

'Out, Out -'

Robert Frost

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside him in her apron
To tell them 'Supper.' At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. 'Don't let him cut my hand off—
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

VOCABULARY

Buzz saw - a circular machine saw that spins fast

Ether - a type of anaesthetic, used to knock out patients

Vermont - a northern state of the USA

STORY/SUMMARY

Scene in a yard of a house, a boy uses machinery to cut wood with a buzz saw (on a table instead of hand held, mechanical). He has been working hard for a long time and the sister eventually tells him to come inside for supper. This breaks his concentration, perhaps showing his excitement or emphasising his fatigue, in which time the saw deeply cuts through his hand. He is in shock and panics about the idea of losing his hand. The doctor arrives and puts him under anesthetic. He passes away and everyone else continues with their lives.

SPEAKER/VOICE

The speaker is a third person omniscient narrator, who tells the story impartially, although he adds a somewhat tragic tone to the story.

FORM/STRUCTURE

One single stanza / Dramatic form - sense of continuation to the scene, compacted/dense, compression of events and detail - setting/mood/tone, climactic moment and resolution, intense atmosphere - amplifies the shock of the story/outcome, everything happens so quickly (mirrors shock of characters), could represent a continuation of life, which ends at the stanza's close.

Lots of dashes - caesura, particularly at the end of lines - suspenseful 'don't let him cut my hand off -' driving towards climactic moment, breath or pause, anticipation / lack of fluid narrative / emulates the motion of cutting wood.

'Little-less-nothing!-' exclamatory sentence, disrupted rhythm, imitating the boy's last heartbeat, exclamation mark indicates perhaps the last brief moment of life, or the shock at his departure, expression of intense emotion.

Past tense - sense of inevitability, impossibility of changing the outcome of the situation, narrative style - feels like a story, enhancing the drama of the moment.

Dialogue - allows for multiple voices, different perspectives, the speaker becomes a kind of narrator.

Emulates the narrative style of a fairytale or folktale 'Sweet-scented stuff'- simplistic language, an almost unemotional and whimsical narrator - typical of fairytales, which depict violent events with an impersonal, sometimes even silly/irreverent tone - creates a sense of uncanniness and horror - our response is different from how we would expect the characters to react.

LANGUAGE

- **Repetition** > 'snarled', 'rattled' - personification of the saw.
- **Bathos** > anticlimactic ending, where the characters go on with their lives, shocking and seemingly insensitive but also practical and arguably realistic/sensible.
- **Foreshadowing** > 'He was old enough to know' this foreshadows the removal of his hand and from there, his death, since he begins to realise the seriousness of the situation.
- **Antithesis** > 'Sweet-scented stuff' this seemingly nice, alliterative phrase is contrasted with the harshness of the 'buzz saw', despite the similarities of the sibilant 's' sounds.
- **Irony** > 'Neither refused the meeting' though the boy did not want the situation to happen, his hand did not 'refuse' to be cut by the saw; in reality his reactions were not quick enough to prevent it.
- **Personification** > 'As if to prove saws knew' the saw is continually personified throughout the poem as a vicious, crude animal, as if it were alive.
- **Pun** > 'Then the boy saw all' using the specific word 'saw' relates to the machine that caused his pain in the first place; it crudely foreshadows what is to come.
- **Pastoral Imagery** > 'Five mountain ranges' 'sunset' 'breeze' juxtaposed with the unsettling nature of the narrative.
- **Plosive alliteration** > 'dust and dropped' violent nature of the monotonous lumbar job; too harsh for a child to do.

- **Dialogue** > “Don’t let him cut my hand off” the boy is one of the only characters gifted with a voice, despite the inevitability and lack of power to change his outcome from his situation. The other characters, most likely to be adults, are more passive and (other than the sister) without a voice, as if to show a laissez-faire approach.

ATTITUDES

- **The boy is too young to be doing this type of work;** this puts blame onto the adults who allowed this to happen, especially considering how long he was expected to endure the working days and the type of complex, dangerous machinery used.
- The tragic ending demonstrates that **the parents have not learnt from the situation** and that it is likely to continue. Their lack of emotion concerning the aftermath of the situation is disturbingly potent in order to paint them in a darker light, encouraging the reader to dislike these unnamed characters.
- Despite his protests against it, the boy is put under anesthetic in order to remove his hand which leads to his death for which he is unaware. **It seems to be a messily dealt with situation that lacks sympathy,** and the fact that the boy has no say in the matter parallels the fact that he had no say in doing the job in the first place. He is treated like a man to their benefit (where the work is concerned), but like a boy in other cases.

CONTEXT

- The **title** is from Macbeth, where Macbeth states ‘Out, out, brief candle...’ referring to the fragility of existence, extinguishing life, a well known metaphor in Western society.
- **Pastoral genre** > depicts traditional idyllic settings in the countryside, where workers are practical and the pace of life is slower than cities. The poem contains a lot of pastoral imagery: ‘five mountain ranges’ ‘sweet-scented stuff’, ‘sunset far into Vermont’ > seems like it’s going to be a pastoral, happy poem but the tragic ending creates a shock or disruption of our expectations, it is foreshadowed by the ‘buzz saw’, which is personified in a menacing way and has repeated imagery associated with violence and threat.

- First published in the collection *Mountain Interval* (**1916**).
- Commemorates Frost's friend Raymond Fitzgerald, who died aged 16 in 1910 from a similar incident.

CRITICS

Harold bloom called it '**one of Frost's most respected poems**', although he also acknowledged that it is not as popular or well written about as some of his more famous writings.

THEMES

Fate > 'he must have given the hand' suggests his lack of control over the situation, equally disturbing is the ending 'turned to their affairs', the others can do nothing so they go back to their daily lives.

Nature vs machinery

Childhood / innocence

Responsibility

Death

Adulthood / maturity

Instinct