

**Research Article**

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## **Death in the web of life: A thematic analysis of Robert Frost's *Design***

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### **Abstract**

This paper provides a thematic analysis of Robert Frost's poem *Design*, focusing on the deep connection between life and death as expressed through powerful imagery, symbolism, and poetic structure. The study examines Frost's vivid depiction of a white spider, moth, and heal-all flower to illustrate the interplay of beauty and brutality in nature. These seemingly simple elements are transformed by Frost's language and perspective, raising important questions about the nature of existence, the inevitability of mortality, and the possibility of a grand design versus randomness in life. In addition, the study explores the way the poem's symbolism connects to Robert Frost's own life and experiences. Frost's personal struggles, including the losses of loved ones and his intimate confrontation with grief, are reflected in the symbolic choices in the poem. This autobiographical dimension adds depth to the interpretation, showing how Frost's personal understanding of death shaped his poetic exploration of mortality. By focusing on the intricate relationship between life and death, this paper seeks to uncover how *Design* serves as more than a simple reflection on nature. Frost's ironic detachment and thoughtful use of literary devices make *Design* offering insights into the balance between life's fragility and its unyielding realities.

**Keywords:** Poem; Analysis; Personal Experience; Literature Interpretation; *Design*

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### **1. Introduction**

Literature, according to Rees (1973) is "the expression of life through the medium of language, shaped by the imagination of the writer." This definition emphasizes the intrinsic relationship between literature and human life, as literature serves as a mirror that reflects the complexities, emotions and experiences of life. Through literature, we as the readers are invited to explore universal themes, ranging from love and hope to suffering and mortality, allowing them to gain a deeper insight into the human condition.

Literary work is a form of creative expression that encompasses various genres, including poetry, serving to convey complex human emotions and experiences such as witnessing life or death of another human (Olsen, 1982). Poetry, as a genre of literature, is particularly adept at engaging with profound and complex themes like death since death are perhaps the most universal and personally significant topics for all people (Ningrum & Mas'ulah, 2016). Its unique structure and emphasis on language and imagery allow poets to present fresh and distinctive interpretations, ensuring that death as a theme remains compelling rather than repetitive.

Poets frequently use symbolism when crafting their poetry. Ordinary words alone are often insufficient to convey a certain concept or emotion to the readers. As a result, some poets purposely employed symbolism to produce poems that were deeper, enticing and more profound (Yanti & Pandey, 2019). Symbolism is the art or practice of using a word or an object to represent a general idea. Among the most well-known poets is Robert Frost. Through his poetry, he conveys his idea through symbols (Gregoriyani, 2024). He describes death through symbolism in the poem *Design*.

This paper examines *Design* by Robert Frost, focusing on the theme of death as an integral part of the web of life. Through a thematic analysis, the study seeks to uncover how Frost uses imagery, symbolism, and poetic structure to convey the intricate relationship between life and death, encouraging readers to reflect on the universal and inevitable nature of mortality.

Robert Frost, one of America's most celebrated poets, masterfully captures these themes in his sonnet *Design*. Published in 1936, *Design* is a compact yet powerful poem that uses the seemingly ordinary scene of a spider, a moth, and a flower to explore questions about the nature of existence. Frost juxtaposes the beauty and brutality of nature, prompting readers to consider whether life and death are guided by a divine plan or shaped by randomness. The poem's striking imagery, careful use of structure, and philosophical undertones make it a rich subject for literary analysis.

This paper provides a thematic analysis of *Design*, focusing on the depiction of death as an integral part of life. By examining Frost's use of natural imagery, symbolism, and poetic structure, the study aims to uncover how the poet intertwines life and death within the broader context of existence, challenging readers to reflect on the delicate balance between the two. This poem already done by many scholars. One of them is "Individualism in Robert Frost's *Design*" by (Rong, 2018) that examines the interplay of individualism and optimism in Robert Frost's poem *Design*. While many interpretations of the poem focus on its pessimistic elements, such as death and darkness, the author argues for a more nuanced reading that highlights Frost's belief in "responsible individualism," influenced by Transcendentalist ideals.

This paper is focusing on how symbolism and imagery are used in the poem *Design* by Robert Frost to understand the meaning of death and life. This paper not only analyzes the symbolism and imagery in *Design* but also connects these elements to Frost's personal experiences and outlook on life. Frost's life was marked by profound tragedies, including the loss of multiple family members, which deeply influenced his poetic themes. Ultimately, this paper extends the discussion to include how Frost's use of symbolism reflects the delicate interplay between beauty and cruelty, innocence and destruction, and randomness and design. By considering the philosophical, emotional, and autobiographical dimensions of the poem, the analysis seeks to provide a deeper understanding of Frost's meditation on mortality, revealing how his personal struggles shape his portrayal of life's inescapable realities.

## **2. Methods**

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze Robert Frost's poem *Design*. The descriptive qualitative method is chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the elements, imagery, and symbolism within the poem, which are crucial to understanding its nuanced portrayal of life and death. By focusing on the text as the primary source, this approach enables a detailed examination of how Frost's language, structure, and literary devices contribute to the central theme. Basically, descriptive research is research that seeks to describe and interpret something, for example, situations and conditions with existing relationships, developing opinions, consequences or effects that occur and so on (Rusandi & Rusli, 2020).

To examine the imagery and symbolism in Robert Frost's poems, the authors employed a few steps. The first step is to read the poems more than once. Finding the poetry's imagery, meaning, and poetic form comes in second. Thirdly, categorizing the poems' use of imagery and symbolism. Lastly, a description of the poem's imagery and symbol.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Imagery

Imagery in poetry refers to the poet's ability to translate sensory experiences into words and expressions, creating a vivid and tangible depiction of a scene or atmosphere. This use of imagery allows readers to visualize, hear, or feel the elements conveyed in the poem (Waluyo, 1987). Poets employ imagery to provide clarity, evoke a specific mood, create vivid mental and sensory pictures, and capture the reader's attention.

Robert Frost's *Design*, which explores the complex and even unnerving link between nature and existence, heavily relies on imagery. This essay examines how Frost uses powerful contrasts and vivid imagery to dig deeper into the philosophical topics of death, innocence, and the contradictory character of natural world design. By concentrating on the elaborate description of the spider, the moth, and the healing flower, we contend that Frost employs imagery to question accepted ideas of morality and universal purpose in addition to describing a scenario. By this investigation, we hope to demonstrate how Frost's imagery may be used to address more general existential issues and encourage readers to consider the intricacy and apathy of the natural order.

Through the use of imagery, readers are made to feel as though they are experiencing the events or emotions described in the poem themselves. This aspect of poetry plays a crucial role in enhancing the reader's understanding of the poem's meaning, making it a powerful tool for engaging with the text on a deeper level (Pitaloka, Oktaviani, & Fiani, 2023).

Imagery consists of several types such as visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, organic, and kinesthetic (Rosmaidar & Wijayanti, 2012). However, in this poem, there are only three types of imagery that are found. The types of imagery found in this poem are:

##### 3.1.1. Visual Imagery

Since the majority of the words that are depicted in the poems are essentially visible, visual imagery is a type of imagery that usually occurs in the poetry. It could be challenging to write a poem without vivid imagery (Rosmaidar & Wijayanti, 2012). In the poem we can see some visual imagery:

In the line implies "I found a dimpled spider, fat and white," that the writer or actor in this poem "found" or saw a spider. The spider is also described in full such as its size, shape and form.

In this poem often mentions the color of each object such as the color of the spider, the color of the web and the color of the moth that described in the fourth line of the second stanza "Then steered the white moth thither in the night?". "On a white heal-all," and "Mixed ready to begin the morning right," this shows the location of the spider in its white, almost transparent nest mixed in morning sunlight.

##### 3.1.2. Kinesthetic Imagery

Words that depict a static object as moving or that accurately describe a moving object are known as kinesthetic imagery (Rosmaidar & Wijayanti, 2012). We can find a kinesthetic imagery in the line "On a white heal-all, holding up a moth" readers know that the spider does its job of binding the trapped moths to its web.

The line "And dead wings carried like a paper kite", especially the word "carried" means that the spider carrying around the wings of the moth apart from its body.

##### 3.1.3. Tactile Imagery

Temperature and our sense of touch are related to tactile images (Rosmaidar & Wijayanti, 2012). In the line "Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—" the reader can feel the texture of the spider described.

### 3.2. *Symbolism in Poem Design*

Symbolism is founded on the theory of symbols and sensorial correspondences; it produces blank verse; it is distinguished by inner musicality, by the musical perception of the world; it cultivates solitude, discreetly and silently rather than with the enthusiasm of romanticists; it cultivates mysticism and intimacy, neuroses and mystery; it favors autumnal settings and landscapes (rainy, foggy, with ravens in the light); it gives rise to the poetry of towns, whether large or provincial fairs: depressing, melancholic, annihilating, overwhelmed by spleen; it brings forth the conscience of the void and internal confusion, of moral isolation, of the artist's damnation in society; it paves the way for groups and proper modernist trends (Mihut, 1976).

The theme of *Design* by Robert Frost delves into profound existential questions about life, death, and the possibility of a higher order orchestrating natural events. Frost's use of symbolism—such as the white spider, moth, and heal-all flower—provides a rich foundation for exploring the duality of beauty and brutality within the natural world. These symbols not only illustrate the inevitability of death but also evoke ambiguity about whether such occurrences are part of a deliberate cosmic design or mere happenstance.

The use of symbolism in poetry often reflects a convergence of personal experience, cultural context, and broader philosophical underpinnings. Symbolic elements provide poets with tools to convey layered meanings, enabling readers to explore themes that transcend literal interpretations. This discussion examines the symbolic elements employed in *Design* by Robert Frost, focusing on how his personal background, environmental influences, and prevailing cultural narratives inform their use of symbolism. By analyzing these factors, we seek to uncover the intricate connections between Frost's context and their artistic choices, offering a deeper understanding of the work's thematic depth.

#### 3.2.1. Environmental Influences on Frost's *Design* Symbolism

Robert Frost's poem *Design* is deeply rooted in the natural environment of New England, where he spent a significant portion of his life. This region, characterized by its distinct seasons, dense forests, and diverse flora and fauna, served as a rich backdrop for Frost's poetic explorations. The choice of a white spider, a white moth, and a heal-all flower in *Design* reflects his acute awareness of these surroundings and the intricate relationships within them.

The heal-all flower (*Prunella vulgaris*), commonly found in New England, traditionally symbolizes healing and life. However, Frost subverts this symbolism by depicting the flower as the setting for a predatory act involving the spider and moth. This transformation turns a symbol of vitality into one of death and inevitability. As noted in analyses of the poem, the imagery of the heal-all juxtaposed with the predatory scene illustrates Frost's tendency to question the harmony of nature, presenting it instead as a space where beauty and brutality coexist (Murphy, 2007).

Frost's rural experiences likely shaped his symbolic choices. His observations of the natural cycles of life, death, and decay influenced his portrayal of the spider and moth as participants in a predatory relationship, emphasizing the fragility and interconnectedness of existence. The poem's imagery—where the white moth is likened to "a white piece of rigid satin cloth"—highlights this interplay between beauty and mortality (Baldwin, 2020). The use of terms like "death" and "blight" further underscores this theme, suggesting that nature is not merely a benign force but also one that encompasses violence and destruction (Spacey, 2023).

By grounding his symbols in a familiar natural setting, Frost invites readers to view these elements not as abstract ideas but as part of a tangible reality that reflects the complexities of life. This environmental influence emphasizes the intricate relationship between place and poetic imagination, where Frost's surroundings became the foundation for his exploration of deeper existential themes. His work prompts readers to ponder whether there is an inherent design in nature or if it is governed by randomness and chaos (Murphy, 2007).

### 3.2.2. Personal Tragedies

Robert Frost's life was marked by profound personal loss, which significantly influenced the somber tone and themes of death and predation in his poem *Design*. Throughout his life, Frost faced numerous tragedies, including the deaths of four of his children, struggles with mental illness within his family, and the death of his beloved wife, Elinor (Gerber, 2024). These experiences imbued his poetry with a deep sense of grief and reflection on mortality.

Frost's father died when he was just eleven years old, leaving him with a sense of early abandonment. This loss was compounded by the deaths of two of his children during childhood and the tragic fate of his son Carol, who committed suicide. Additionally, Frost's wife battled breast cancer before ultimately succumbing to heart disease in 1938. The cumulative weight of these losses profoundly shaped Frost's worldview and artistic expression, often leading him to explore themes of life's inherent cruelty and fragility in his work.

In *Design*, the symbols of the spider, moth, and heal-all flower can be seen as reflections of Frost's contemplation on mortality and the seeming cruelty embedded in life's design. The predatory relationship between the spider and moth mirrors the harsh realities of existence that Frost grappled with personally. Critics note that such imagery evokes a sense of inevitability regarding death, suggesting that nature is not merely a nurturing force but also one that embodies violence and predation. (Strikou, 2022)

Frost himself acknowledged the darker aspects of nature, famously stating that "nature is always more or less cruel." This perspective resonates throughout his poetry, where beauty often coexists with brutality. The juxtaposition found in *Design* serves to highlight this complexity—what appears beautiful can also harbor darkness and death. As noted by scholars, this duality reflects Frost's own experiences with loss and suffering, presenting a world where joy is frequently overshadowed by sorrow.

Moreover, Frost's ability to articulate these themes stems from his intimate understanding of human suffering. His poetry does not shy away from depicting life's harsh realities; instead, it confronts them head-on. This engagement with personal tragedy allows readers to connect deeply with his work, as it resonates with universal themes of loss and resilience.

### 3.3. Symbolism of Death Based on Literary Interpretation

In *Design*, the poet masterfully intertwines thematic elements with symbolic imagery, creating a layered narrative that invites readers to reflect on the coexistence of innocence and malevolence in life. The whiteness of the spider and the flower, traditionally associated with purity, is starkly contrasted with the darker implications of death and predation. This tension underscores the poem's existential inquiry into the relationship between life's fragility and the broader forces that shape it. By examining the interplay between theme and symbolism, this section aims to uncover how Frost's portrayal of a seemingly simple scene conveys complex ideas about life, death and destiny.

#### 3.3.1 The Contrast Between Life and Death

One of the most striking aspects of *Design* is how it blends symbols of life and death into one eerie, unsettling image. Normally, the color white is associated with purity, innocence, or even new beginnings (Saito, 1996). However, in this poem, Frost uses white to describe things related to death: a white spider, a white flower, and a dead moth. This creates a sharp contrast between what we expect and what we see. Instead of purity, the color white here feels cold and lifeless, highlighting the inescapable presence of death in even the smallest, quietest corners of nature.

The scene itself—where a spider captures and kills a moth—is a natural event, something that happens all the time. Yet, Frost makes it feel chilling and deliberate, as if every detail has been carefully planned. The "whiteness" of everything makes the image more unsettling, as it strips away the usual vibrancy of life. By combining these symbols, Frost shows how life and death are not opposites but are

deeply connected. The moth's death is part of the spider's survival, and this interdependence reminds us of the delicate balance in nature.

What makes this even more interesting is how Frost doesn't portray death as dramatic or heroic. It's quiet, almost ordinary, but still full of meaning. This invites readers to reflect on how death is an inevitable part of life. It's not just something that happens at the end; it's intertwined with the process of living itself.

### 3.3.2 The Role of a Higher Power or Fate

In *Design*, Frost explores whether the events in life, even small and seemingly insignificant ones, are controlled by a higher power or are just random. The poem describes the scene of a spider capturing a moth in a way that feels deliberate and planned. Frost calls this moment a "design," which makes us wonder: Is this scene of death carefully arranged by some greater force, or is it just a coincidence?

The spider's actions seem cruel, but they're also part of survival in nature. This raises big questions about the role of fate or a higher power in controlling life and death. If a spider killing a moth is part of a grand design, does that mean everything, including suffering and death, has been intentionally created? Frost doesn't give a clear answer, leaving it up to the reader to decide.

On the other hand, Frost's tone suggests some skepticism. The word "design" might be ironic, hinting that maybe there isn't a grand plan at all. By describing something as small as a spider's hunt as "designed," Frost could be questioning whether such a detailed, perfect plan really exists—or whether it's just something humans imagine to make sense of chaos.

This theme resonates beyond the poem. It challenges us to think about our own lives. Do the things that happen to us—good or bad—have a purpose? Or are they just random events in a world without meaning? By focusing on such a tiny moment in nature, Frost turns these questions into something deeply personal and universal at the same time.

### 3.3.3 The Irony of Innocence and Beauty in Nature

Frost plays with the idea that things we often see as innocent and beautiful in nature (Saito, 1996) can also be connected to death and destruction. In the poem, he describes the spider as small and white, a color we usually associate with purity and goodness. The moth is also white, and together, they seem fragile and harmless. But in reality, the spider is a predator, and the moth is its victim. This contrast creates a powerful irony: something that looks innocent is actually tied to violence and survival.

By using the color white, Frost pushes us to rethink our assumptions. Why do we see white as pure or good when, in this case, it's part of a deadly scene? The web is described as being shaped like a "white piece of rigid satin," making it sound beautiful, even though it's part of a trap. This makes us question whether beauty in nature is separate from its darker, crueler side—or if they are deeply connected.

Frost's description also challenges our view of nature as a peaceful, harmonious place. In reality, nature is full of life-and-death struggles, just like the spider and the moth. But instead of being ugly, Frost shows us how even these moments of violence can have a strange, unsettling beauty. This irony forces us to confront uncomfortable truths about the natural world and perhaps about ourselves as well.

Through this exploration, Frost seems to invite readers to think critically about how we interpret innocence and beauty. Is it possible that what we find lovely and pure often hides something darker beneath the surface? Or are these qualities always intertwined in ways we don't fully understand? The poem doesn't offer answers but leaves us pondering these thought-provoking ideas.

### 3.3.4 The Poetic Tone of Ironic Detachment

Robert Frost employs a tone of ironic detachment throughout the poem to explore the complex relationship between innocence and death. This tone is evident in the way he presents the scene without

moral judgment, simply stating the facts: a white spider preying on a white moth. The detached language invites the reader to consider the event without immediately applying an emotional or moral judgment, reflecting nature's indifferent, almost mechanical cruelty.

The choice to maintain a neutral tone allows Frost to reveal the harsh truths of life and death with a kind of poetic precision. The speaker in the poem does not attempt to soften the image of the spider or the process of predation—it is presented as part of a natural order, a reality that simply is. This detachment not only emphasizes the irony but also suggests a philosophical commentary on the randomness and inevitability of death in the natural world.

Frost's irony is subtle yet powerful, allowing the poem to resonate on multiple levels. It reflects how humans might grapple with the seemingly contradictory forces of life and death—life-giving but also death-dealing. The ironic detachment compels readers to confront these themes without offering easy answers. The beauty of the poem lies in its ability to make the reader uncomfortable, forcing them to consider the connections between innocence and death, beauty and cruelty, without easy resolution.

By presenting the death of the moth as a natural and almost banal event, Frost underscores the stark, sometimes brutal reality of life. The irony inherent in this detachment invites readers to reflect on their own perceptions of innocence, death, and the natural world, questioning their assumptions about beauty and cruelty, life and death, rather than accepting them at face value. This technique allows Frost to engage readers in a deeper meditation on existence and its inherent complexities.

### 3.3.5 The Ironic Emphasis on Innocence and Design

In *Design*, Frost explores the theme of innocence juxtaposed with a natural order that incorporates death and destruction. The poem's central irony lies in its portrayal of innocence—embodied by the white moth—caught in a design of nature that seems indifferent to its vulnerability. Frost's choice of imagery—particularly the white spider, the white flower, and the white moth—creates a stark visual metaphor for purity and innocence. However, these elements are not spared from the predatory design, which is indifferent to innocence and operates purely by nature's rules.

This ironic tension is intensified by the question posed at the end of the poem: "What but design of darkness appalls?" Here, Frost uses a rhetorical question to challenge the reader's understanding of the concept of design. The "design of darkness" suggests a malevolent, sinister force that would prey on innocence, yet Frost refuses to attribute it to any intentional evil. Instead, he redefines "design" not as a conscious act but as a natural order that incorporates both creation and destruction. This philosophical stance highlights the indifference of the natural world to human concepts of good and evil.

By portraying a design that includes not only beauty but also death and decay, Frost reveals an acceptance of the tragic and sometimes brutal realities of life. Innocence is not protected from these forces; it merely exists within them. The poem becomes a meditation on the inevitability of suffering and the inescapable reality of death, suggesting that such occurrences are not "appalling" in themselves but are simply a part of the natural order.

The ironic emphasis on innocence and design thus forces the reader to confront the painful realities of existence and question their own responses to them. Frost's design is devoid of moral judgment; instead, it invites the reader to see the world through a lens of naturalism, where life and death, creation and destruction, are intertwined and inescapable. The poem asks readers to reflect on the nature of innocence within a larger, indifferent cosmos and confront the unsettling truth that even the purest forms of life are not immune to death's grasp.

## 4. Conclusion

In Robert Frost's *Design*, the intricate dance between life and death is presented through a lens of stark realism, rich symbolism, and poignant imagery. Through the seemingly simple encounter of a white spider, a white moth, and a flower, Frost masterfully invites readers to contemplate profound

existential questions about the nature of existence. The thematic exploration of death as an inescapable component of life reframes our understanding of mortality, positioning it not as an end but as an integral element of the natural order.

Frost's choice of theme and symbolism is deeply influenced by his personal experiences and environmental observations. The natural environment of New England, where he spent much of his life, provided a rich source of inspiration, while the recurring cycles of life and death in nature prompted a reflection on existence. The heal-all flower, traditionally symbolizing vitality, is subverted by Frost into a setting of predation, illustrating the coexistence of healing and destruction. Furthermore, Frost's personal tragedies, including the loss of his children and wife, profoundly shaped his preoccupation with mortality, imbuing his work with a somber tone and philosophical depth. These life experiences are mirrored in the symbols of the spider and moth, which reflect the fragility of existence and the indifference of the natural world to human suffering.

Through detailed visual, tactile, and kinesthetic imagery, Frost brings the scene to life, inviting readers to experience its fragility and harshness simultaneously. The symbolism reflects not only the poet's observations of nature but also deeper existential questions about the role of fate or randomness in life's events. Frost's ironic detachment underscores the complexity of these themes, presenting the natural world as indifferent and cyclical, rather than moral or purposeful.

Moreover, *Design* compels readers to rethink their assumptions about the meaning of beauty, innocence, and death, illustrating how these elements are inseparable within the web of life. Frost leaves us pondering whether existence is governed by a grand design or the chaotic forces of nature, enriching the philosophical and emotional resonance of the poem. His poetic exploration urges readers to confront these universal questions, grounded in both personal grief and the broader patterns of the natural world.

Frost's use of contrasts, particularly through the color white—a symbol typically associated with purity and innocence—serves to illuminate the duality inherent in life itself. This ironic juxtaposition challenges conventional notions of beauty and goodness, urging readers to recognize the coexistence of tenderness and violence in nature. By portraying the spider's predation as a natural act devoid of moral judgment, Frost reflects on the indifferent cruelty of the world, presenting death not as a tragedy but as a facet of survival.

Moreover, the poem's tonal irony further emphasizes the complexity of life's design. Frost leaves open the question of whether this design is guided by a higher power or is merely a random occurrence, thus engaging readers in a deeper philosophical inquiry about fate, purpose, and the randomness of existence. This ambiguity resonates with the human experience, prompting introspection about our interpretations of suffering and the seeming chaos of life.

In conclusion, *Design* is more than a meditation on death; it is a layered exploration of the mysteries of existence, urging readers to confront the uncomfortable truths that lie beneath the surface of beauty. Frost's artistry compels us to reflect on our own perceptions of life and death, ultimately reminding us that they are inextricably linked in the grand tapestry of nature. Through this work, Frost not only deepens our understanding of mortality but also enriches our appreciation for the delicate balance that sustains life itself, encouraging a more nuanced view of existence that embraces both its fragile beauty and its inevitable darkness.

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