

Robert Frost Lecture at Bridgewater Teachers College
Horace Mann Auditorium
December 1, 1959

Length: 01:14:58

When I first faced audiences, I used to try to make myself think that they were nothing but classes, and I ought to be able to stand them. [laughter] If I think of them as classes, I'm not half as scared as when I think of them as audiences. You look terribly like a class in some respects – young, and like the class of all girls that I had in the, what they called the Normal School at Plymouth, New Hampshire in eighteen ninety ... no, in nineteen hundred and, nineteen hundred and ten. It was a long time ago.

I followed you all – I watch the schools a good deal. I'm in and out of them in various ways and capacities. And I'm interested in noticing that they are so far from being Normal Schools anymore that they're not even Teachers Colleges anymore. They're getting ready to call them just State College and so on, get rid of the word "Teachers" for some reason. That word I used to think was a nice word. [Applause]

I always hated anybody who talked about himself as an "educator." [laughter] You know, teacher, teacher, teacher. Things have changed in a very interesting way. I was very intimate at one time with the State Superintendent and with all that went on in the state of New Hampshire. They picked me up out of the gutter and took me in among them. I knew ... well, I tell you what was going on there at that time. There was only Education in theory and in history. I had a course in History of Education. And there was another course in the Theory of – there were several courses, I guess, in the Theory of Education. And there was, beside that ... nothing. Oh, Psychology. Yeah. That was the [Psychology of the] Child. That was supposed to be the Psychology of the Child. I remember one of my friends had two or three children. And I was having lunch with him one day – there were rather noisy children. And he called to his wife to "put the children out of the way. Mr. Frost and I want to talk about the Child." [laughter] We were then theorizing about [the child]. But just think, that's all there was. Now there are even courses in – I suppose they'd be Latin and Greek, come back, you know. I don't know.

And then I noticed there are boys. I forgot to ask how many men there are, that go to college [Bridgewater Teachers College]. It looks like largely girls, but there are some boys. In my day there wasn't a ... there'd been one single boy and he'd just run away because he couldn't stand it. [laughter] And he left a poem behind him called "The Only Normal Boy." [laughter] That was those good old days.

We had a great State Superintendent who was beginning to worry about the emptiness of that. The formality of it. Do you know what it really was? It anticipated the movement in modern art – that was form without content. See? What prepared me for that movement in art when I ran into it was what I'd had there at the Normal School, you see. [laughter] Form without content. You'd think there'd be no such thing. We almost made a reality of it.

I was told by the State Superintendent that my chief job in psychiatry was to disabuse the girls of the idea that it could be used directly in teaching. Psychology. Did I say “psychiatry”? I had the course in Psychology [of Education]. The first thing I did was – there was some books there. And the first lesson was to have four strong girls carry those books into the basement. [laughter] That was the first lesson I gave them. Then they wouldn’t know what was coming next, you see. [laughter] But that’s all just reminiscing.

And I was writing then, just [the] same as I am now. People wonder about that: when you write, and what’s advantageous for writing, and how many disadvantages you need to get on in the world. Someone asked me, in television a little while ago, “Do you think that poetry has a chance in a country like this?” And the same thing came up on telegram from the magazine called *This Week*, the other day. “Does poetry have a chance in a country like this?” Just [the] same question, practically. It quotes Emerson – one fearing that it might not have a chance where the commercial interests are so great. Emerson was worried about it a hundred years ago.

But that’s so in any country. You may well worry [that] commercial interests – bread and butter and buttons. They say “He has a soul above buttons.” Did you ever hear that expression? The old people used to say that: “He has a soul above buttons.” But the buttons are always there. Or else zippers. [laughter] Some like that. The fear about America is nothing but the fear ... the fear for America is nothing what they ought to have about other countries, too. It’s always been like that. Always will be. Who dares? Non, serez vous? [Will it be you?] Who dares to leave the buttons and the dollars and cents and the bread and butter on a venture? What is the venture? There’s a peril of, there’s always a peril to art and to any kind of originality in science or all. There’s a peril in it. You may ... originality may be eccentricity and eccentricity may be lunacy. The first peril you think of is to the young person himself. Is he doing something foolish? Has he got anything that’s really worth daring for or worth dying for? He’s got to think of it that way. He’s got to have a vision somewhere along when he’s young, with the teachers, his friends, and everybody. A vision of something that’s worth failing at as well as worth succeeding at. And he’s got to see that peril. There’s always the first peril that he’s a fool. Then the next peril is if he’s just not a fool, the next peril is that the people are foolish – that they don’t see him soon enough. He’d be dead before they realize they got him. That’s so in science and all, just the same in poetry.

Now I can’t help seeing you this way without thinking of the many times I’ve been asked, “How do you make children – young people in school – how do you make them want to be poets?” No, that’s too much to expect. They’d be rare, wouldn’t it? You wouldn’t want to interfere with that, but you don’t want to get them into that trouble. That’s their own funeral. But how do you get children to read poetry and carry poetry and all that? Well, I haven’t any solution for that except to show in nice ways that you care a little about it yourself. Not be harping on it. I wouldn’t like to come to you, urging you to urge others, to like poetry. I’m not preaching or advocating anything. You just hope, you know, your own quiet way, that America will care for poetry. And that young people will care for it a little. And you’ve got to be very careful. I notice if I have a very close friend that likes my poetry too well, he can’t sell me to anybody else. He likes me too well. That’s right. Most of his friends don’t like me at all. [laughter] Isn’t that funny? It’s because he’s fanatical about it or he’s too zealous about it or to advocate.

So there it is. You've got to have a little poetry going on. And you've got to have something that you call lessons and there can be a little memorizing. But that's very dangerous too. You can make poetry poisonous to a class by having them memorize too much. They don't want it. They resent it. They eliminate it from their system. There's a certain amount of magic in it. That's what I wrote in answer to this *Newsweek* thing. I just said we only wish we knew – we all wish we knew – what rewards and what praises and what rewards would make people have this vision of poetry and art. And originality in science, too. I don't make much difference in how you venture into the unknown, give way to your originality, whatever that is.

When does one get that vision? I think one gets it somewhere around fifteen to twenty-five. I don't believe ... I'm always a little worried for fear at that age they're all busy just acquiring knowledge and getting a respect for more knowledge and more knowledge and more knowledge, that they never do anything with. There are too many people getting two or three degrees. They're between fifteen and twenty-five. So busy getting those degrees that they don't know what art is. They don't have any of that ... It's a curious thing how we come together in it. We have the same sort of material. We know the same things. But, this disgraceful business of the quiz. [Editor's note: Frost is referring to the rigging scandals associated with television game shows such as "Twenty-one." In October and November 1959, the House Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight held standing-room only hearings into the quiz show scandals.]. It's more of a disgrace to the American public that they make a hero of a fellow that knows a lot of things that have no connection with each other. No esprit in him. No esprit. No wit. No nothing. All of thought ... All of thought... And it begins very young. Let's see, a kind of a triumph of association – a feat of association. Let's put it that way. To put two things together that nobody would ever think of putting together but you. But everybody, after they heard it, wished they'd thought of putting it together first. [laughter] What you call felicity. Happy thought.

There's no happy thought in any of this quiz business at all. It's just answer questions, you see? Just direct knowledge. The deadliest sort of thing. If I'd been caught playing that trick on the public, do you know what I'd of said? I'd of said, "I'm very young. This was just a college prank. I was just making fun of the American public." That's what I would have said. And then they couldn't have done anything to me. [laughter] They couldn't have put him in trouble.

This is class to me, somewhat. What I wish I could make you feel, more than think, is how to ... Easy does it with this poetry. It's a sort of a ... I heard some rich men and foundation men, saying the other night, "We've got to have some poetry." You see, just like that. Well, we haven't got to. See? That's all wrong. You've got to like poetry. You haven't got to. See? It isn't like that at all. I said to them afterwards – they had spoke before me – and they said, "We've got to have some poetry to beat the Russians." See? [laughter] And I said, "I never thought of poetry that way." [laughter] I always thought it was something we got on top of things, you know. It's like reclining on top of success, national success. It belongs to a successful nation and all that, with all it's suffering too. And everything mixed – it's a very mixed thing. I said, "I think of poetry as reclining on top of things." Not sitting. Not standing. But reclining on top of them. And blowing smoke rings and giving away to childish moods. That was shocking. [laughter] [It] was meant to be. It's something like that. It's the flower, the flowering of things. So hard to get the right tone about it, the right attitude toward it. There's no "got to" about it.

That's as if you'd asked me that question. I've been asked it so many times by teachers. "How do you make them like poetry?" I say it's very hard to do it without making them hate it. Easy does it. Play with it. It's a play on top of things. And it's the loveliest thing of all – very lovely. But you can't say that too much. Can't overdo it.

Now, I'm going to read you some of my things. And, I'll tell you about that. The first poem I ever wrote was the first piece of anything I ever wrote. See, I never wrote any prose and I never had any English teacher. All I had was Latin and Greek and mathematics. The first thing I ever wrote was in the second year in high school at the age of about fifteen. Walking home one March day in Lawrence, Massachusetts – dusty, dirty day, March, but dusty, wind blowing – I began to make a long ballad. Out of what, you know, what did I ... I'd had Mother Goose and so on. Nothing. And the subject was something that had nothing to do with my Latin or Greek or anything else, my English ... I had a little Greek and Roman history and a little English history. No American history in those days. None. We hadn't been a country long enough, you know. [laughter] This poem was about [Hernando] Cortez and the terrible night when he was nearly wiped out in Mexico. And I must of been reading on my own in Prescott's "Conquest of Mexico" [Editor's note: "The History of the Conquest of Mexico" by William H. Prescott, first published in 1843] – probably, I don't remember that. I don't remember the book. That's what I wrote. And I wrote it all afternoon as I walked and after I got home, so that I was late at dinner at my grandmother's. And that got published and that's still to be seen. It's still around. That's the story of writing [it].

And I always thought our school magazines were better in those days when there was no English department than they are now. [laughter] You know why? Because there was no urgency about it. There was emulation among the young people. We had a magazine – a monthly magazine – that always had a short story in it, had an essay or two in it, had a poem or two in it, an editorial page, and it wasn't a newspaper. It had a little reporting of [the] debating union or something, or athletics, at the tail end. But it was a literary magazine with not a faculty advisor. They had nothing to do with us. We ran our own. I wouldn't say all in favor of that but it had the advantage of not having any urgency about it. It was entirely the free spirit, you know, let loose. I noticed a car that ... We were in a long procession of cars yesterday coming home, and we couldn't get by a great big truck or something like that. And I noticed we ... Finally somebody ventured and then somebody ... And I noticed a little car scooting out ahead and it looked just like a person that had got free, you know. I could just see expression of freedom in it. Free. We go. And it's something like that that has to come into the poetry. Free liking.

I have a little new book here of mine that's got no new poems in it. I brought it with me. It's probably all the poems that other people have told me were good, see? Maybe not, trust me. Where to begin? This little book was got out by my publishers for younger people, it says on it. [laughter] It says "Favorite Poems for Young People." What does that mean? Favorite? Whose favorites are they? [laughter] Favorite of young people – doesn't say that. It says "for young people." Teacher's favorites for young people. [laughter] Every word counts in what you write. "To" that ought to be, "of". I'll have to see to that, [in the] next edition.

Well, I'll begin in that just for the ... That earliest one I wrote isn't there. But I'd like to take the ... Look. They always begin with this one [poem]. Whatever book of mine they get out. They've got out a good many different kinds of things. This one is called "The Pasture." And they put it as the frontispiece of book after book of mine. It's in this book too, this big one.

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may);
I sha'n't be gone long. – You come too.

That's what they've called this book: *You Come Too*.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young,
It totters when she licks it with her tongue,

And then the same thing:

I sha'n't be gone long. – You come too.

That's the afterthought. Why don't you come along. It's really two different days in the pasture. One going after the calf. It hasn't the virtue of unity. There are two different days there.
[laughter]

That's the very country-like one. Then, here's a very city-like one. See, that's one of the questions before the house today is whether the future of poetry is to be urban. No more country poetry. [laughter] You've got to be born under Brooklyn Bridge. [laughter] I wasn't. But this is the city. I guess I don't have quite enough light.

I have been one acquainted with the night.

This is called "Acquainted with the Night."

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;

And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

See, that's the city kind. That wasn't intentional again, to be city or country. I never had any ... I've been utterly unprincipled there in that respect. No theories.

Then here's another little country one. This is ... I've had different names for this. Changed the name. But one of the things I called it was "The Favor." It was a favor from nature. Just a little tiny favor. If it were a city one, the favor might be the morning news. There might be something – your team might have won a game yesterday. You know, something like that. So that you feel very lucky for that day for an hour or two. Lucky day, lucky day! And this is the kind of thing that might happen to you out in the woods.

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

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

That's all – just that little favor from nature. A dash of snow in the face.

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

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

That's all. As simple as that. Somebody wants us ... We won't talk about spoiling these things. These fellas didn't know too much, and not quite enough. That's a state of mind. Somebody said, "The way a crow shook down on me the dust of snow from a hemlock tree." "Ohhhhhh. Hemlock." See, a critic said that. That's what killed Socrates. [laughter] But it wasn't a hemlock tree. You see, he didn't know enough. That's a weed – that hemlock. We have it in our meadows. [It's] poisonous. But it's not a tree at all. A hemlock tree is [a] beautiful evergreen tree, you know. But he didn't know that. He knew about Socrates when he said that reminded him of Socrates, I said then it reminds me of Aristotle and it reminds me of Athens and it

reminds me of Greece and it reminds me of Byzantium, then it reminds me of William Butler Yeats and so on. [laughter] I went on being reminded until he stopped me. [Frost hisses.] [laughter] Things like that.

Then I wanted to see what I got here. [looking through book] That's not what I want. I guess I better go to the other book. Oh, here's one I want to read you.

Now, this is right out of my country days, when I lived on a farm up here in Derry, New Hampshire, just above Lawrence. My practice at that age – I wrote this very young, around twenty. A little younger than that, I hadn't learned to mow with a scythe myself but I followed the mower and turned the grass behind him. And sometimes I did it long after he'd gone. He did it when it was wet in the morning and the dew, 'cause it mowed better that way. And then I came to open it up to the sun, dry it out. So that was my job for one, some summers. And this is like that.

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 bewildered 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.

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.’

Now you can see what I went through there. That’s putting it both ways:

And I must be, as he had been,—alone,

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

And then I change it to:

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

That is, the more we’re with people, the more we’re alone. And the more we’re alone, the more we’re with them. Both ways, it works both ways.

You know, as I went past that I thought of what I'd been saying to you before. That ... It says, if we can only do this with the flowers of poetry in classroom or at home, with a flower of poetry, it says

A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had bared

The mower in the dew had loved them thus,

We say that – “loved them as a poem”, you see.

By leaving them to flourish, not for us,

See? If you can only have it – the young people feel it – you weren't doing it to them, particularly.

Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him.
But from sheer morning gladness at the brim.

See, that's the way the teaching ought to be. If you could only carry this off, that you were so ... having such a nice time about it that everybody else couldn't help wishing they were like you. Not trying to like you, but wishing they got that, too. Wishing they saw what is it he sees. And what is that about poetry.

And I take a more recent one. No, I'll say another old one to you. Two, three little ones.

This is “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

A teaching experience with that – a teacher told me, somewhat recently, that she did what I used to do – I used to try on a class a short poem like that and see how many could repeat it on one hearing, on two hearings, on three hearings. Always a girl came first, when I had boys and girls together. And she said she tried that on a class with a very bright little girl who had it – that poem – all of that poem right off. She said. And she went home and said it to her mother. And her mother said, “My dear, I knew that poem before you were born.” She said, “Well, why didn’t you tell me?” [laughter] [Her] mother hadn’t been forcing anything on her.

This question of how to incite, induce ... the seductiveness of it all is something, you know, somewhere. Another one:

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 kept 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.

Then ... those are old ones. Another old one, about birches. I want to take advantage of your possibly knowing some of these anyway. That’ll help me a lot. But I’m going to break a little ground with you. Well, let’s take the new one first. This is about a dog. This is called – the name for it is “One More Brevity.” I don’t like that name too well. It’s about the shortness of a dog’s life, you know.

I opened the door so my last look

Before I went to bed, that is.

I opened the door so my last look
Should be taken outside a house and book.
Before I gave up seeing and slept,
I thought I would see how Sirius kept
His watchdog eye on what remained
To be gone into, if not explained.

About life.

But scarcely was my door ajar,
When, past the leg I thrust for bar,
Slipped in to be my problem guest,
Not a heavenly dog made manifest,
But an earthly dog of the carriage breed,
Who, having failed of the modern speed,
Now asked asylum, and I was stirred
To be the one so dog-preferred.

He dumped himself like a bag of bones.
He sighed himself a couple of groans,
And, head to tail, then firmly curled,
Like swearing off on the traffic world.

I set him water. I set him food.
He rolled an eye with gratitude,
Or merely manners, it may have been,
But never so much as lifted chin.

He was too tired.

His hard tail loudly smacked the floor,
As if beseeching me, "Please, no more;
I can't explain, tonight at least."
His brow was perceptibly trouble-creased.

So I spoke in tones of adoption, thus:
"Gusty, old boy, Dalmatian Gus,
You're right, there's nothing to discuss.
Don't try to tell me what's on your mind,
The sorrow of having been left behind
Or the sorrow of having run away.
All that can wait for the light of day.
Meanwhile feel obligation-free;
Nobody has to confide in me."

See, though I once taught psychology ... [laughter] Made a [inaudible] [Takes drink of water and sets glass down]

Nobody has to confide in me.

'Twas too one-sided a dialogue,
And I wasn't sure I was talking Dog.
I gave up, baffled, but all the same,
In fancy, I ratified his name;
Gusty, Dalmatian Gus, that is,
And started shaping my life to his,
Sharing his miles of exercise
And finding him in his right supplies.

Next morning the minute I was about,
He was at the door to be let out.
With an air that said, "I have paid my call.
You mustn't feel hurt if now I'm all
For getting back somewhere, or further on."
I opened the door, and he was gone.
I was to taste in little the grief
That comes of dogs' lives being so brief.
Only a fraction of ours, at most,
He might have been the dream of a ghost,
In spite of the way his tail had smacked
My floor, so hard and matter-of-fact.

And things have been going so strangely since,
I wouldn't be too hard to convince,
I might almost claim he was Sirius.
The star itself, heaven's brightest star,
Think of presuming to call him Gus!
Not a meteorite but an avatar,
Who had made this overnight descent
To show by deeds he didn't resent
My having depended on him so long,
And yet done nothing about it in song.

A symbol was all he could hope to convey,
An intimation, a shot of ray,
A meaning I was supposed to seek,
And finding, wasn't supposed to speak.

That's a new one. Rather new. Not in the book. Then an old one, like "Mending Wall." I noticed an article in one of these magazines the other day, saying, say goodbye to the [stone] walls, you won't see 'em much longer. You know what they're doing with them? They're building them

into the walls of houses, chopping them up to make road material, I suppose. They're disappearing, I admit, they won't be any more. But look your last at the walls. But I used to ... I go back far enough to help build the walls. Not really make them, but restore them year by year. We used to restore them. Nobody restores them anymore; they put a barbed wire along, above them, and they'll let it go at that. But the restoration of [stone] walls is only done by men that want to ... antiques-, sort of, minded people. Wall Street – that kind of people, that can afford to have a good wall for no purpose at all. But this is when they were [a] regular part of the business.

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. But 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 neighbor 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 work.
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 neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbors? 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 offense.
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
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 neighbors."

Then, see if I've got time. How much of a longish one I might do for you. Now you see, there are lots of little poems like this – I'm always looking for them. I was when I was teaching. I always like a little tiny poem that I could say directly to the young people and see how many could give it to me right back. Shorter than that one I was speaking of. I wouldn't expect what that girl did – get a poem as long as that [on] one hearing. But, some people get one like this. This is not mine, [I] suppose.

Three ducks on a pond,
A grass bank beyond,
Blue sky of spring,
White clouds on the wing;
What a little thing
To remember with tears–
To remember for years.

You know, I could get that all right at one hearing, I think.

Three ducks on a pond,
Grass bank beyond,
White clouds on the wing,
Blue sky of spring;

I guess I turned that line [around].

Blue sky of spring,
What a little thing
To remember for years–
To remember with tears!

See, there are many strewn over literature like that, from Shakespeare and all the way down. That come into your head. Take a ... sometimes it's a religious thing. A little bit of a – just a stanza or two stanzas. See the difference in tone, utterly different tone from mine. Not like mine at all. That isn't like mine. This isn't like mine.

Strong is the lion—like a coal
His eye-balls—like a bastion's mole
His breast against the foes:
Strong, the gier-eagle on his sail,

Strong against tide, th' enormous whale
Emerges as he goes.

And then, the next stanza changes its tune wonderfully:

But stronger still, in earth and air,
And in the sea, the man of pray'r;
And far beneath the tide;
And in the seat to faith assign'd,
Where ask is have, where seek is find,
Where knock is open wide.

That's two stanzas of a great long poem [Editor's note: "A Song to David" by Christopher Smart], but just stay with you. You see how very religious it is, by an 18th century poet. If it were me teaching, I'd always be thinking of little scraps, you know, what you call "catchy". Even the deepest of them, and the greatest of them, have to be "catchy" [in] some way. Just same as ... They never are that way. Oh, I suppose they are. Prose, too. Sometimes in prose. I find myself remembering something in prose. This is a description of poetry. Probably the time of Elizabeth [Editor's note: Queen Elizabeth I] way back there. The other Elizabeth. The earlier Elizabeth. It says,

Poetry is the honey of all flowers,

See, that means all the flowers, all the way from clover to buckwheat. Low honey, cheap honey, fine honey, all kinds.

Poetry is the honey of all flowers,

The essence of all the science says, it says, it summarizes all the sciences.

The marrow of wit ...

That's a funny one. Old fashioned; you just have to think about that. And finally it says,

... and the very phrase of angels.

[Editor's note: "Poetry is the honey of all flowers, the quintessence of all sciences, the marrow of wit, and the very phrase of angels." 1592, Thomas Nashe, Pierce Penniless, His Supplication to the Devil, 'An Invective Against Enemies of Poetry']

Not "phrases," but "the phrase of angels." The angelic way of making phrase. That's probably Sir Philip Sidney. But that's not inverse at all. It stuck in my memory like that.

Sometimes somebody says something like that in politics. Something you can't help remembering, they're worded so well. Good slogan, sort of slogan-like things. I think that's the part of anybody that wants to disseminate poetry at all is to have these little things, you know,

mixed in his speech almost. Even the Mother Goose. The oddness of Mother Goose, and the queerness of nonsense. Poetry runs off into a kind of intentional, half-intentional nonsense.

There was a man and he had naught,

You see. Now the logic is – there was a man and he had naught, so the robbers came to rob him. See, they would, because he had nothing.

He climbed up to the chimney top.
And then they thought they had him.

But why they wanted him, I don't know. See all that you ask. What is the sense of all this?

He climbed up to the chimney top.
And then they thought they had him.
But he climbed down on the other side,
And so they couldn't find him;
He ran fourteen miles in fifteen days,
And never looked behind him.

That's a great record, you see, to be able to run fourteen miles in fifteen days. [laughter] A mile and one fifteenth a day. That right? See, it's very mathematical.

Then this kind of thing:

I have been treading on leaves all day until I am autumn-tired.
God knows all the color and form of leaves I have trodden on and mired.
Perhaps I have put forth too much strength and been too fierce from fear.
I have safely trodden underfoot the leaves of another year.

All summer long they were overhead, more lifted up than I.
To come to their final place in earth they had to pass me by.
All summer long I thought I heard them threatening under their breath.
And when they came it seemed with a will to carry me with them to death.

They spoke to the fugitive in my heart as if it were leaf to leaf.
They tapped at my eyelids and touched my lips with an invitation to grief.
But it was no reason I had to go because they had to go.
Now up, my knee, and keep on top of another year of snow.

Then here's a little tiny one that... of the kind I mean. This is one of mine.

She always had to burn a light
Beside her attic bed at night.
It gave bad dreams and troubled sleep,
But helped the Lord her soul to keep.

Good gloom on her was thrown away.
'Tis on me by night or day,
Who have, as I foresee, ahead
The darkest of it still to dread.

See, that's very personal. But the amusing one, so many night lights I see as I walk. And I think of the people that are, of that kind. Usually high up in the house.

She always had to burn her light
Beside her attic bed at night
It gave bad dreams and troubled sleep,
But helped the Lord her soul to keep.
Good gloom on her was thrown away.

No use to her. She didn't like gloom.

It is on me by night or day,
Who have, as I foresee, ahead
The darkest of it still to dread.

See, that kind of play on words. Then here's one for those that know what a rake is, or a hoe. I don't know if you're all city-bred. I guess those get into the city even, under Brooklyn Bridge. Might be. This is "The Objection to Being Stepped On."

At the end of the row
I stepped on the toe
Of an unemployed hoe.
It rose in offense
And struck me a blow
In the seat of my sense. [laughter]
It wasn't to blame
But I called it a name.
And I must say it dealt
Me a blow that I felt
Like malice prepense.
You may call me a fool,
But was there a rule
The weapon should be
Turned into a tool?
And what do we see?
The first tool I step on
Turned into a weapon.

See, that's logic. Then... another like that. One of the things I think you people ought to enjoy with a poem is the little couplets, the way the little pairs of words. In that long one that I said to you:

It was too one-sided a dialogue,

See, “dialogue”...

And I wasn't sure I was talking Dog.

Now that couplet stands by itself almost in my own estimation. See, just to have that lucky nice turn like that. Luck in [inaudible]. The luck of the rhyme. The luck of the pairing rhyme. Now this, sometimes you suspect that the rhymes and the couplet are governing the poem too much. It just gets silly. It's flowers and bowers and hours and showers and [mumbles through more rhymes]. [laughter] And no point to it. But when you take a little couplet like this:

We dance round in a ring and suppose,

See, this is going to be just two lines.

We dance round in a ring and suppose,

That's us.

But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

“Knows” and “suppose,” you see. The secret's always there. When you print that, you print the secret with a capital “S”. It's the big secret.

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

Then, rather ... One I said is a prayer. At the end of something in New York the other day, somebody ought to, somebody ought to say a prayer I thought there. I didn't see any clergymen around. So I thought I ought to say one. So I said,

Forgive ...

See, we'd had a long evening of argument, talk, and noise and everything. I said:

Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee
And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me.

[laughter]

This one is not just a couplet but it has couplets all the way through it. It's called “Departmental”. It's about an ant. A-N-T. On a tablecloth, where I sat of an evening. There was a moth that had fallen from the light. And an ant went by it, too. Congestion, traffic. [laughter] The country life.

An ant on the tablecloth
Ran into a dormant moth
Of many times his size.
He showed not the least surprise.
His business wasn't with such.
He gave it scarcely a touch,
And was off on his duty run.
But if he encountered one
Of the hive's...

I'm emphasizing the rhymes.

But if he encountered one
Of the hive's enquiry squad
Whose work is to find out God
And the nature of time and space,
He would put him onto the case.
Ants are a curious race;
One crossing with hurried tread
The body of one of their dead
Isn't given a moment's arrest-
Seems not even impressed.
But he no doubt reports to any
With whom he crosses antennae,
And they no doubt report
To the higher-up at court.
Then word goes forth in Formic:

That's that acid language you know that we study about in psychology.

Then word goes forth in Formic:
"Death's come to Jerry McCormic,
Our selfless forager Jerry.

See, that's why I called him "Jerry." So I could rhyme it next, you see.

Our selfless forager Jerry.

That's Socialism, you know. We'll all be selfless foragers. Everybody will be looking out for Number 2 instead of Number 1. We coax in Number 2 to eat it, you know. Number 2 doesn't want it. But we're coaxing 2 because you're thinking of him more than you are of yourself. And you don't know what he really wants anyway, but you finally, if he's a baby, you just tip his head back and force his mouth open, and make him drink it. That's what you call Socialism.
[laughter]

Our selfless forager Jerry.
Will the special Janizary
Whose office it is to bury
The dead of the commissary
Go bring him home to his people.
Lay him in state on a sepal.
Wrap him for shroud in a petal.
Embalm him with ichor of nettle.
This is the word of your Queen.”
And presently on the scene
Appears a solemn mortician;
And taking formal position,
With feelers calmly atwiddle,
Seizes the dead by the middle,
And heaving him high in air,
Carries him out of there.
No one stands round to stare.
It is nobody else’s affair
It couldn’t be called ungentle
But how thoroughly departmental.

[laughter]

Those are that kind. I ought to ... I didn’t ask if you had to go to classes right away. Do you? It’s about time to stop? [Consults with someone about time remaining] How many minutes? Two minutes? Alright.

I’ve often noticed that if I visit – I haven’t been to schools very much, lately – but I used to notice when I first read to schools that they were very enthusiastic about my going on because they didn’t want to go to the next class. [laughter]

[I] don’t want to trade on that. I think that’s unmanly. Now, let’s see what else I have. This is the kind of thing I want people to like most, you know. Those little ones like that little one I said about the night light and so on. Those are the ones that I think ... The little rhymes and, close together, and short line. I like them. That’s my niche ... (I’m not going to tip that over.) Haven’t tipped it over so far.

This one’s called – I’m going to say it to you twice, just to look at. Just the rhyming and the rhyme scheme for the fun of it. It’s a serious, serious one. But you see what anyone’s doing with a poem. What I set my heart on, anyway with it. It’s called “Away!” See the word “away” is the title of it. “Away!”

Now I out walking
The world desert,
And my shoe and my stocking
Do me no hurt.

You can see that's out of a life of walking, where I've had lots of trouble with shoes and stockings. But this time it doesn't.

Now I out walking
The world desert,
And my shoe and my stocking
Do me no hurt.

I leave behind
Good friends in town.
Let them get well-wined
And go lie down.

Don't think I leave
For the outer dark
Like Adam and Eve
Put out of the Park.

Forget the myth.
There is no one I
Am put out with
Or put out by.

Unless I'm wrong
I but obey
The urge of a song:
I'm – bound – away!

You know that song? [sings] "I'm bound away."

And I may return
If dissatisfied
With what I learn
From having died.

See, I tempted to emphasize the rhymes for you. That's all of it. Now say it again. You look at it again for me, please me.

Now I out walking
The world desert,
And my shoe and my stocking
Do me no hurt.

That's a little suspicious, right away, you see. This is a different kind of walk. I didn't mean to anyone to know, until I got to the end.

Now I out walking
The world desert,
And my shoe and my stocking
Do me no hurt.

I leave behind
Good friends in town.
Let them get well-wined
And go lie down.

Don't think I leave
For the outer dark
Like Adam and Eve
Put out of the Park.

Forget the myth.
There is no one I
Am put out with
Or put out by.

Unless I'm wrong
I but obey
The urge of a song:
I'm – bound – away!

And I may return
If dissatisfied
With what I learn
From having died.

See, it's all very rhyme-y and very close together. Short lines and all. That's one I wish you'd remember.

Shall I say another of the mocking kind? This one's a little meaner. It's got political things in it. [laughter] And I tell them, you know, if you were to [have] looked at my books or had to look at it, you'd see what I couldn't possibly have meant. Well, you can't possibly see what I mean, but I've been telling [inaudible] lately. They ask me, "How you going to vote? Who are you voting for? Who are you getting ready to vote for?" I said, "If you read my complete works, you can probably tell yourselves." See, that's [inaudible] by my complete works. You find out just who I'm going to vote for. I'm very decided [about] politician. I tell them – well, I won't go into that. This shows some of my prejudices.

A speck ...

It's about another insect.

A speck that would have been beneath my sight
On any but a paper sheet so white
Set off across what I had written there.
And I had idly poised my pen in air
To stop it with a period of ink
When something strange about it made me think,
This was no dust speck by my breathing blown,
But unmistakably a living mite
With inclinations it could call its own.
It paused as with suspicion of my pen,
And then came racing wildly on again
To where my manuscript was not yet dry;
And paused again and either drank or smelt—
Plainly with an intelligence I dealt.
It seemed too tiny to have room for feet,
Yet must have had a set of them complete
To express how much it didn't want to die.
It ran with terror and with cunning crept.
It faltered: I could see it hesitate;
Then in the middle of the open sheet
Cower down in desperation to accept
Whatever I accorded it of fate.
I have none of the tenderer-than-thou
Collectivistic regimenting love
With which the modern world is being swept.
But this poor microscopic item now!
Since it was nothing I knew evil of
I let it lie there till I hope it slept.

I have a mind myself and recognize
Mind when I meet with it in any guise
No one can know how glad I am to find
On any sheet the least display of mind.

See, that's from reading theme papers. [laughter] But it's from deeper things than that. If you know what I mean by this "being swept", you know, the world. I have none of the holier than, "tenderer than thou, collectivistic regimenting love." See, that's what they're talking to us. Regimenting love – all got to love each other.

All right. Goodbye. I've really talked more like teaching than I often do. That's your fault. Bring me to a Teachers College. Goodbye. [Applause]

[recording abruptly stops during applause and restarts mid-sentence]

... got out in front of people of, young people. I'm going to leave it to the library here so you can all consult it. It isn't very heavy to consult, just ... [laughter, applause]

I've been out at Urbana, Illinois. That's the state university. I visited a fraternity house. They have them there. They're lost, sort of, in the big place. But they're there, just the same as they are... At Amherst, where I'm on the – a regular member of the faculty – it's the whole thing. It's the way they all live, in fraternity houses; just a way of being taken care of. It has something of the old quality of pride of the fraternity you belong to, you know. The right one, and all that. But it isn't so much that.

But I went into this fraternity house, and luckily there was another teacher there. They're all boys, except one. And he was a Greek, a Greek from some – just one generation American. But a very, very cultivated man who'd been in the Greek language from childhood and had read the Odyssey and all that in the original. And he was just as malicious toward, you know, crudity as I could be. And I started the row. I said, "Let's look your house over." [It was a] handsome house. And I said, "Not a book in it." I shouted, after I'd looked room to room. "Well, we got a library in here." I said, "That makes it worse – A library, not a book in it." And this Greek and I had a fine time making fun of them.

And I ought to follow that up. But you got to remember, you got to remember how, you know, how to ... that we're here, teaching things. I often say, "I can't teach in a town where there isn't a good book store." See, I don't care if you don't buy two books a year, but you got to be putting ... And that's what I set up in Plymouth, New Hampshire. I put away these textbooks and I made them all buy some books that I had no right to make them buy. The rules of the state were against it. But I got some Everyman's Library that is like the Modern Library now. It covers a whole lot. And had a lot of things about education, too. Very ancient ones, you know. Way back to Plato. And I made them get – before I got through with them [clears throat] and they had to have about ten books. [It was] against the law – State of New Hampshire. But you've got to have books. Remember that, too. That we don't want to force that, I wouldn't want to hurry about it. But, just what are we in this for? What's the difference between educated and uneducated? Just the difference in print, using print. That's really the difference. How to get out [something] of books. Not be made a fool of by books. There's such a thing as book-fooled. Everybody knows that, too. But it has something to do with using books. Football, even. Read the rules.

You've got to know how to read. And you ... I've lived in two or three houses – sabbatically – been in other people's houses when I stayed one year at a college. And I've been astonished in some of them to find not a book, except one on the parlor table, for Christmas or something. Not a book. And I'd hate to tell where I saw them. And to see the other extreme, there was an old professor of Latin at Michigan named D'Ooge [Editor's note: Benjamin L. D'Ooge], who spread textbooks all over this United States, and made quite a fortune, he did, out of Latin textbooks, in the day of Latin. And in that house – I stayed in it a year – in that house every wall was, in every room in the house was solid with books. And then the joker in it – I'll tell you one thing more – and every one had had its punctuation corrected. [laughter]

[Applause]