‘The Tuft of Flowers’

The poem recounts a journey by the speaker to discover the mysterious figure who has mown the grass before dawn and the lesson he draws from this experience. It is another of Frost’s pastoral poems and repeats a favourite image of the mower as well as a favourite line from ‘Mowing’.

RESEARCH BEFORE YOU READ

Explore the pastoral poems previously listed for ‘Mowing’. You may like to extend your research to Spenser’s ‘Shepherd’s Calendar’ (1579), Sir Philip Sidney’s ‘Arcadia’, Marlowe’s ‘The Passionate Shepherd to His Love’ and Shakespeare’s As You Like It which is based on a pastoral romance by Thomas Lodge, and Alexander Pope’s ‘Pastorals’ (1709).

YOUR FIRST RESPONSE

A CLOSER ANALYSIS

The dramatic setting of the poem is created in the first couplet. Is there beauty in this first image? Serenity? A sense of timelessness?

The second image is tougher. It records the desolation left by the early mower. The image of the blade challenges the simple innocence of the introduction.

The third couplet expands the details of the scene – it adds visual, auditory and tactile depth. What is the impact of the reference to the ‘whetstone’? The introduction of utilitarianism? A reminder of the physicality of rural labour? An antidote to cloying romanticism?

The early labourer is not to be found. The speaker, like the one before him, is all alone – a fact that is rationalised as the ‘way of things’, the reality of every individual’s existence. What is the effect of the internalised conversation? The establishment of an introspective melancholy?
Nature answers the sad thought of the speaker even as it is given words. The butterfly surprises him in the suddenness and noiselessness of its appearance. Its confusion is echoed in the alliterative use of ‘w’, the second repetition of the sound caught up in the middle of ‘bewilder’d’, and in the stumbling rhythm created by the alliteration of ‘b’.

The butterfly is a fellow searcher, seeking alas, that which is now lost, swallowed by time and the mower’s scythe. What dramatic emphasis is given to the creature’s motivation by the selection of the first words of this seventh couplet – and by their alliteration?

The speaker observes the sad discovery to which the butterfly’s journey leads, the desperation attending the search captured in the circularity of sound in the first line of this couplet. What reality is given to the dying flower by the speaker’s use of the trisyllabic ‘withering’? Is the single flower’s death given greater poignancy by the fact that its dying is still in process?

The ninth couplet states simply a perfectly magical moment – the butterfly’s return to the speaker after its reconnaissance of the landscape. What is the meaning of its action? An acknowledgment of the companionship of all things? That the speaker and the creature are the two sole living beings in their landscape? How confident is the butterfly of its security in approaching the speaker? What else is suggested by its tremulousness? The creature’s own fragility? Its beautiful delicacy? Its understanding of the vulnerabilities and dangers faced by any living being? Is the vastness of the landscape established in the first line of this couplet a contributing factor to its fearfulness?

The speaker ponders the significance of the event but, finding the questions raised by it unfathomable, goes to turn away. Perhaps to bury his anxiety in the ritual of labour?

The butterfly’s flight path is to another expression of life in the landscape – the tall tuft of flowers beside a brook. The dignity of the flowers is captured in the confident rhythmical firmness of the words selected to describe them. How does the alliterative use of ‘t’ contribute to the effect?

The flowers’ height is reiterated in the metaphor of the twelfth couplet. The surmise of their survival is conveyed in the repetition of ‘scythe’, the destroyer of all their kind who out of vagary or sympathy or even, perhaps, admiration, had chosen to spare them. What kind of energy is captured in the choice of the adjective ‘leaping’? Aggressive? Vital? Does the reed-choked brook have its own secrets?

The reason for the survival of the tuft of flowers is to be found in the pre-dawn mower’s appreciation of their beauty in the beauty of the morning. How rare – and therefore how much more valuable – is this expression by Frost of a moment of sheer joy. How does the rhyme of ‘him’ and ‘brim’ concentrate the reaper’s feeling of happy plenitude?
The speaker interprets the tuft of flowers as a message from the dawn. What does his use of the word ‘lit’ contribute to the emphasis of the poem at this point on the greater understanding of existence to be gained by close association with nature?

The message is aurally defined in the sixteenth couplet. The bird song intrudes on the speaker’s consciousness at the same time as the sound of the early mower’s scythe intrudes on the ear of his imagination. How effective is the rhythmical effect of the use of ‘wakening’ and ‘whispering’ and their connection semantically as well as metrically with the alliterative use of ‘w’? Is each image in this couplet a statement of the vitality and energy of life?

The speaker feels a link to the early mower. On what is this connection based? Merely their common humanity? Their bond with the earth? Their joint appreciation of natural beauty? What is the value of the feeling? A sense of human society? A solution to the agony of loneliness?

What is achieved by the speaker’s repeated reference to the mower as his companion? Is there a sense of the surreal or paranormal in the spiritual and emotional contact between the two? How strongly visual – and symbolic – is the image? Is it a physical statement of the commonality of experience (and fears and need for companionship) shared by all humankind? How comforting is the repeated sound of the rhyme?

The ‘brotherly’ speech is an imagined dialogue – but of real significance to the speaker. Why? What is its meaning? How does it contribute to the universality of the speaker’s singular experience in the light of this early morning?

Poetic techniques
The poem consists of twenty rhyming couplets and develops its thesis about human existence by the steady enlightenment of the speaker in the early morning light as he contemplates the images that are revealed by the dawn. The poem does not depart from the rhythms of natural speech but achieves a serenity as well as a dramatic emphasis through its use of rhyme and metre. After all, in the quietness of early morning do not all sounds take on a special significance?

The images are selective and sensual: all senses are awakened in the taste, touch and smell of the dew, in the breeze’s caress; in the smell of new-mown grass; in the sound and delicacy of the butterfly’s wing; in the sound of the awakening birds and in the visual and tactile beauty of the spike of flowers; in the sound of the brook and of the scythe ‘whispering to ground’ in the heat of the noon sun and the coolness and colour of the shade.
Themes
Think about the following thematic possibilities:
• the bond between all living things (the speaker and the butterfly; the butterfly and the tuft of flowers; the mower and the tuft of flowers; the speaker and the mower; the mower and the birds)
• the power of beauty
• the nature and power of love
• the need of humankind for society
• the pangs of loneliness
• the vulnerabilities and vagaries of existence – the role of chance
• the fragility and brevity of life
• the vastness of nature
• the presence of the power of all the elements – earth, water, fire (the heat of the sun) and wind (air)

Universal elements
The landscape is rural countryside which is a pastoral symbol of idyllic nature in which a man can employ himself in honest labour and at the same time gain wisdom from close association with the earth and the elements which mould it.

YOUR SECOND RESPONSE
1. Can this poem be dismissed as merely an exercise in an old-fashioned poetic (pastoral) form or does it, in its simplicity, provide profound insight into the meaning of existence?
2. Analyse the contribution of the imagery of ‘The Tuft of Flowers’ to its meaning.
3. Is this one of Frost’s more positive poems in its choice of subject matter and theme?