Dust of Snow

BY ROBERT FROST

OVERVIEW

RATIONALE

“Dust of Snow” is a poignant poem that notes an uplifting moment in an otherwise bad day. This poem by Robert Frost is also listed as an exemplar text for grades 4-5 by the authors of the CCSS for ELA. Because identifying and describing a theme can be challenging for fourth graders, we have chosen to focus this text analysis on determining theme. The poem also offers an opportunity to discuss structure and rhyme scheme.

SUGGESTIONS FOR USE

A class discussion centered on the meaning of theme may also help to frame reading and discussion. The teacher might begin by asking students to read the text several times independently, encouraging them to arrive at their own understanding and craft their own questions. In addition, reading the story out loud as a class will help students to see the continuity in this poem: it is one long “sentence” with punctuation only at the end. Teachers may want to ask students to generate their own interpretation and pose questions about meaning prior to asking any of the text-dependent questions below. Showing a student-made video, “Dust of Snow,” can also affirm students’ interpretations of the scenario and theme of the poem. As students explore how weather affects the setting, this poem might be compared to Sandburg’s “Fog.” Teachers may also compare and contrast “Dust of Snow” with “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” another Frost poem set in snowy weather, noting the similarity in setting but difference in theme and meter.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

(a) Focus Standards

Students will practice the following standards through a close read of the poem and completion of the performance assessment task:

RL.4.2: Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.

W.4.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.
(b) Additional Standards

RL.4.1
RL.4.5
RL.4.10
RF.4.4

**VOCABULARY**

Some words from this book may be unfamiliar to students or may be used in a different way than students have seen previously. Possible words for study include:

- hemlock
- rued
Dust of Snow
by Robert Frost

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

1. What happened in the first verse of the poem?
   - Someone was standing beneath a hemlock tree, when a crow shook a branch just hard enough for a light “dust” of snow to land on the speaker.
   - **Note to teachers:** If you click on the link to explore the online dictionary definitions of “hemlock,” you will see that the first definition refers to the poisonous plant. Some interpret this poem as a reference to the poisonous version of the plant. Because the poet specifies that it is a “hemlock tree,” the students should focus on the fourth definition in this link.

2. What happened in the second verse of the poem?
   - The speaker’s mood changed, and part of his/her day was “saved” which suggests that the day became better.

3. Did the snow change the speaker’s mood for better or for worse? Support your answer with examples from the poem.
   - Before the “dust of snow” fell, it had been a day that he or she “rued.”
     - “Rued” means to wish a day had never happened, to regret it bitterly.
     - Teachers could ask students to make other sentences with this word to ensure understanding and also ensure that students recall its meaning in the future.
   - After the dust of snow fell, the speaker had a “change of mood,” indicating that the speaker’s mood changed for the better.

4. Are the events in this poem written in chronological order? Support your answer with text evidence.
   - The events in this poem are not written chronologically.
     - The first thing that happened was whatever made the speaker “rue” the day.
     - Then the speaker had the “dust of snow” fall on him, making his mood better, and “saved some part of a day I rued.” This event is described in the first stanza.
Read the poem again to listen to the rhythm in this poem. How many accented syllables do you hear in each line of this poem?

- **The way a crow**
  Shook down on me
  The dust of snow
  From a hemlock tree

- **Has given my heart**
  A change of mood
  And saved some part
  Of a day I had rued.

There are two accented syllables in each line of the poem.

- This is called dimeter because the line has “two feet” or two accented syllables per line.
  - *Note to teachers: Robert Frost loved to write poetry with certain structures. He is quoted as saying, “I would sooner write free verse as play tennis with the net down.”*
  - *Teachers might ask students to discuss what they think Frost means by that—and their various thoughts about free verse compared to poetry that exhibits a particular form.*

What are possible themes of this poem? Cite evidence from the text that makes you think the theme you mention is possible.

- **Hope**
  - The speaker happily and quickly decides that the day is saved because of a dust of snow falling on him or her. He or she no longer thinks the day is a loss, but instead has hope that the day can be salvaged.

- **Perspective**
  - The speaker's perspective is changed by a small event. Perhaps the poem implies that we can either think positively or negatively about events, depending on our perspectives and points of view. Perhaps the speaker thinks we should maintain a positive perspective on life in general.
PART ONE

In preparation for the writing, conduct a Socratic seminar based on “Dust of Snow.” Ask students to reflect on the following questions:

- Other than the themes we have identified, are there other themes represented in this poem? What evidence can you find to support your idea of an alternative theme?
- Of the themes we have discussed, which theme seems to be the strongest? Cite evidence from the poem for your choice of theme.

PART TWO

Give students the following writing guidance:

Write an informative/explanatory paragraph focused on one theme of this poem. Identify and explain this theme and support your choice by providing at least two examples from the text. Create a sense of closure at the end of your paragraph. (RL.4.2)

Your response should:

- State one theme of this poem clearly.
- Support your choice of theme with evidence from the poem.
- Link your ideas using words and phrases (e.g., another, for example, also, because).
- Use precise language and vocabulary to explain your choice of theme.
- Provide a concluding statement related to your choice of theme.
Read the following text for the students, demonstrating the elements of fluent reading: accuracy, prosody, and appropriate rate. Encourage students to use their idea of theme to guide the interpretation of the poem. Consider asking students to emphasize the accented syllables in each line. Digitally record the poem to compare different interpretations of the same set of words.

PASSAGE

(34 words)

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by Robert Frost

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