Avocation and Vocation in “Two Tramps in Mud Time”

Two Tramps in Mud Time
Robert Frost (1934)

Out of the mud two strangers came
And caught me splitting wood in the yard,
And one of them put me off my aim
By hailing cheerily “Hit them hard!”
I knew pretty well why he dropped behind
And let the other go on a way.
I knew pretty well what he had in mind:
He wanted to take my job for pay.

Good blocks of beech it was I split,
As large around as the chopping block;
And every piece I squarely hit
Fell splinterless as a cloven rock.
The blows that a life of self-control
Spares to strike for the common good
That day, giving a loose to my soul,
I spent on the unimportant wood.

The sun was warm but the wind was chill.
You know how it is with an April day
When the sun is out and the wind is still,
You’re one month on in the middle of May.
But if you so much as dare to speak,
A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,
A wind comes off a frozen peak,
And you’re two months back in the middle of March.

A bluebird comes tenderly up to alight
And fronts the wind to unruffle a plume
His song so pitched as not to excite
A single flower as yet to bloom.
It is snowing a flake: and he half knew
Winter was only playing possum.
Except in color he isn’t blue,
But he wouldn’t advise a thing to blossom.

The water for which we may have to look
In summertime with a witching wand,
In every wheel rut’s now a brook,
In every print of a hoof a pond.
Be glad of water, but don’t forget
The lurking frost in the earth beneath
That will steal forth after the sun is set
And show on the water its crystal teeth.

The time when most I loved my task
These two must make me love it more
By coming with what they came to ask.
You’d think I never had felt before
The weight of an axhead poised aloft,
The grip on earth of outspread feet.
The life of muscles rocking soft
And smooth and moist in vernal heat.

Out of the woods two hulking tramps
(From sleeping God knows where last night,
But not long since in the lumber camps.)
They thought all chopping was theirs of right.
Men of the woods and lumberjacks,
They judged me by their appropriate tool.
Except as a fellow handled an ax,
They had no way of knowing a fool.

Nothing on either side was said.
They knew they had but to stay their stay
And all their logic would fill my head:
As that I had no right to play
With what was another man’s work for gain.
My right might be love but theirs was need.
And where the two exist in twain
Their was the better right — agreed.

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For heaven and the future’s sakes.
I. Introduction
   A. Living with poem, listening to its message as an adjunct
   B. Summarizing narrative arc of poem
   C. Reading final stanza
   D. Discussing final stanza as an ideal (unity of avocation and vocation)

II. Juggling avocation and vocation for Teacher-Writers
   A. Some adjuncts are adjuncts because they are looking for flexibility
   B. Happy to find a teaching job in which they can share love of language and writing
   C. Hard to make a living

III. Communicating to students who have a conflicted calling or do not know their calling
   A. For some uniting avocation with vocation is easier because society compensates what they love
   B. Athletes, artists, actors often feel conflicted between what they love and what is practical
   C. Poem suggests both avocation and vocation must be paid attention to.
   D. Frost’s life is a case in point.

IV. Being versus Doing to find identity
   A. Poem does not name people by their jobs
   B. Poem also pays tribute to borderland, liminal areas
   C. Those who are conflicted about calling often undergo a rich, existential struggle to find identity, not relying on a career title to define themselves.
   D. Ending with invitation to read poem and think about it message in terms of your own life.