

## Fragile Bodies, Marginal Lives: Disability and the Politics of Normalcy in Robert Frost's Selected Poems

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### Abstract

Robert Frost is widely celebrated as a poet of nature and rural life, yet his poetry also reveals a sustained concern with bodily vulnerability, dependence, and social exclusion. This paper examines "Out, Out—", "An Old Man's Winter Night", and "Haec Fabula Docet" from a Disability Studies perspective. It argues that Frost moves beyond traditional pastoral concerns to explore how physical injury, mental decline, and visual impairment are shaped by social attitudes, environmental barriers, and cultural expectations. Through the experiences of an injured child labourer, an ageing man struggling with memory loss, and a blind pedestrian crossing a public space, Frost exposes the limitations of ideals such as productivity, independence, and normalcy. The study demonstrates that disability in these poems is not merely an individual condition but a complex interaction between the body and its social environment. Frost's poetry ultimately highlights vulnerability, interdependence, and human dignity.

**Key Words:** Robert Frost, Disability Studies, Ableism, Vulnerability, Social Exclusion

Robert Frost is mainly celebrated in Western literature as the quintessential poet of nature, showing the beauty and splendour of rural New England. His legacy mainly rests on his mastery of pastoral imagery and meditations on the countryside. Critics frequently analyse his works through existential or ecocritical frameworks. The traditional views interpret the lonely farmhouses, dark woods and rural labour as symbols of the human condition and the sublimity of nature. However, these interpretations overlook a critical structural motif that drives Frost's poems: the presence of a non-normative body and mind.

This blind spot or oversight stems from a past literary tradition that views the disabled body through narrow lenses-- either as a cosmic punishment, a tragic burden or an object of pity. In his poems, the countryside is idealised as a peaceful, therapeutic space where individuals escape to find physical and spiritual renewal. This paper rejects the romanticized landscape of easy healing and comfort. His New England is populated by isolated individuals struggling through environments that are basically hostile to physical and cognitive limitations. Frost, by incorporating characters with impairments into the heart of pastoral domains, pulls apart the illusion of nature as a benevolent sanctuary. The settings of his poems are sites where human vulnerability is highlighted by rigid social and physical structures.

The academic neglect of these themes mirrors a broader issue within the literary canon: the habit of treating disability as a purely metaphorical device. This paper argues that to read Frost's poems without disability lens is to miss his portrayal of how a society responds to bodily and mental difference. Frost, by focusing on the physical and cognitive vulnerabilities of his protagonists, moves beyond a mere meditation on the human condition to explore how social and environmental structures produce and intensify disability. This study, by applying the lens of critical disability studies, shifts the interpretive pattern of Frost's poetry. Physical

trauma, ageing or visual impairment is not read as a metaphorical device to illustrate human tragedy or predicament, but this analysis investigates how Frost directly confronts the stark realities of disability.

This paper focuses on three distinct poems spanning Frost's career, i.e., "Out, Out—" (1916), "An Old Man's Winter Night" (1916) and "Haec Fabula Docet" (1962). Through these poems, Frost provides a critique of how society constructs normalcy. These poems demonstrate that disability is not an inherent individual defect, but an identity constructed by the unyielding and uncompromising society. He exposes how a capitalist society treats a damaged body as an economic loss, how traditional soothing spaces become disabling environments where mental faculties fail, and how patronising charity actions do far more damage to marginalised individuals than their actual physical impairments.

Literary representations of disability have been dominated by the Medical Model which sees disability as a pathology or a biological defect residing inside the individual's body. Under this model the only solution is either a medical cure, a hero overcoming the impairment or tragic death (Garland-Thomson 10-11). In contrast, the Social Model posits that while a person may possess a biological or psychological impairment, it is society that really disables them through architectural barriers, institutional exclusion, economic exploitation and deep-seated cultural prejudices (Oliver, Social Model 1024). Lennard J. Davis in *Enforcing Normalcy* writes that the "problem is not the person with the disability; the problem is the way normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (24). Frost's poems act as an illustration of this assertion. His poems do not pathologise the impaired individual; instead, they rigorously portray the economic, spatial, and ideological structures that construct this notion of normalcy.

The first poem "Out, Out—" to be analysed, was published in his 1916 collection *Mountain Interval*. It is one of the most chilling indictments of industrial and agricultural labour in early twentieth-century American poetry. The poem takes its title from Macbeth's famous soliloquy on the brevity and meaninglessness of life, setting a tone of existential dread. But a disability centric reading reveals that the tragedy of the poem is rooted in the brutal economic structures that commodify the human body. The poem opens with a vivid depiction of a buzz saw working in a New England yard: "The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard / And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood" (1-2). Within this space, human bodies are valued strictly for their mechanical output. Frost emphasises this economic exploitation by highlighting the youth of the worker: "Call it a day, I wish they might have said / To please the boy by giving him the half hour" (10-11). By stating that "Since he was old enough to know, big boy / Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—" (23-24), Frost exposes the calculations of the capitalistic framework. The boy performs adult labour, yet his economic labour is discounted because of his youth.

The lines "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" (15-17) capture the exact moment a labourer's body changes from a productive tool of capitalism into a disabled and broken entity. Disability studies look at this and argue that impairment is built into the workplace itself; the machine is built without safety guards, making physical impairment an inevitable outcome of the environment. The social model of disability states that people are disabled by environmental barriers, not their bodies. The buzz saw suddenly cuts the boy's hand, but the narrator describes it to prove that the boy, likely due to exhaustion or distraction, must have accidentally moved his hand into the moving blade, hinting at a case of gaslighting. The environment is governed by what Tobin Siebers mentions in his *Disability Theory* as the ideology of ability, which is "the preference of able-bodiedness" that defines human value by the capacity for work, production and independent execution of physical tasks (8).

The sudden, violent transition from an able-bodied worker to a disabled person triggers an immediate crisis of representation. Immediately following the accident, the boy reacts in a state of profound physiological shock, letting out a “rueful laugh” (19) as his brain struggles to comprehend the sudden mutilation. He turns around to face the other workers, desperately lifting his severed arm. The boy holds his hand up “half in appeal”—a desperate plea to his community to recognise his sudden vulnerability. He realizes that his injury is not just a medical emergency, it signifies the total destruction of his social and economic future.

Mitchell and Snyder argue that “disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” (49) but they note that literature rarely takes up disability as an expression of genuine social dimensions. The boy’s “rueful laugh” is the vocalisation of this shock. He will no longer be seen as a normal, healthy worker who can contribute to society. Instead, his broken body forces him into a terrifying new world where he is considered disabled and useless to the workforce.

The poem’s climax shifts to the community’s reaction. The doctor administers ether, but the boy’s pulse fails: “Little—less—nothing! —and that ended it” (32). The last two lines perfectly capture the ‘ideology of ability’ at its worst. “No more to build on there. And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs” (33-34). By describing the lifeless boy in architectural and economic terms, Frost exposes how an ableist society measures human value strictly by physical capacity and labour output. Because his impaired body can no longer produce capital, his social utility drops to zero, and he is coded as a broken tool rather than a human being. The poem treats the boy’s sudden impairment and death merely as a brief disturbance before returning to normal. The surrounding social infrastructure refuses to accommodate or mourn the non-functional body. Instead, the ableist matrix demands continuous momentum; the moment a worker breaks down permanently, they are instantly discarded so the remaining able-bodied community can return to maximising profit. “Out, Out—” thus exposes a brutal capitalist matrix that treats human bodies as disposable fuel for industrial wealth. The second the boy becomes impaired; his human value drops to absolute zero. By turning back to “their affairs”, the community issues a scary warning: in an ableist society, your worth is entirely dependent on your physical body and prowess.

A disability studies reading of the poem “An Old Man’s Winter Night” shifts attention from the poem as a universal meditation on loneliness. Instead, it examines how ageing produces physical and cognitive limitations that shaped the old man’s experience of the world. The poem traces a single, unnamed elderly man who finds himself alone in a vast creaking farmhouse. The most striking indication of disability occurs when the speaker says: “What kept him from remembering what it was / That brought him to that creaking room was age” (6-7). The old man experiences memory loss and confusion. He cannot remember why he entered the room. A task that would normally be simple becomes confusing due to cognitive decline associated with ageing. Frost shows how age affects the mind as well as the body.

The poem also highlights his physical limitations, as the word “clomping” (10-11) is repeatedly used to describe his heavy and awkward movements. His movements lack the energy and confidence of youth. Disability studies approach makes us pay attention to his bodily experiences rather than judging individuals by standards of strength and efficiency. His wandering is a literal representation of dementia. The setting also plays an important role in increasing the old man’s difficulties. He lives in an old farmhouse which is dark and empty during winter. His disability is created not only by his cognitive impairment but also due to an unsupportive environment, as claimed by the Social Model. The old man’s physical and mental weakness become more serious because of the lack of companionship. The line “a

light he was to no one but himself” (15) emphasises his social isolation. He is no longer connected to his family or community, and his existence matters only to himself. In many societies, elderly people are often ignored once their productivity declines and Frost captures this reality through this poem.

The poem also challenges the belief that every person should remain independent and able, again referring to Tony Sieber’s ideology of ability, which values people according to their productivity, strength and self-sufficiency. This old man cannot manage all the responsibilities that he once could. The poem suggests that complete independence from an elderly person is unrealistic; human beings naturally become dependent on others at each stage of life. From the perspective of the Social Model, the problem also lies in a lack of social support and accommodation and a more supportive social environment could reduce the disabling effects of age-related impairments, allowing older people to live with greater dignity and support.

Ato Quayson argues in *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* that “aesthetic nervousness is seen when the dominant protocols of representation within the literary text are short-circuited in relation to disability” (15). In Frost’s poem, this short-circuiting occurs through the breaking of the traditional pastoral image of a self-reliant farmer and his secure and cosy farmhouse. One’s home, which is conventionally associated with warmth, stability and familiarity, becomes confusing for the old man. He stands “at a loss” (8) among the barrels, where he experiences his home as an unfamiliar territory. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson defines the “normate” as “the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries” (8). In other words, society often assumes a standard individual who is physically fit, cognitively alert, and capable of functioning independently. Frost’s farmhouse appears to be structured around the needs of such a normate subject. However, as the old man’s memory and abilities decline, the familiar domestic space becomes increasingly difficult for him to navigate. The house that once offered security and control gradually becomes a place of confusion and uncertainty, revealing how environments can become disabling when they fail to accommodate changing bodies and minds. The darkness of the house further increases the old man’s vulnerability, while the cellar and surrounding rooms create an atmosphere of uncertainty. From the perspective of the Social Model of Disability, his difficulties arise not solely from cognitive decline but also from an environment that no longer accommodates his changing abilities. The farmhouse, once a place of familiarity and security, has become a site of what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls “misfitting,” (“Misfits: A Feminist Disability Concept”, 593), a disjunctive encounter between a body and its environment. As a result, spaces that were once easily navigable now magnify his confusion and isolation.

The poem reaches its most significant statement on ageing and dependency in the final lines: “One aged man one man can’t keep a house, / A farm, a countryside” (25-26). These lines challenge what Tobin Siebers terms the “ideology of ability” (8), which privileges independence, productivity, and self-sufficiency. Frost’s old man can no longer fulfil the role of the self-reliant farmer, yet the poem does not portray this as a personal failure; instead, it describes the universal vulnerability of human life. Through its portrayal of age-related decline, the poem reveals dependency not as an exception but as an inevitable aspect of the human condition, thereby exposing the limitations of ableist ideals and emphasising the necessity of care and interdependence.

Thus, “An Old Man’s Winter Night” emerges as a critique of the ideology of ability that privileges autonomy and control. Frost replaces the image of the self-reliant farmer with that of an elderly man whose memory loss, physical weakness, and isolation expose the fragility

of able-bodied ideals. The poem thus challenges conventional notions of normalcy and independence, emphasising the inevitability of vulnerability and the need for a more compassionate and inclusive understanding of human life.

Robert Frost's "Haec Fabula Docet" can be reinterpreted through the lens of Disability Studies by focusing on the social and environmental factors that contribute to the Blindman's fall. By applying the theories of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Tobin Siebers, the poem's traditional moral, which attributes the blindman's downfall to his pride, can instead be read as reflecting broader social and environmental barriers that shape disabled experience. Through this perspective, the poem becomes less a cautionary tale about individual failure and more an exploration of the challenges faced by those whose bodies and ways of navigating the world differ from dominant social expectations.

The poem's central conflict arises when the blindman, La Fontaine, encounters a "trench where water pipes were laying on" (6). From the perspective of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, this encounter exemplifies what she terms *misfitting*, a "disjunctive encounter" that occurs when a body enters a world designed for "standard, majority bodies" (Garland-Thomson; Lie). La Fontaine initially moves through the village with considerable agency, "relying on himself and on his cane" (1-2). His cane functions as an adaptive tool that enables mobility and independence rather than as a marker of deficiency. However, the trench disrupts this relationship between body and environment. The difficulties faced by La Fontaine do not arise from blindness alone but from the interaction between his impairment and an environment that fails to accommodate it. The trench creates a moment of misfitting in which the material world no longer supports his established method of navigation. Through this encounter, Frost demonstrates how disability is shaped not only by bodily difference but also by the physical structures through which individuals move.

The arrival of the "someone overanxious" who attempts to help La Fontaine with a "loud command" and a "staying hand" (9-10) shifts attention from environmental barriers to social ones. This intervention reflects what Tobin Siebers calls the *ideology of ability*. As Siebers argues, "the ideology of ability is at its simplest the preference for able-bodiedness." The helper assumes that blindness necessarily requires supervision and correction, thereby treating La Fontaine as incapable of managing his own movements. Rather than respecting his established method of navigation, the helper imposes an able-bodied understanding of safety and competence. In doing so, the intervention reinforces a social hierarchy that privileges sighted experience while dismissing the Blindman's lived expertise. The helper's actions illustrate how disability is often constructed through social attitudes that view disabled individuals as objects of care rather than autonomous subjects capable of directing their own lives.

The poem's concluding moral states that those "too proud to be beholden for relief / Are absolutely sure to come to grief" (19-20). On the surface, this lesson appears to blame the Blindman's independence for his downfall. However, a Disability Studies reading complicates this interpretation. The Blindman's grief cannot be attributed solely to his pride but must also be understood as the result of environmental barriers and ableist social assumptions. The trench represents a material failure that creates a misfit between the Blindman's body and the built environment, while the intervention of the "someone overanxious" reflects the ideology of ability that undermines disabled autonomy. Consequently, the fall emerges from the interaction between impairment, environmental obstacles, and intrusive social intervention rather than from blindness itself. Read through Disability Studies, "Haec Fabula Docet" reveals how disability is co-produced by physical spaces and social attitudes. The poem therefore invites readers to question assumptions about

dependence, competence, and normalcy, exposing the limitations of a world that frequently mistakes interventionism for genuine support.

Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell's concept of narrative prosthesis further illuminates Frost's treatment of blindness in the poem. According to Snyder and Mitchell, disability often functions in literature as a "resource for the production of meaning" and as an "opportunistic metaphorical device" or a "crutch upon which literary narratives lean" (47). In "Haec Fabula Docet", the Blindman's impairment becomes the basis for the poem's moral lesson about pride and dependence, rather than fully exploring the lived experience of blindness. From a Disability Studies perspective, this tendency can be questioned because it transforms the Blindman's embodied experience into a symbolic lesson for non-disabled readers. The poem therefore illustrates how disability is frequently employed as a narrative tool while simultaneously revealing the social and environmental barriers that shape disabled lives.

Jay Dolmage's work on ableist spaces further supports this reading. In *Academic Ableism*, he argues that design practices have long been shaped by "design bias," in which "a normate body was the end goal and end user for almost all design" (44). By "design bias," Dolmage refers to the tendency to create public spaces and environments for an able-bodied, sighted, and cognitively typical person while overlooking the needs of those who navigate the world differently. This idea can be applied to the "trench where water pipes were laying on" (6). As La Fontaine moves through the village "relying on himself and on his cane" (1-2), he encounters a space that has not "issued an invitation" to his mode of navigation (Dolmage 35). His fall, when he "plunged himself head foremost in the trench" (14), reflects not only personal misfortune but also the limitations of an environment designed with the "ideal human in mind" (Dolmage 46).

When "Out, Out—", "An Old Man's Winter Night", and "Haec Fabula Docet" are read together, they reveal Frost's sustained engagement with bodily vulnerability, dependency, and social attitudes toward impairment. While "Out, Out—" examines the fate of an injured body within a productivity-driven society, "An Old Man's Winter Night" explores the effects of cognitive decline and social isolation within the domestic sphere. "Haec Fabula Docet", in turn, focuses on the relationship between disability, autonomy, and paternalistic intervention in public space. Taken together, these poems demonstrate how disability is shaped not only by bodily impairment but also by social, environmental, and cultural conditions.

A Disability Studies approach challenges the traditional view of Frost as merely a pastoral poet concerned with rural life and nature. Instead, these poems reveal a deeper interest in the experiences of individuals whose bodies or minds do not conform to dominant expectations of normalcy, productivity, and independence. Through the injured child in "Out, Out—", the ageing man in "An Old Man's Winter Night", and the blind protagonist of "Haec Fabula Docet", Frost draws attention to how social attitudes, physical environments, and cultural assumptions influence lived experience. Drawing upon the insights of Lennard Davis, Tobin Siebers, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Ato Quayson, Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, and Jay Dolmage, this study demonstrates that Frost's poems consistently expose the mechanisms through which disability is produced, represented, and regulated within society. Whether through the economic exploitation of the injured boy in "Out, Out—", the cognitive and spatial disorientation of the old man in "An Old Man's Winter Night", or the paternalistic treatment of the blind protagonist in "Haec Fabula Docet", Frost reveals how bodies and minds that diverge from the norm are shaped by social attitudes, environmental barriers, and cultural expectations. His poetry repeatedly questions the ideology of normalcy and the assumption that human value depends upon productivity, independence, and physical competence. Read through Disability Studies, Frost emerges not merely as a poet of nature

and rural life, but as a perceptive observer of vulnerability, interdependence, and the unequal structures that determine whose bodies are accommodated and whose are marginalised.

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