

Robert Frost – Design

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth --
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches' broth --
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.



What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?--
If design govern in a thing so small.

Summary and analysis:

The title 'Design' brings to mind intelligent design: a plan of some sort. The designer in this case is clearly not a benevolent, caring God however but is rather a cruel being who has no desire for peace or happiness.

The poem is a sonnet: it is divided into an octet (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). Usually, in this type of sonnet, the octet raises a problem and the sestet makes an attempt to come up with an answer.

The poem opens in a straightforward manner. Frost describes finding a 'dimpled spider, fat and white'. However, the description of the spider is a rather strange one. We generally think of spiders as brown or black, not white. The critic Randall Jarrell points out that the words 'dimpled', 'fat' and 'white' come from 'our regular description of any baby'. White is almost always associated with innocence and purity but that is most

clearly not the case in this poem, as we discover when we read on. The spider is sitting on a 'white heal-all' flower and holding a dead white moth. The repetition of 'white' is important (indeed, Frost originally called the poem 'In White' before changing the title to 'Design' later on). Neither the spider nor the heal-all would normally be white, which makes the whole scene strangely eerie and a little unreal. It is ironic that the flower is a 'heal-all' because far from having medicinal properties, this flower leads the moth to death.

Some critics have pointed to the lilting, nursery rhyme rhythm of the iambic pentameter in the poem and this also adds to the idea of innocence but there is evil lurking just beneath the surface, if we look closely.

There is something ritualistic about the spider holding up the dead moth which resembles 'a white piece of rigid satin cloth'. The critic Reuben A. Brower draws our attention to the fact that white satin cloth is used to line coffins and that the word 'rigid' reminds us of rigor mortis.

The spider would not normally be white, but it is camouflaged perfectly by the oddly white heal-all and the bright colour of this flower draws the moth to its death. Therefore, there is a strange coincidence governing this whole event. Or is it a coincidence? Does an evil God contrive to bring about what Jarrell calls this 'little albino catastrophe [which] is too whitely catastrophic to be accidental'? Argument for design says, basically, that if there is a watch, there must be a watchmaker. If it is clear that something is too complex to have occurred by accident, then there must be a designer who brought it all about. Frost twists the usual interpretation of this argument for the existence of a benevolent God by pointing out that this event is too complex to have occurred by accident and if, therefore, it proves the existence of a designer, what does it say about him?

In the fourth line, Frost sums up the scene as 'Assorted characters of death and blight'. The flower lures the moth to its death, the spider kills it and the moth is the victim. Although this should be a natural event, the strangeness of the white flower and spider make us view it as something diseased or blighted. Frost goes on compare these entities to ingredients 'mixed ready to being the morning right'. There is no sense of a new beginning with the arrival of morning; instead there is a feeling that it will be tainted by the ugliness of this horrible occurrence. The simile in which Frost compares the combination of moth, flower and spider to 'the ingredients of a witches' broth' adds to

the idea that evil permeates the dawning of the new day. It is worth noting that Frost refers to 'witches' rather than one witch in this image. It brings to mind the three witches in *Macbeth* who existed purely to bring about pointless evil and chaos. One of the points often debated when the witches in *Macbeth* are discussed is whether or not they are really predicting an inevitable future or whether, by predicting it, they cause it to unfold in the way they have described. This ties in neatly with the theme of this poem and makes us examine once again the idea that our lives may be controlled and we may not have the power over our future that we would like to think we have. This isn't the only Frost poem on your course which refers to *Macbeth*, although the reference is not as immediately obvious as that in "Out, Out –".

The octet ends with the spider being likened to a snow-drop, the flower to froth and the dead moth to a paper kite. This image is a pretty one on the surface, but closer examination reveals its darkness. Snow-drops are pretty, but in this case the picture is ruined by the comparison to the murderous spider; froth is fragile and fluffy, but also brings to mind frothing at the mouth when poisoned. A kite is a child's toy but there is nothing pleasant or sweet about this particular kite; after all it is a dead body being carried by its killer. Nature here is not in the least attractive.

The beginning of the sestet marks the turn in the sonnet. The poet moves from observation to reflection. Frost wonders why the normally blue flower is white and why the moth and the spider came together on the flower at that time. The heal-all is 'innocent': it did nothing to turn itself white. What, if anything, created this unnatural scene, then? The verbs 'brought' and 'steered' imply that some outside force brought the spider, flower and moth together. The word 'kindred' suggests that the unlikely threesome is linked by something other than their colour: has the same designer created them all?

The poem ends rather unusually in that it seems to blend both Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets. In Petrarchan sonnets there is a 'turn' at the ninth line and then a resolution, but there is no definite resolution here and there is, in fact, another turn at the very end when Frost ends on a Shakespearean sonnet's rhyming couplet. Instead of answers, we are left with questions. The poet is uneasy and appalled at the idea of a God who may control lives in such an evil way. If this designer could do such a thing on a small scale, could he do it on a larger scale too? Or is there any designer at all? Either way, the poem ends on a bleak note and leaves us with very little comfort.

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