might it tell us about the speaker?

“Mending Wall”

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
(lines 1-4)

Discussion Questions

- How does that line compare to the neighbor’s saying?

Teaching Robert Frost

Frost always refused to give away the "secret," as he put it, of what his poem means. In general, he claimed, "poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another. People say, 'Why don't you say what you mean?' We never do that, we being all of us too much poets. We like to talk in parables and in hints and indirections—whether from diffidence or some other instinct."

Discussion Questions

- Why can't or won't he say what he means in "Mending Wall"?
- How does he compare to the speaker?

Teaching Robert Frost

"Mending Wall" is typical of Frost's celebrated style. By comparison to the writing of many of his predecessors and contemporaries, it does not sound very "poetic." The diction and syntax are similar to those used in ordinary speech. The poem is also not highly "musical" in the style that Frost disliked in late 19th century poets like Tennyson and Swinburne or experimental in the style he disliked in some early 20th century poetry. In fact, formally the poem is both conventional and unconventional. It is in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter), the style used by Shakespeare in his plays and by many other masters of English poetry. And yet, very few of the lines in the poem fit the pattern neatly. Lines 3, 10, 17, 21, for example, are conventional iambic pentameter, but the first line and many others are not. This was a quality Frost took pride in. He remarked that a line of poetry "will have the more charm for not being mechanically straight. We enjoy the straight crookedness of a good walking stick."

Discussion Question

- Might this style fit with the subject of "Mending Wall"?

“The Death of the Hired Man”

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway with the news
And put him on his guard. “Silas is back.”
She pushed him outward with her through the door
And shut it after her. “Be kind,” she said.
She took the market things from Warren’s arms
And set them on the porch, then drew him down
To sit beside her on the wooden steps.

“When was I ever anything but kind to him?
But I’ll not have the fellow back,” he said.
“I told him so last haying, didn’t I?
‘If he left then,’ I said, ‘that ended it.’
What good is he? Who else will harbour him
At his age for the little he can do?
What help he is there’s no depending on.
Off he goes always when I need him most.
‘He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,
So he won’t have to beg and be beholden.’
‘All right,’ I say, ‘I can’t afford to pay
Any fixed wages, though I wish I could.’
‘Someone else can.’ ‘Then someone else will have to.’
I shouldn’t mind his bettering himself
If that was what it was. You can be certain,
When he begins like that, there’s someone at him
Trying to coax him off with pocket-money,—
In haying time, when any help is scarce.
In winter he comes back to us. I’m done.”

“Sh! not so loud: he’ll hear you,” Mary said.

“I want him to: he’ll have to soon or late.”

“He’s worn out. He’s asleep beside the stove.
When I came up from Rowe’s I found him here,
Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep,
A miserable sight, and frightening, too—
You needn’t smile—I didn’t recognise him—
I wasn’t looking for him—and he’s changed.
Wait till you see.”

“Where did you say he’d been?”

“He didn’t say. I dragged him to the house,
And gave him tea and tried to make him smoke.
I tried to make him talk about his travels.
Nothing would do: he just kept nodding off.”

“The Death of the Hired Man”

“What did he say? Did he say anything?”

“But little.”

“Anything? Mary, confess
He said he’d come to ditch the meadow for me.”

“Warren!”

“But did he? I just want to know.”

“Of course he did. What would you have him say?
Surely you wouldn’t grudge the poor old man
Some humble way to save his self-respect.
He added, if you really care to know,
He meant to clear the upper pasture, too.
That sounds like something you have heard before?
Warren, I wish you could have heard the way
He jumbled everything. I stopped to look
Two or three times—he made me feel so queer—
To see if he was talking in his sleep.
He ran on Harold Wilson—you remember—
The boy you had in haying four years since.
He’s finished school, and teaching in his college.
Silas declares you’ll have to get him back.
He says they two will make a team for work:
Between them they will lay this farm as smooth!
The way he mixed that in with other things.
He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft
On education—you know how they fought
All through July under the blazing sun,
Silas up on the cart to build the load,
Harold along beside to pitch it on.”

“Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot.”

“Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream.
You wouldn’t think they would. How some things linger!
Harold’s young college boy’s assurance piqued him.
After so many years he still keeps finding
Good arguments he sees he might have used.
I sympathise. I know just how it feels
To think of the right thing to say too late.
Harold’s associated in his mind with Latin.
He asked me what I thought of Harold’s saying
He studied Latin like the violin
Because he liked it—that an argument!
He said he couldn’t make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong—
Which showed how much good school had ever done him.
He wanted to go over that. But most of all
He thinks if he could have another chance
To teach him how to build a load of hay——”

“The Death of the Hired Man”

“I know, that’s Silas’ one accomplishment.
He bundles every forkful in its place,
And tags and numbers it for future reference,
So he can find and easily dislodge it
In the unloading. Silas does that well.
He takes it out in bunches like big birds’ nests.
You never see him standing on the hay
He’s trying to lift, straining to lift himself.”

“He thinks if he could teach him that, he’d be
Some good perhaps to someone in the world.
He hates to see a boy the fool of books.
Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
And nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different.”

Part of a moon was falling down the west,
Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw
And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
As if she played unheard the tenderness
That wrought on him beside her in the night.
“Warren,” she said, “he has come home to die:
You needn’t be afraid he’ll leave you this time.”

“Home,” he mocked gently.

“Yes, what else but home?
It all depends on what you mean by home.
Of course he’s nothing to us, any more
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.”

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.”

“I should have called it
Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.”

Warren leaned out and took a step or two,
Picked up a little stick, and brought it back
And broke it in his hand and tossed it by.
“Silas has better claim on us you think
Than on his brother? Thirteen little miles
As the road winds would bring him to his door.
Silas has walked that far no doubt to-day.
Why didn’t he go there? His brother’s rich,
A somebody—director in the bank.”

“The Death of the Hired Man”

“He never told us that.”

“We know it though.”

“I think his brother ought to help, of course.
I’ll see to that if there is need. He ought of right
To take him in, and might be willing to—
He may be better than appearances.
But have some pity on Silas. Do you think
If he’d had any pride in claiming kin
Or anything he looked for from his brother,
He’d keep so still about him all this time?”

“I wonder what’s between them.”

“I can tell you.
Silas is what he is—we wouldn’t mind him—
But just the kind that kinsfolk can’t abide.
He never did a thing so very bad.
He don’t know why he isn’t quite as good
As anyone. He won’t be made ashamed
To please his brother, worthless though he is.”

“I can’t think Si ever hurt anyone.”
“No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay
And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back.
He wouldn’t let me put him on the lounge.
You must go in and see what you can do.
I made the bed up for him there to-night.
You’ll be surprised at him—how much he’s broken.
His working days are done; I’m sure of it.”

“I’d not be in a hurry to say that.”

“I haven’t been. Go, look, see for yourself.
But, Warren, please remember how it is:
He’s come to help you ditch the meadow.
He has a plan. You mustn’t laugh at him.
He may not speak of it, and then he may.
I’ll sit and see if that small sailing cloud
Will hit or miss the moon.”

It hit the moon.
Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.

Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her,
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.

“Warren,” she questioned.

“Dead,” was all he answered.

“The Death of the Hired Man”

“All right,” I say, “I can’t afford to pay
Any fixed wages, though I wish I could.”
“Someone else can.” “Then someone else will have to.”
I shouldn’t mind his bettering himself
If that was what it was. You can be certain,
When he begins like that, there’s someone at him
Trying to coax him off with pocket-money,—
In haying time, when any help is scarce.
In winter he comes back to us. I’m done.’

Discussion Questions

- “The Death of the Hired Man” presents the dialogue of two characters—Mary and Warren—talking about a third: Silas, the hired man who has returned to Mary and Warren’s farm to die. What might be important to Frost about this situation?
- What does Silas represent for him?
- Why might it be important in this context that Silas’s brother is a wealthy bank director?

“The Death of the Hired Man”

He ran on Harold Wilson—you remember—
The boy you had in haying four years since.
He’s finished school, and teaching in his college.
Silas declares you’ll have to get him back.
He says they two will make a team for work:
Between them they will lay this farm as smooth!
The way he mixed that in with other things.
He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft
On education—you know how they fought
All through July under the blazing sun,
Silas up on the cart to build the load,
Harold along beside to pitch it on.’

Discussion Questions

- Frost presents a foil to Silas in the minor character Harold Wilson. What does he want us to see in the disagreement between these two figures?
- What issue does the contrast between them represent?

“The Death of the Hired Man”

Part of a moon was falling down the west,
Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it
And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
As if she played unheard some tenderness
That wrought on him beside her in the night.
‘Warren,’ she said, ‘he has come home to die:
You needn’t be afraid he’ll leave you this time.’

‘Home,’ he mocked gently.

‘Yes, what else but home?
It all depends on what you mean by home.
Of course he’s nothing to us, any more
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.’

‘Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.’

‘I should have called it
Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.’

Warren leaned out and took a step or two,
Picked up a little stick, and brought it back
And broke it in his hand and tossed it
by.

Discussion Question

- What different qualities do Mary and Warren represent in their debate?

“The Death of the Hired Man”

Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her,
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.

‘Warren,’ she questioned.

‘Dead,’ was all he answered.

Discussion Question

- What tone is created in the last line of the poem?

Final slide.

Thank you.