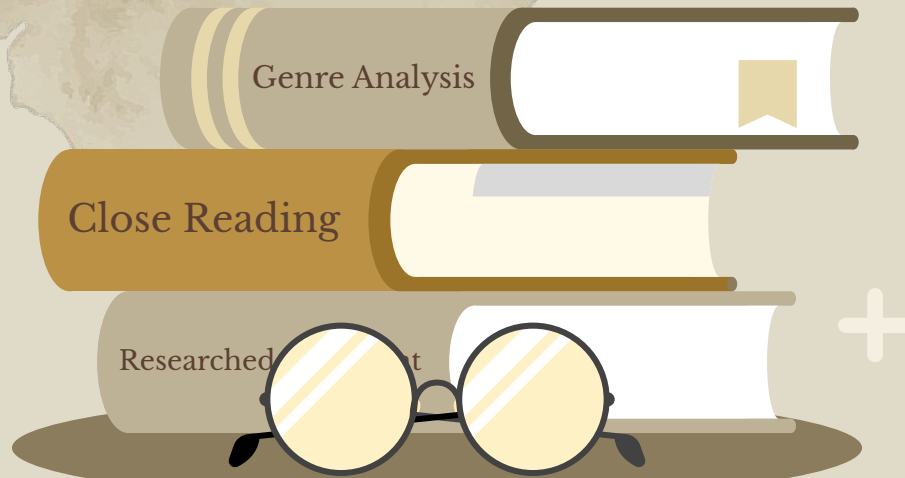


# An Analysis of Robert Frost's “Design” in the Context of its Genre

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**Genre Analysis:**

**SONNET**

## sonnet requirements

- formal rhyme scheme
- 14 lines
- typically 10 syllables per line



# A Traditional Sonnet...

18.

**S**Hall I compare thee to a Summers day?  
Thou art more louely and more temperate:  
Rough windes do shake the darling buds of Maie,  
And Sommers lease hath all too short a date:  
Sometime too hot the eye of heauen shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd,  
And euey faire from faire some-time declines,  
By chance, or natures changing course vntrim'd:  
But thy eternall Sommer shall not fade,  
Nor loose possession of that faire thou ow'ft,  
Nor shall death brag thou wandr'ft in his shade,  
When in eternall lines to time thou grow'ft,  
So long as men can breath or eyes can see,  
So long liues this, and this giues life to thee,

...is typically about **love** (“sonnet”  
literally means “little song”)

← ex: a very famous sonnet by  
William Shakespeare

- romantic and enchanting language
- reminiscent of a love song

# “Design” as a Sonnet

- ✓ formal rhyme scheme (ABBAABBA)
- ✓ 14 lines
- ✓ 10 syllables per line
- ✗ about love\*

\*main themes/ideas:

- **death and darkness**
- **question of free will**



If Frost's poem diverts so much from the traditional tone and topic of a sonnet...

Why did he choose to make "Design" a sonnet in the first place?



*(common aspect of a sonnet)*

**beautiful language** contrasts **dark topic**

*(direct contrast to a typical sonnet)*

*catches the reader off guard  
by usurping expectations*

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 spirit 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.

contradicting readers' expectations makes the writing more **impactful**

unexpectedly **dark topic** +  
traditional characteristics of a  
sonnet = **jarring effect**



possible reality  
check


increased feeling  
of dread



reconsider  
meaning






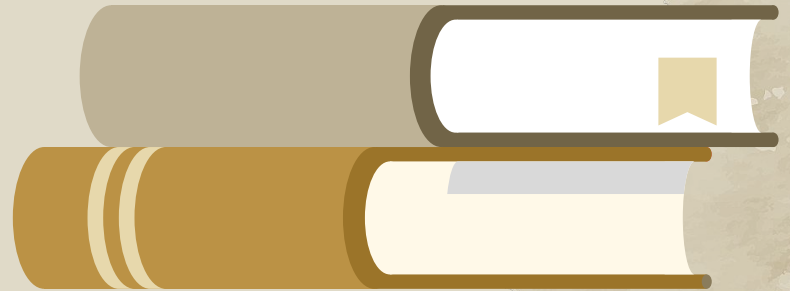


poses questions in the **sestet**  
instead of octave

*(most poems ask a question first  
and then answer it)*



leaves poem **open-ended**  
and **uncertain**, similar to  
Frost's **skepticism** of free  
will

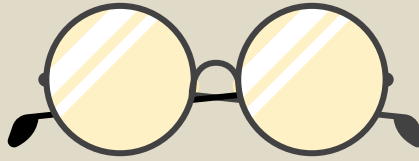




## The Irony of “Design”

Questions the  
existence of some  
higher power or  
“design,” yet is very  
carefully designed  
itself

- Very specific  
rhyme scheme
- Carefully chosen  
language
- Meticulous  
symbolism (e.g.  
white)



## OVERALL

### alignments with sonnet traditions

- structure requirements
- beautiful language

### diversions from sonnet traditions

- sinister, existential content

Frost's specific mix of adherence to and diversion from the genre ultimately strengthened the effectiveness of "Design."



# Thanks

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