Design - Robert Frost

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches’ broth—
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth.
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?—
If design govern in a thing so small.

Commentary on "Design"

The title of Frost's poem is doubly suggestive. It is about design, but as a well-made sonnet, it also is a design. The speaker of the poem has come upon a mini-drama of nature. The "assorted characters" involved are a spider, a moth, and a heal-all. The simple action of this spectacle is the spider holding up a dead moth upon the heal-all. The octave of the sonnet focuses on the happenings placed before the speaker; the sestet presents a series of questions concerning the scene the speaker has just witnessed. The poem is a strange concoction of ingredients, itself a sort of "witches broth," bubbling in a cauldron.

The tone of the poem is casually terrifying. The speaker talks in understatement, describing a seemingly ordinary occurrence. This sort of drama, after all, is acted out on infinite occasions. The terror of the poem derives from the speaker's use of contradictory images. The brutal death of the moth is imparted with appealing imagery. The predatory spider is described as any baby might be: "dimpled...fat and white." The speaker juxtaposes the image of "death and blight" with the whiteness of the morning scene and compares "dead wings" with a child's "paper kite." An air of abnormality pervades the entire poem. The flower, ironically called the "heal-all" is usually blue, but this is an albino - a mutation of some sort. The "snowdrop spider," an oxymoronic figure, is at an unnatural height. And, of course, the "characters of death and blight" are all white. The scene is odd; there seems to be too much white. Even the term "characters" is ambiguous. Does the word refer to personages in the drama before the speaker, or to representative signs of something else, something larger perhaps?

In the sestet, the speaker moves from description to reflection. He ponders the significance of the spectacle he has just observed. He is perhaps searching for some purpose to this dreadful configuration before him. The speaker answers his own questions in lines nine through twelve, with another: "What but design of darkness to appall?" - a suggestion, maybe, that some sinister plan of nature has caused this seemingly random happening. After all, so much whiteness could not be accidental. The last line of the poem is again statement,
not question, and the "If" serves to qualify the answer given previously with a reservation. This terminal utterance introduces a chilling note of doubt: that the seemingly insignificant events of nature simply play themselves out in a random fashion. Either conclusion drawn by the speaker - either that these encounters are random or that they are by design - is terrifying. The last line seems initially to offer a glimmer of hope by negating the speaker's own suggestion. But in reality, this alternative explanation is no less morbid, for it dismisses the previous notion of a predetermined fate for the possibility that is even more horrifying: that such minute scenes in nature are simply played out at random. Humankind's own inflated view of itself then is questioned; for if we are merely insignificant specks in the bigger picture of the cosmos, then human existence, too, is just another accidental scene guided by nothing more than happenstance.

The word "kindred" in line eleven is especially suggestive. Literally, of course, the speaker is identifying the spider and moth as related forms of life. More broadly, the suggestion may be that all life forms (human included) are connected and yet involved in a pattern of preying upon each other; another frightening suggestion.

The design of the poem is an Italian, or Petrarchan sonnet. The rhyme scheme is abba abba aca acc. The limited number of rhymes (3) focuses attention on the color white - the dominant rhyme-word of the poem. This focus on whiteness accentuates the appearance of innocence and the ostensibly benign nature of the exhibition before the speaker. Thus the impact of darker images such as the fat spider, a witches' broth, and dead wings, are much more striking and the terror of the questions and answers posed is intensified. The white malevolence put in place of God is a horrifying picture. The rhyme scheme helps create an awful, silent whiteness.

The speaker may be asking such questions of design about his own poem. Does design really govern in very small things, such as his own creation - a sonnet? Looking at the tight structure of the sonnet - its deliberate rhyme scheme and meter - the answer to this question seems obvious: yes, design determines such things. The sonnet by its very nature is created by design. It demands specific pattern, beats, and rhymes; it is certainly not a random creation. Yet the speaker has stumbled upon the scene before him accidentally. The octave of the sonnet presents the illusion of a simple telling - an observation of what the speaker has "stumbled upon." Likewise, the sestet seems a series of casual thoughts regarding the scene before him. The speech act of the poem seems to be a spontaneous reaction to what the speaker happens to see. Yet the improvisational construction of such a sonnet seems unlikely and perhaps even impossible. Just as the speaker has carefully juxtaposed the images within the poem, the suggestions of coincidence and intent at the end of the poem, and the illusionary innocence of the octave with the melancholy ponderings of the sestet, he has also very cleverly juxtaposed the impromptu musings on a random scene of nature with the careful and deliberate construction of his sonnet - an intricate design, indeed.