Jeffrey Meyers: On "Fire and Ice"

The concise, laconic, perfect and perfectly savage "Fire and Ice," the antithesis of the long-winded "New Hampshire," belongs with the apocalyptic "Once by the Pacific." The alternatives in the title represent passion and hatred, two ways of destroying the world. The poem was inspired by a passage in Canto 32 of Dante's Inferno, in which the betrayers of their own kind are plunged, while in a fiery hell, up to their necks in ice: "a lake so bound with ice, / It did not took like water, but like a glass ... right clear / I saw, where sinners are preserved in ice." The last, understated word in Frost's poem, "suffice," clinches the meaning (like "difference" in "The Road Not Taken") by rhyming with the two lines that end in "ice" and enclosing that thematic word within itself.