

Birches

by Robert Lee Frost

1. (a) With reference to the poem, 'Birches', answer why was swinging the best sport for the young boy? How does the poet attempt to escape from the routine life? Why is this escape so necessary for him?

Answer: The poet narrates an occasion when he comes across the birches as an adult and he reminisces about the times when he was a young boy and he could play around the trees and swing on them. The boy lived in the country far away from the towns and cities. He didn't have the option of learning to play baseball. Swinging on the trees was the best form of play for him because he didn't need anyone for the company and could play alone. There was no limit of weather and seasons in this game because the trees were all the same in the winter as well as in the summer. On recollecting the days of his childhood, the poet also expresses a desire to escape from the trials and complexities of adult life. He wishes he could swing on a birch tree and fly away out of this world where he can have his share of peace. He believes that escape would avail him some peace and relaxation. Nevertheless, he has no plans to stay away from the earth forever. It is only meant to be a break from regular life. The poet wonders if it were possible for him to climb up tree heavenwards and peek into heaven, relishing the comfort and peace. He would climb further and further till it becomes unbearable for the tree and its branch would stoop down bringing the poet back to the ground. This escape is essential for the poet because he is wearied of his daily routine. An escape to heaven and returning back would be the perfect vacation for his soul and his tiresome mind.

(b) Does the poet wish to go away from the Earth permanently? Why?

Answer: The poet comes across the birches that have drooping branches, and he recollects his childhood days when he swung on the trees as a boy. In the present, the poet wonders if in his present life he could swing on the trees. He wishes he could swing on the birch tree and fly away out of this world and into the heavens. He mentions how it seems to him to be an escape from routine life and the tribulations and trials of adult life. He wishes he could go run away from Earth and gain a little peace. But he doesn't want this excursion to be permanent. He has no intention to be away from the Earth forever. He believes that there is no other place where love may flourish among humans and one has to be on Earth in order to experience love. Love is the basic necessity of every human soul and it is only here that one feels and cherishes love. So, though the poet wishes of flying away from the Earth, it is only meant to be temporary. He wants an arrangement where he can go away for some time, refresh his mind and soul and then return back to Earth to continue his usual life.

(c) What childhood memories does the poet recollect in the narration of the poem?

Answer: The poem is mostly a reminiscence for the narrator. The poet himself is the narrator of the poem, and he mentions the past years when boys would swing on birches and enjoy themselves. The poet had visited the birches as an adult where the birches were stooping low due to the snowfall in the morning. But the poet does not relate the drooping of the tree to the heavy snowfall; rather he suggests that the birches have been dragged down by young boys who were swinging on them sometime back. The poet remembers how he used to swing on the birches as a boy. He says that one by one he would subdue all the trees owned by his father. He was removing their stiffness from them and made them limp. The scene of him carefully climbing up the trees and then swinging is etched in his memories with complete detail, and he remembers every bit of those adventures that he had in his childhood. As he recollects and narrates the exciting days of his life, he also expresses a strong desire to swing on those trees as an adult. But being an adult his heart is not satisfied with mere swinging from the birch to the ground. He wants to jump up to the heavens and return back to the Earth

2. (a) Referring to the poem 'Birches,' relate the nostalgia one experiences on revisiting places where childhood was spent.

Answer: Each poem of Robert Frost exhibits a different aspect of his poetic writing style—some are long narratives whereas some are more like a short story than to be a poem and some others deal with his sharp sense of satire and fictional genius. His poems, however, have a common theme with a sentimental touch of day-to-day activity, rural England, and unveiling the real struggles of real people. In "Birches," Frost's use of the childhood game of swinging on birches is drawing the reader to the nostalgia of childhood.

While writing this poem, Frost seems to be highly influenced by his childhood memories of swinging on the birches, which used to be a popular game for children in rural England during those days. Though it is related to nostalgic memories of childhood, Frost is repentant as he realizes that he cannot enjoy the swinging on birches as it doesn't provide him peace of mind. Because he is an adult, who has a lot of responsibilities to fulfil he cannot leave them behind and swing towards heaven by swinging like a boy. The narrator under pressure due to a stressed life and with loads of responsibilities is unable to enjoy the view of a boy swinging on the birches.

The use of birches and swinging is quite symbolic as it suggests a common man's wish to escape the materialistic world and reach up to the heights of imagination. The conflict between desire and responsibility is also expressed in "The Sound of Trees," there to the narrator finds a need to escape the "roots" of responsibility in the persistent swaying of the trees outside his house.

There is a brilliant use of blank verse with an emphasis on the "sound of sense" which to

makes the nostalgia clearer in the following lines:

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

Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away..."

(b) Why does an adult person long for the simple actions and experiences of childhood?

Answer: The poem clearly carves out the subtle difference between childhood problems and everlasting adult responsibilities. As it is easy to do away with childhood problems, one cannot escape the responsibility of adulthood. The poet expresses that as a child, it is easier to conquer each problem, and life appears under one's own control. But for an adult, it is not that easy. A simple swinging can bring a lot of smiles and rejoice on a child's face but the same activity may not even get space in the daily life of an adult, as he is loaded with a stressful life full of responsibilities. Here the poet is simply asserting that the problems of childhood are so minor that they are easy to handle. The second stanza symbolizes that children are fearless, that they can make their way to the height of their problems and bring them down, without a care at all. Frost highlights the narrator's regret that he can no longer find this peace of mind from swinging on birches. Because he is an adult, he is unable to leave his responsibilities behind and climb towards heaven until he can start afresh on the earth.

As described above, the poet has presented complex issues of adulthood in contrast to that of childhood. He has used several literary devices and writing styles to make it more suggestive. The metaphors of cobwebs and twigs symbolize the hard times in life which make life quite dull stereotype and stressful at times. The poet is in a fix at this point of life, unable to decide what to do and where to go. He often misses the sweet little innocent joys of childhood and its similar problems which used to be sorted out easily. The poet is at such a point of life where he has a lot of hardships. He longs to go back to his childhood when life was extremely easy.

(c) Is the poet's wish to escape temporarily from routine adult life, a strange one? Explain.

Answer: Yes, absolutely the poet's wish to escape to heaven by swinging on the birches is comparative to his temporary escape from routine adult life. The poet of this poem has a well-developed personality with a cool minded view towards life. He is clear about the realities of life, which may be bitter, but are true. These realities do have problems that include living a monotonous life. But these problems and issues are the essences of life, or in the words of the poet, they are one's responsibility, from which one can't run away but should be completed. The poet says that the swinging of a boy is quite different from that of a man. A boy can swing in and do away with all his problems. But a man cannot do so, as he

is stressed and coiled badly in the responsibilities of life. He may escape but only temporarily.

The poet wishes to escape temporarily as he likes planet Earth, which is full of beautiful things. He would like to move away from Earth albeit temporarily.

One of the reasons of the poet's departure is due to the mundane life that he leads full of various problems and no breathing room for a break. It is here the poet decides to swing to heaven by the Birches, just for a change. He wants to be rejuvenated and come back on Earth to enjoy the happiness present in his surroundings and to fulfil the responsibilities, which he beholds as an adult on earth. The poet wishes to escape as a boy climbing towards heaven, but at the same time, wants to return back to Earth. The poem creates a wonderful world of freedom and imagination, which is appealing and relieving from adult life. The narrator doesn't want to run away from the "Truth", that is, his responsibilities on Earth. He only desires for a temporary escape.

Long Questions and Answers

1. Frost uses many different literary devices in his poetry. Identify two literary devices that Frost had used in the poem 'Birches'.

Answer: Literary devices are used to connect with the reader and help us to see and feel the context. Action, love, suspense, fear, and hate are all incorporated when literary devices are used. These devices draw the reader in, paint a picture, heighten the senses, and tug at us emotionally.

In the poem 'Birches' the metaphor used could be, "swinging on birch trees", this implies that - life should be lived in a way that is free and simple as a child would live life. Swinging on birches alludes to him of the idea to go towards heaven, but the speaker doesn't literally want to go to heaven (or die), as he says, "May no fate willfully misunderstand me". The metaphor is used to show that in order to live a good life; one must maintain a balance between reality and fantasy.

In the poem Birches by Robert Frost. Frost portrays the images of a child growing to adulthood through the symbolism of ageing birch trees. Through these images, readers are able to see the reality of the real world compared to their carefree childhood. Swinging on the birches is symbolic of escaping life, and the ice in the poem symbolizes the hardships or unpleasant realities of life that can often permanently bring us down like the birch tree permanently bent to the ground. Showing that ice or hardship in life can cause permanent damage; whereas, swinging on birches, or escaping by having carefree fun does not cause permanent damage.

The trees in "Birches" represent much more than something the little boy swings on. These trees represent the speaker's yearning for the freedom that the child has while swinging on those trees. Even if the man could get into the tree and manage to swing down as the boy does in his mind, he would not be able to enjoy it and feel the freedom that the child has.

2. In the poem 'Birches', why the speaker/ poet rues that he is now a grownup man? How is man's natural world represented?

Answer: In the poem 'Birches', the trees represent much more than something the little boy swings on. These trees represent the speaker's yearning for the freedom that the child has while swinging on those trees. As an older man, and more reflective, he sees the practice of swinging in more philosophical terms. He wants to "get away from the earth for a while, but then he wants to come back and repeat the process. This idea of getting away could be something as simple (and abstract) as daydreaming or living in one's imagination.

As an adult, the speaker longs to swing on birches again. He says how swinging on the birches is a temporary escape from the earth.

This memory is a release for the speaker, a return to days of youthful freedom and flights of fancy. For, when the speaker relates problems connected to life as an adult, he continues to employ this imagery.

The real-life in the real world is too hard to live and confusions and uncertainties trouble a lot, the very reason for somebody who would like to escape, deep down in a place of serenity.

The poetry often deals with deep human emotions or philosophical thoughts. In the poem 'Birches' the swing on the trees represents leaving Earth and coming back could imply living multiple lives, the abstract escape the speaker is dreaming of here might be as simple as a temporary escape from his daily routine and hardships.

The theme is childhood is not forever, you eventually have to grow and discover reality.