

# "Out, Out"

Robert Frost



## Background:

"**Out, Out—**" is a single stanza poem authored by American poet [Robert Frost](#), relating the accidental death of young boy. The poem was written in memory of 16-year-old Raymond Tracy Fitzgerald, whom Frost had befriended while living in [Franconia, New Hampshire](#). Fitzgerald had died on March 24, 1910 after an accident similar to the accident related in *Out, Out—*

The title of the poem is an allusion to [William Shakespeare](#)'s tragedy [Macbeth](#) ("Out, out, brief candle ..." in the [Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow](#) soliloquy). [Macbeth](#) is shocked to hear of his wife's death and comments on the brevity of life. It refers to how unpredictable and fragile life is.

### Things we need to understand:

1. Allusion
2. Repetition
3. Personification
4. Imagery
5. Blank Verse
6. Alliteration

## 'Out, Out—'

BY [ROBERT FROST](#)

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard  
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,  
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.  
And from there those that lifted eyes could count  
Five mountain ranges one behind the other  
Under the sunset far into Vermont.  
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,  
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.  
And nothing happened: day was all but done.  
Call it a day, I wish they might have said  
To please the boy by giving him the half hour  
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.  
His sister stood beside him in her apron  
To tell them 'Supper.' At the word, the saw,  
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,  
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—  
He must have given the hand. However it was,  
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!

The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,  
As he swung toward them holding up the hand  
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep  
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—  
Since he was old enough to know, big boy  
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—  
He saw all spoiled. 'Don't let him cut my hand off—  
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!  
So. But the hand was gone already.  
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.  
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.  
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.  
No one believed. They listened at his heart.  
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.  
No more to build on there. And they, since they  
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

## Fact Checks:

1. This poem has a blank verse rhyming structure
2. "Out, Out" is a poem by American poet Robert Frost, published in Frost's 1916 collection *Mountain Interval* and based on a true incident that happened to Frost's friend's son.
3. Alliterations in the poem:  
"The buzz saw snarled **and** rattled in the yard  
**And** made **dust** and **dropped** stove-length sticks of wood,"  
"Sweet-scented stuff"
4. Personification in the poem: "The buzz saw snarled and rattled"
5. Repetition in the poem: "snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled"  
"And they, since they/ Were not the one dead"

## Important Themes:

### 1. Life and death:

“Out, Out” tells the tragic tale of a boy injured in an accident. Just as he is about to go in for his dinner, his arm gets caught in a buzz saw—he loses his hand, and subsequently dies from blood loss. The poem is thus a stark reminder of the fragility of life, and that tragedy can happen to anyone at any time. But the poem doesn’t simply lament this sad loss—it also hints at the way life moves on after people die, gently questioning the value of life in the first place. The speaker begins the poem by painting a deliberately mundane scene, luring the reader into a false sense of security (though the buzz saw does carry with it the threat of violence from the beginning). In doing so, the poem is able to show the suddenness and apparent arbitrariness with which death can strike. Aside from its mentions of the buzz saw’s snarling and rattling sound, the opening of the poem is almost pastoral—that is, idyllic and set in rural surroundings. The breeze is “sweet-scented,” and “five mountain ranges” look over the boy’s family home. Indeed, even the buzz saw’s threatening sound is painted almost as part of the landscape, in the way that this sound seems to simply continue on throughout the day without any incident.

## 2. Humanity and Technology:

Frost makes the buzz saw a presence in the poem from the beginning, subtly hinting at the violence to come. Though it is a useful tool, it's also deadly—and requires appropriate knowledge, control, and experience to use it safely. The poem [personifies](#) the buzz saw from the beginning, indicating the threat that it poses. It “snarl[s]” as though it's angry about something, and is looking for a way to act on this anger. This harsh sound is contrasted with the idyllic peacefulness of the surrounding mountains, hinting at a division between nature and technology. However, the poem balances the threat of the saw with its portrayal as an everyday object—it *does* snarl and rattle, but that's also just the sound that it makes when used. And like most technology, it gets used frequently without incident.

But just as the day is drawing to a close, the boy is injured by the saw. The way in which the poem shows this grim event speaks to the poem's argument that technology, if treated with carelessness, is a danger as much as a help. The saw—as if trying to prove its own agency—seems to attack the boy just at the moment that he is supposed to be free from his work. It acts “as if to prove it knew what supper meant” (“Supper” is the call that the boy is responding to). It's "as if" the saw is resentful of the fact that the boy gets to go inside to his family.

That said, the poem seems to be aware that this personification of the saw is just an attempt to make sense of the tragic incident—the saw doesn't *really* hold any malicious thoughts. But it does hold an immense power that is essentially neutral, indifferent to whether it aids or injures people. And all it takes is for one slip—one misuse or accident—for technology to reveal its deadly power. And though the visiting doctor has his own tools and implements, he can do nothing to help the boy. The saw proves its might, and the helplessness of the people around the boy is matched only by the deadliness of the saw. The poem thus questions to what extent humanity is truly in control over its technological innovations, highlighting technology's often dormant but ever-present dangers.