

'Out, Out' - Robert Frost, 1874 - 1963

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 them 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.

'Out, Out' – Robert Frost

The title of this poem is taken from 'Macbeth'. Frost invites the reader to make an intertextual comparison between this poem and what Macbeth feels about his wife's death. The death of the boy in the poem is given a heroic status through the link to LM. In this way, Frost seems to be saying that the loss of ordinary lives is just as tragic as the loss of high-status ones.

She should have died hereafter.
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. **Out, out, brief candle!**
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

1. How is the saw personified? What is the effect of this?
2. How does Frost present the innocence and passivity of the boy?
3. How could the poem be described a tragic?
4. Look carefully at the last line of the poem. How does this compare to Macbeth's view? Why is it so blunt and detached?
5. Frost seems to be arguing that we have a disposable or even throwaway view of life. To what extent is that true here?

'Miss Gee' – WH Auden

Let me tell you a little story
About Miss Edith Gee;
She lived in Clevedon Terrace
At number 83.

She'd a slight squint in her left eye,
Her lips they were thin and small,
She had narrow sloping shoulders
And she had no bust at all.

She'd a velvet hat with trimmings,
And a dark grey serge costume;
She lived in Clevedon Terrace
In a small bed-sitting room.

She'd a purple mac for wet days,
A green umbrella too to take,
She'd a bicycle with shopping basket
And a harsh back-pedal break.

The Church of Saint Aloysius
Was not so very far;
She did a lot of knitting,
Knitting for the Church Bazaar.

Miss Gee looked up at the starlight
And said, 'Does anyone care
That I live on Clevedon Terrace
On one hundred pounds a year?'

She dreamed a dream one evening
That she was the Queen of France
And the Vicar of Saint Aloysius
Asked Her Majesty to dance.

But a storm blew down the palace,
She was biking through a field of corn,
And a bull with the face of the Vicar
Was charging with lowered horn.

She could feel his hot breath behind her,
He was going to overtake;
And the bicycle went slower and slower
Because of that back-pedal break.

Summer made the trees a picture,
Winter made them a wreck;
She bicycled to the evening service
With her clothes buttoned up to her neck.

She passed by the loving couples,
She turned her head away;
She passed by the loving couples,
And they didn't ask her to stay.

Miss Gee sat in the side-aisle,
She heard the organ play;
And the choir sang so sweetly
At the ending of the day,

Miss Gee knelt down in the side-aisle,
She knelt down on her knees;
'Lead me not into temptation
But make me a good girl, please.'

The days and nights went by her
Like waves round a Cornish wreck;
She bicycled down to the doctor
With her clothes buttoned up to her neck.

She bicycled down to the doctor,
And rang the surgery bell;
'O, doctor, I've a pain inside me,
And I don't feel very well.'

Doctor Thomas looked her over,
And then he looked some more;
Walked over to his wash-basin,
Said, 'Why didn't you come before?'

Doctor Thomas sat over his dinner,
Though his wife was waiting to ring,
Rolling his bread into pellets;
Said, 'Cancer's a funny thing.'

'Nobody knows what the cause is,
Though some pretend they do;
It's like some hidden assassin
Waiting to strike at you.

'Childless women get it.
And men when they retire;
It's as if there had to be some outlet
For their foiled creative fire.'

His wife she rang for the servant,
Said, 'Dont be so morbid, dear';
He said: 'I saw Miss Gee this evening
And she's a goner, I fear.'

They took Miss Gee to the hospital,
She lay there a total wreck,
Lay in the ward for women
With her bedclothes right up to her neck.

They lay her on the table,
The students began to laugh;
And Mr. Rose the surgeon
He cut Miss Gee in half.

Mr. Rose he turned to his students,
Said, 'Gentlemen if you please,
We seldom see a sarcoma
As far advanced as this.'

They took her off the table,
They wheeled away Miss Gee
Down to another department
Where they study Anatomy.

They hung her from the ceiling
Yes, they hung up Miss Gee;
And a couple of Oxford Groupers
Carefully dissected her knee.

'Miss Gee' – WH Auden

Miss Gee's tragedy is presented by Auden as one deriving from repression. It seems that the character wanted to be more adventurous in her youth, but life has forced into a position where she feels 'buttoned up'.

1. A core focus within the poem is her illness – is Auden using it as a metaphor for something else?
2. Is she a good woman only in God's eyes?
3. How is the poem about the tragic lack of respect that we have for people?
4. How does the poem change in the seventh quatrain?
5. Does anyone care for Miss Gee?
6. How / Why is this poem tragic?



'Death in Leamington' – John Betjeman

She died in the upstairs bedroom
By the light of the ev'ning star
That shone through the plate glass window
From over Leamington Spa

Beside her the lonely crochet
Lay patiently and unstirred,
But the fingers that would have work'd it
Were dead as the spoken word.

And Nurse came in with the tea-things
Breast high 'mid the stands and chairs-
But Nurse was alone with her own little soul,
And the things were alone with theirs.

She bolted the big round window,
She let the blinds unroll,
She set a match to the mantle,
She covered the fire with coal.

And "Tea!" she said in a tiny voice
"Wake up! It's nearly five"
Oh! Chintzy, chintzy cheeriness,
Half dead and half alive.

Do you know that the stucco is peeling?
Do you know that the heart will stop?
From those yellow Italianate arches
Do you hear the plaster drop?

Nurse looked at the silent bedstead,
At the gray, decaying face,
As the calm of a Leamington ev'ning
Drifted into the place.

She moved the table of bottles
Away from the bed to the wall;
And tiptoeing gently over the stairs
Turned down the gas in the hall.

'Death in Leamington' – WH Auden

1. Betjeman portrays English people dealing with tragedy in what ways?
2. How does Betjeman use questions in the poem to progress the idea of tragedy?
3. How does the poet show the shutting down of the house be matched with the shutting down of the heart?
4. Why is middle-class pretence carried on in the face of domestic tragedy?
5. Does Betjeman present the nurse as taking pleasure in the tragedy?
6. How does the rhyme scheme reinforce tragic event?

Extended Response – Due Monday 14th

How is the concept of tragedy presented in the three poems studied? What are the main intentions of the poets in their differing interpretations of the idea of tragedy?