**Reading Literature: A Developmental Model (Jack Thomson)**

This is Jack Thomson’s explanation of what he calls the ‘developmental stages of reading literature’. However, be aware that Thomson’s model is hierarchical and therefore problematic for some.

**Process Stages: Kinds of Satisfaction/Process Strategies**

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| 1. Unreflective interest in action. 2. Empathising with characters. 3. Analogising: deriving insights from fiction for understanding oneself. 4. Reviewing the whole work as a construct. 5. Consciously considered relationship with text, recognition of textual ideology, and understanding of self and one’s own reading processes.   Why might academics find the hierarchical structure of this model problematic? | * 1. Rudimentary mental images (stereotypes from film and television).   2. Predicting what might happen in the short term.   3. Mental images of effect.   4. Expectations about characters.   5. Drawing on the repertoire of personal and cultural experiences; making connections between characters and one’s life.   6. Generating expectations about alternative possible long term outcomes.   7. Filling in textual gaps.   8. Formulating puzzles, enigmas, accepting larger textual hermeneutic\* challenges.   9. Drawing on literary and cultural repertoires.   10. Interrogating the text to match the world view offered by the text with one’s own.   11. Recognition of implied author\*   12. Recognition of the implied reader\* in the text, and the relationship between implied author and implied reader.   13. Reflexiveness, leading to understanding of textual ideology, personal identity and one’s own reading processes. |

* Hermeneutic: relating to or consisting in the interpretation of texts.
* Implied author: the kind of person that the text implies the author is and possessing the kinds of values the text implies the author has.
* Implied reader: the kind of reader the real reader is invited by the implied author to become, at least temporarily, so as to participate in the production of the text’s meaning.

How might these stages or hermeneutic thought processes relate to your interpretation of the following text?

## “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 *5*

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 *10*

To please the boy by giving him the half hour

That a boy counts so much when saved from work.

His sister stood beside them in her apron

To tell them “Supper.” At the word, the saw,

As if to prove saws knew what supper meant, *15*

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 *20*

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— *25*

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. *30*

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.

How does this information contribute to the meaning making process?

**Robert Frost**

## Context

Robert Lee Frost was born in San Francisco, and after his father’s death in 1885, he moved with his family to Lawrence, Massachusetts, where he became interested in reading and writing poetry while in high school. Frost attended Dartmouth College and Harvard University, but never received a degree. He was a jack of all trades, and had many different occupations after leaving school, including a teacher, a cobbler, and an editor of the local newspaper, the "Lawrence Sentinel". His first published poem was "My Butterfly: An Elegy" in the New York literary journal "The Independent" in 1894. A year later he married Elinor Miriam White, with whom he shared valedictorian honours with at his Massachusetts High School.

In the following years, he operated a farm in Derry, New Hampshire, and taught at Derry's Pinkerton Academy. In 1912, he sold his farm and moved his family to England, where he could devote himself entirely to his writing. His efforts to establish himself in England were immediately successful, and in 1913 he published "A Boy's Will", followed a year later by "North of Boston". It was in England where he met and was influenced by such poets at Rupert Brooke and Robert Graves, and where he established his life-long friendship with Ezra Pound, who helped to promote and publish his work.

Frost returned to the United states in 1915, and by the 1920's, he was the most celebrated poet in North America, and was granted four Pulitzer Prizes. Robert Frost lived and taught for many years in Massachusetts and Vermont, and died on January 29, 1963 in Boston.

## Invited Readings of Frost’s Poetry

Literary critics labelled ‘the New Critics’ dominated literary criticism in the 20th century. They sought to make criticism more ‘objective’ and ‘scientific’ by focussing what was written on the page rather than guessing about the poet’s feelings or intentions. They argued that the meaning of a poem, for instance, arises from the language within it – not from an outside source. These critics valued poems which could be read on a number of levels, and which had complex structures and a ‘rich’ use of language. They believed that such poems worked like complicated machines or living organisms, in which each part has an important function.

The work of American Robert Frost was praised by the New Critics. Frost’s poetry frequently offer the reader mini-dramas, with characters and plot, almost like a stage play. They can be read as stories or parables rather than an expression of the poet’s inner feelings. New Critics believed that readers could always find the meaning of a poem by paying close attention to ‘the words on the page’. They assumed that a poem had a ‘single’ meaning, or a narrow range of meanings, that was ‘fixed’ by its language or structure – and that readers should all agree on what that meaning was.

By applying the principles of New Criticism we can often arrive at the invited or most widely accepted reading of a poem. This means considering the content/plot, themes and language use present in the poem.

**LANCASTER NOV 18 -**

John R. Adams, 15, son of Mr and Mrs James Adams, Route 3, Riverton, died last Saturday evening as a result of injuries he received while operating a power saw on his parents’ farm.

The accident happened late Saturday afternoon while young Adams, his brother Stephen 12, and his father were sawing logs. Apparently the boy was momentarily distracted while feeding a piece of wood into the blade, which caught his hand and amputated it.

The youth’s sister, Mud, 17, was witness to the accident. She said that her mother had sent her to call her father and brothers to supper. The accident occurred, she said, just as she called out to them.

Mr Adams immediately drove to nearby Riverton for a doctor. He finally located Dr E.L. White and drove him back to the farm.

Dr White said that when he arrived the boy was already in shock from loss of blood and that it was impossible to save him. The cause of death was listed by the coroner as accidental.

Funeral services on Tuesday were held in Riverton Congregational Church, and internment was in Good Hope Cemetery.

**Intertextual connection**

The title of the poem is presented as a quotation. Many critics have suggested that the title comes from Shakespeare’s play MacBeth. Towards the end of the play, just as he is about to face his enemies in combat, MacBeth hears the news that his wife, the Queen, has been killed. The following is MacBeth’s response.

**Seyton:**

*The Queen, my lord, is dead.*

**MacBeth:**

*She should have died hereafter:*

*There would have been a time for such a word.*

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow*

*Creeps on this petty pace from day to day*

*To the last syllable of recorded time,*

*And all our yesterdays have lighted fools*

*The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!*

*Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player*

*That struts and frets his hour upon the stage*

*And then is heard no more. It is a tale*

*Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury*

*Signifying nothing.*

The last six linesof MacBeth’s speech contain a series of metaphors about life. MacBeth compares life to: a candle that burns out;a shadow; a poor actor who makes one brief appearance; and a pointless story, full of sound but without meaning.

How might Frost’s allusion to this speech influence the reading of his poem?