

1978

Robert Frost: A Twentieth Century Poet of Man and Nature

Pauline Elaine Allen
University of Rhode Island

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/theses>

Terms of Use

All rights reserved under copyright.

Recommended Citation

Allen, Pauline Elaine, "Robert Frost: A Twentieth Century Poet of Man and Nature" (1978). *Open Access Master's Theses*. Paper 1101.
<https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/theses/1101>

This Thesis is brought to you by the University of Rhode Island. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons-group@uri.edu. For permission to reuse copyrighted content, contact the author directly.

ROBERT FROST: A TWENTIETH CENTURY POET

OF
MAN AND NATURE

BY
PAULINE ELAINE ALLEN

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN
ENGLISH

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

1978

MASTER OF ARTS THESIS

OF

PAULINE ELAINE ALLEN

Approved:

Thesis Committee

Major Professor

Jimmy Howard White

Burton G. Brown

Wilfred Paul Dooch

A. A. Michel

Dean of the Graduate School

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

1978

ABSTRACT

Robert Frost is a twentieth century poet who deals realistically with his world through man and nature. Frost is still widely thought of as a nature poet, but this is a misconception. Although most of his poems are filled with nature images, his real subject is humanity. Frost admitted that he "had only three or four pure nature poems. The rest were human portraits with a nature setting."

Frost's poetry differs from that of nineteenth century poetry in response and tone--his subtlety and sly wit is often undetected except by the most observant, his material is presented honestly and without sentimentality. Frost's focus remains on the drama of man in nature whether it is in his lyric, narrative, or dramatic poetry. The unique form of Frost's nature poetry represents his way of presenting man and nature along the usual lines of a contemporary poet.

In his themes of fear, isolation and acceptance, Frost is often in conflict with nature. He strives to keep man and nature independent of each other because they are separate entities, not to be unified, and not to be joined. Frost is well aware of man's limitations, and in coping with these limited capabilities he realizes that man must possess a strong faith in himself in order to maintain his equilibrium against nature.

Frost's dramatic poems reveal intricate tensions in human relationships. In his longer narrative poems he couples together inward fears and external problems with the most interesting results. In his lyric poetry, love appears to be more prevalent. Love, sex, and psychological relationships do, however, appear to be expressions of what he sees to be central to human relationships.

Robert Frost is a twentieth century poet of man and nature; he is a major poet of our time. To Frost, nature may be a symbol of man's relation to the world, but the most important aspect in his poetry remains his strong underlying message about man.

Chapter I, "The American Country Poet" attempts to demonstrate that Frost is a part of "the great outdoors" and not just a romantic, picturesque, or nature poet, although he possesses many of these characteristics. Chapter II discusses Frost's important themes of love, isolation, and acceptance. Chapter III examines his portrayal of human relationships on the neighborhood and the social level and concludes with an analysis of Frost's view of love, not only as an intimate relationship between two individuals, but as it affects the lives of nature, God, and humanity as well.

In addition, each chapter contains close readings of selected poems and critical responses given to suggest various interpretations. Biographical material is frequently used. Frost in his New England and Vermont home have given us the feeling of knowing the poet very well. Talking with his close friend and secretary, Roy Knyman, and his nephew, Ted Harrison, author of several excellent books on Frost, has given us a better understanding of Robert Frost.

PREFACE

"Robert Frost: A Twentieth Century Poet of Man and Nature" shows how a modern poet deals with his world of poetry through man and nature. Though man and nature were often combined, especially by earlier poets, Frost makes the important distinction of separating one from the other. How to deal realistically with nature in the midst of coping with man's limited capabilities is a prime concern for Frost. The fresh, creative manner in which he handles this problem further accounts for his status as a major poet of the twentieth century.

Chapter I, "Twentieth Century Poet" attempts to demonstrate that Frost is a poet of "man and nature" and not alone a romantic, pastoralist, or nature poet, although he possesses many of these characteristics. Chapter II discusses Frost's important themes of fear, isolation, and acceptance. Chapter III examines his portrayal of human relationships on the psychological and the sexual level and concludes with an analysis of Frost's view of love, not only as it involves relationships between man and woman, but as it embraces the love of nature, God, and humanity as well.

In addition, each section contains close readings of selected poems and critical opinions cited to support various contentions. Biographical material is frequently used. Visits to his New Hampshire and Vermont homes have given me the feeling of knowing the poet very well. Talking with his close friend and secretary, Kay Morrison, and her husband, Ted Morrison, author of several articles about Frost, has given me a better understanding of Robert Frost.

Frost is a poet of people. He writes about the human condition through the subtle backdrop of nature in such a way that at times he may deceive the reader into thinking that he is a nature poet and no more. While he writes about the country things he knows and loves best, his statement is always decidedly about humanity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE POET AS MAN	10
1. The Poet as Man	10
2. The Poet as Artist	15
3. The Poet as Citizen	20
III. THE POET AS NATURE POET	25
1. The Poet as Nature Poet	25
2. The Poet as Nature Poet	30
3. The Poet as Nature Poet	35
4. The Poet as Nature Poet	40
5. The Poet as Nature Poet	45
6. The Poet as Nature Poet	50
7. The Poet as Nature Poet	55
8. The Poet as Nature Poet	60
9. The Poet as Nature Poet	65
10. The Poet as Nature Poet	70
11. The Poet as Nature Poet	75
12. The Poet as Nature Poet	80
13. The Poet as Nature Poet	85
14. The Poet as Nature Poet	90
15. The Poet as Nature Poet	95
16. The Poet as Nature Poet	100
17. The Poet as Nature Poet	105
18. The Poet as Nature Poet	110
19. The Poet as Nature Poet	115
20. The Poet as Nature Poet	120
21. The Poet as Nature Poet	125
22. The Poet as Nature Poet	130
23. The Poet as Nature Poet	135
24. The Poet as Nature Poet	140
25. The Poet as Nature Poet	145
26. The Poet as Nature Poet	150
27. The Poet as Nature Poet	155
28. The Poet as Nature Poet	160
29. The Poet as Nature Poet	165
30. The Poet as Nature Poet	170
31. The Poet as Nature Poet	175
32. The Poet as Nature Poet	180
33. The Poet as Nature Poet	185
34. The Poet as Nature Poet	190
35. The Poet as Nature Poet	195
36. The Poet as Nature Poet	200
37. The Poet as Nature Poet	205
38. The Poet as Nature Poet	210
39. The Poet as Nature Poet	215
40. The Poet as Nature Poet	220
41. The Poet as Nature Poet	225
42. The Poet as Nature Poet	230
43. The Poet as Nature Poet	235
44. The Poet as Nature Poet	240
45. The Poet as Nature Poet	245
46. The Poet as Nature Poet	250
47. The Poet as Nature Poet	255
48. The Poet as Nature Poet	260
49. The Poet as Nature Poet	265
50. The Poet as Nature Poet	270
51. The Poet as Nature Poet	275
52. The Poet as Nature Poet	280
53. The Poet as Nature Poet	285
54. The Poet as Nature Poet	290
55. The Poet as Nature Poet	295
56. The Poet as Nature Poet	300
57. The Poet as Nature Poet	305
58. The Poet as Nature Poet	310
59. The Poet as Nature Poet	315
60. The Poet as Nature Poet	320
61. The Poet as Nature Poet	325
62. The Poet as Nature Poet	330
63. The Poet as Nature Poet	335
64. The Poet as Nature Poet	340
65. The Poet as Nature Poet	345
66. The Poet as Nature Poet	350
67. The Poet as Nature Poet	355
68. The Poet as Nature Poet	360
69. The Poet as Nature Poet	365
70. The Poet as Nature Poet	370
71. The Poet as Nature Poet	375
72. The Poet as Nature Poet	380
73. The Poet as Nature Poet	385
74. The Poet as Nature Poet	390
75. The Poet as Nature Poet	395
76. The Poet as Nature Poet	400
77. The Poet as Nature Poet	405
78. The Poet as Nature Poet	410
79. The Poet as Nature Poet	415
80. The Poet as Nature Poet	420
81. The Poet as Nature Poet	425
82. The Poet as Nature Poet	430
83. The Poet as Nature Poet	435
84. The Poet as Nature Poet	440
85. The Poet as Nature Poet	445
86. The Poet as Nature Poet	450
87. The Poet as Nature Poet	455
88. The Poet as Nature Poet	460
89. The Poet as Nature Poet	465
90. The Poet as Nature Poet	470
91. The Poet as Nature Poet	475
92. The Poet as Nature Poet	480
93. The Poet as Nature Poet	485
94. The Poet as Nature Poet	490
95. The Poet as Nature Poet	495
96. The Poet as Nature Poet	500
97. The Poet as Nature Poet	505
98. The Poet as Nature Poet	510
99. The Poet as Nature Poet	515
100. The Poet as Nature Poet	520

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. TWENTIETH CENTURY POET	
1. Romantic Tendencies	2
2. Pastoral Tendencies	8
3. View of Nature	15
II. THEMES	
1. Fear	26
2. Isolation	33
3. Acceptance	44
III. HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS	
1. Psychological	49
2. Sexual	57
3. Love	68
BIBLIOGRAPHY	76

CHAPTER ONE

TWENTIETH CENTURY POET

The style of writing which is usually characteristic of modern poetry is noticeably absent in Robert Frost's verse. During a period when modern poetry was becoming more complex, Frost succeeded in using a refined but simplified language without simplifying its meaning. It is understandable, therefore, why there is confusion in literary circles in attempting to classify Frost. For those to whom nature is synonymous with simplicity and optimism, Frost emerges as a romantic. Others find Frost's penchant for rural life the sure sign of a pastoral poet. Many simply refer to him as a nature poet, wide as that term may be.

Another reason for discord on this issue arises from the fact that many of Frost's best poems have been misinterpreted, and some of his greatest poems appear to have been neglected.¹ Misinterpretations occur particularly in the area pertaining to man and nature. Frost loved man and nature equally, but he felt that the two should be kept apart. For Frost, man and nature must be considered distinct entities, for man is mortal and nature eternal. A nature poet or a romantic such as Wordsworth combines man and nature, but Frost keeps them separated except when they meet during an encounter. At such times Frost deftly displays the interaction between the two.

The folksy Currier and Ives images projected in Frost's poetry is not an indication that he is unsophisticated or that he lacks the stature ordinarily associated with a renowned modern writer. It is

¹ Lora Ann Reuseh, "Man and Nature in the Poetry of Robert Frost," DA, I (1972), 96A (Purdue Univ.).

important to remember that a poet's modernity is not contingent upon subject matter alone. What is important in assessing a poet as modern is whether he deals with the major problems that are representative of his time. Frost's concerns are with nature and man and man's confrontations; and when dealing with them, he incorporates new and fresh ideas that are distinctively of the twentieth century.

1. Romantic Tendencies

Romanticism cannot easily be defined in simple terms because it is a word far too complex for generalities. In attempting to describe the romantic period, such characteristics as "a revolt from reason" or "a movement back to nature" are commonly used. To define exactly what this period is or is not can be perplexing. Jacques Barzun offers an appropriate comment: "Mention any such characteristic and a contrary-minded critic will name you a Romanticist who did not possess it; he may even produce one who clearly strove for the opposite."³

If, however, Frost bears a strong resemblance to the romantics, it is not without good reason. He was closely allied with the romantics in many ways—in the deep feeling he had for nature, and in the way he wrote about rural life. Frost was unpretentious and straightforward in his writing. Indications of romanticism appear in his use of the emotional themes of isolation, despair, and alienation.

While the romantics had a tendency to join man with nature in a

² John F. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 181, 185. Hereafter cited in the text.

³ Jacques Barzun, Classic, Romantic and Modern (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), p.13.

benevolent bond, Frost arranged confrontations between the two for a number of effects. Clark Griffith in his article, "Frost and the American View of Nature," says that when Frost's man and nature confront each other, man often discovers meaningful facts about himself and his world. The speaker in "Mending Wall" is in the presence of Mother Nature who teaches him an important lesson in social relationships.⁴

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;⁵
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

The culprit is, of course, nature who comes to the wall in the form of frost or a ground swell to take down an unnatural barrier by natural forces.

. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go. (p.23)

.
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apples will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
'Why do they make good neighbors? (p.24)

⁴Clark Griffith, "Frost and the American View of Nature," American Quarterly, XX, (Spring 1968), 21.

⁵Robert Frost, Selected Poems of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1963), p.23. All page numbers following quotations from Frost's poetry refer to this edition of his collected poems unless noted otherwise.

Each spring the speaker arranges a meeting with his neighbor so that they might repair the wall together. It becomes apparent that there are now two sets of opposing forces--the wall along with the "something" that wants it down, and the two men with contrasting views, the neighbor fenced within his primitive pines and the speaker within his cultivated orchard. The speaker becomes playful and teasingly asks whom they're walling in or walling out, but his neighbor, a doltish man who is completely devoid of imagination, cannot think beyond the proverb told to him by his father, "Good fences make good neighbors."

This is fundamentally a romantic position in which nature's lesson is easily apparent to man. Although the tone of the poem is slyly humorous, the meaning of the wall must be considered more seriously. Griffith points out that while nature appears to reject the barriers that separate men from one another, the thing that brings them together is the wall which lies between them. Without the wall, the speaker and his neighbor could have no relationship. How ambiguous it is that the two are brought together by the very thing which, in all actuality, separates them! ⁶

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is a similar poem, at least in the way it instructs about social context. The speaker becomes aware of what society expects of him and what he must do as an individual when placed in close contact with nature.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

(p.140)

There are contrasts again in this poem--in both the first and the

⁶ Griffith, p. 22.

second stanzas. Here in the first stanza the speaker must be considered as being rather irrational in relation to the owner of the woods, because the owner of the woods has sense enough to be safely back in the village during a storm.

The second stanza concerns the speaker and his horse. In spite of the apparent comradeship between man and beast, the horse shakes his harness bells with impatience during his master's prolonged stay in the snow. The speaker seems to be intent on being impractical. However, to be practical is not the same as being perceptive, and it is because of his sensitivity that the speaker remains. In his delayed departure, the speaker is awakened to an important decision which is revealed in the final stanza.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
 But I have promises to keep,
 And miles to go before I sleep,
 And miles to go before I sleep.

(p.140)

Many poets write about the lure of the sea, but for Frost it is the lure of the dark woods that he finds irresistible. Frost's woods often have a seductive, hypnotic effect upon him. Undoubtedly there is an attraction here as the trees, capped with snow, bend forward gently towards the speaker in a gesture of reaching out for someone or something to touch. In one final "momentary stay" the speaker recovers his senses and comes to the realization of his responsibilities.

The repetitive last lines indicate the speaker's serious attempt to fulfill his promises to himself and to society.⁷ Even though the woods do not speak in so many words, a communication through nature is

⁷ John Holmes, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Reading Modern Poetry by Paul Engle. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1968), p. 4.

very much in evidence.

While the picture presented is a nineteenth century romantic one, the approach is definitely twentieth century. Nature, in this poem, made her wordless contact to the speaker through a silent intuition, and without any obvious indication. A nineteenth century approach would be less oblique.

The difference is succinctly explained by Griffith in terms of how nature arrives at her teachings. The teachings, he says, come about through "a haze of contradiction, mystery, and uncertainty," and it is out of this that nature emerges as the ambiguous teacher. Frost would have been pleased if nature were to provide him with wise and enduring truths so that he might learn more about himself and society, but Frost knew that because man was man, and not a kin to nature, he was not welcome to share in nature's secrets. Not only was man unwelcome, but he was often spurned by nature precisely at times when he needed her most. With this realization, it is little wonder that the tone of much of Frost's poetry touches on the poignant, and much ends, rather bewilderingly, in ambiguity.⁸

In his article, "Robert Frost: Dark Romantic," Carl Lindner goes one step further by pointing out that Frost is not a mere romantic, but like Melville, is a "dark romantic." Lindner maintains that the terror of discovering truth, the sense of loss, and uncertainty are "dark" aspects derived from the American romantic tradition upon which Frost leaned heavily. Both Frost and Melville establish man in a natural setting faced with uncertainty. Their protagonists behold a world beset with indifference; it is a world to which a "painful

⁸ Griffith, pp. 22, 29.

sense of loss" is inevitable. For the dark American writer, nature has no answers and this is why man appears frightened and confused.⁹

Nietzsche reiterates very much the same philosophy when he says that a fault of the romantics lay in trying to seek a final answer to the problems of human existence.¹⁰ Whereby a romantic such as Emily Dickinson felt outrage or anger in nature's failures, Frost was detached enough to solve the situation by his twentieth century solution--acceptance--and herein lies another important difference in separating the romantics from the moderns.

Charles Carmichael, in his "Robert Frost as a Romantic" implies that the tension in Frost's subject-object situations is romantically orientated. However, Carmichael states that in Frost's later years, when the subject and object tension lessens, so does the quality of his poetry. For Carmichael, then, Frost tends to become a lesser romantic in his later life. It is interesting to note that Carmichael places Frost in such a late period of romanticism that he says Frost degenerates into a stylist, and then, in turn, becomes a mannerist. This is to say that Frost, from Carmichael's standpoint, ends up playing the role of Frost both in his real life and in his poetry.¹¹ Since Carmichael couples Frost and Hemingway together as romantics, a further distinction might have to be made. Both are twentieth century writers, and if they are to be categorized by Mr. Carmichael, a more fitting appellation might

⁹Carl M. Lindner, "Robert Frost: Dark Romantic," Arizona Quarterly, XXIX, (1973), 235.

¹⁰Charles Carmichael, "Robert Frost as a Romantic," in Frost: Centennial Essays, ed. Jac L. Tharpe, (Jackson Univ. Press of Mississippi 1974), p. 149.

¹¹Carmichael, pp. 147, 164.

be post-romantic as opposed to the simpler term, romantic.

Most critics will agree that Frost has many romantic qualities. But if we use Barzun's suggestion in determining a romantic, then Frost, or any other writer for that matter, cannot be labeled a romantic solely from his romantic tendencies. It is the poet's modernity that then takes the first consideration.

In the two poems mentioned, Frost makes some interesting observations. He finds that nature is often unfriendly and ambiguous, and that man must learn acceptance when faced with problems where there are no solutions. Unlike the nineteenth century romantics who often had their "quarrels" with reality, Frost confronts his world as it actually exists in the straightforward and direct manner of a modern who accepts and copes with his fate.

2. Pastoral Tendencies

A pastoral poem, according to Holman's A Handbook of Literature, is a poem about shepherds and rustic life. Greek pastorals existed in three forms: the dialogue or singing-match which was usually between two shepherds; the monologue, the plaint of a lovesick shepherd; and the elegy for a dead friend. Poets wrote of their friends as though they were poetic shepherds in rural scenes. This was an artificial form, because the shepherds spoke in courtly language and were garbed in attire more suitable to the drawing room than the rolling hills.¹²

Pastoral poetry usually depicts nature as lush and green and gentle. The forces of nature produce positive effects, that is, the rains or snows are contributing factors to man in that they fill his streams or insulate his crops for greater rewards in the future. Nature, for

¹²William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, revised by C. Hugh Holman (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), p. 342.

pastoralists, is seldom frightening or threatening, or anything short of ideal. Pastoral characters are placid, innocent people living out their tranquil loves in sweet simplicity. We cannot say, however, that these traits occur in Frost's poetry.

John Lynen gives perhaps the most plausible reason for Frost's link with pastoralism when he says: "Pastoralism and related terms have been applied to Frost at random simply as convenient descriptive labels" (Lynen, p.8). He tries to convince us that Frost is a pastoral poet and provides us with lengthy and rather original descriptions of pastoralism, but, oddly enough, Frost oftentimes fails to fit into Lynen's contrived patterns. Lynen maintains that "the pastoralist must of necessity be a man of sophistication writing for a sophisticated audience, for to yearn for the rustic life one must first know the great world from which it offers an escape" (Lynen, p.13). It is true that Frost had a first-hand view of city life since he lived in the city until he was eleven years old, but he does not consider the country a millennium, by any means.

Lynen says further, "The pastoral is the product of a very highly developed society and it arises from the impulse to look back with yearning and a degree of nostalgia toward the simpler purer life which such a society has left behind" (Lynen, p.12). Lynen cannot rightfully allude to Frost, since nostalgia is not a theme in Frost's verse. Frost is concerned with the current issues of his time and with the future. He seldom looks backward. To attest to that, consider the titles of many of his poems, written in the present tense: "Gathering Leaves," "Putting in the Seed," "Waiting," "Mowing," and "It Is Almost the Year Two Thousand." To be sure, Frost looks back to his youth in "To

Earthward," but youth is used here principally for comparison and is not a dominant theme in the poem.

Many of Frost's poems appear to be pastoral. One of the first to come to mind is "The Pasture" because Frost places it at the beginning of his collections. The setting is, of course, in a pasture where a cow is looking after her newborn calf. The pasture spring has been stopped up by leaves, and the speaker is going to clear it. He invites his friend to come with him.

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I sha'n't be gone long.--You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I sha'n't be gone long--You come too.

(p.5)

Love is rarely mentioned directly in Frost's poetry. A close look reveals the speaker's deep feelings without the obvious words.¹³ The scene is one of protectiveness and tenderness which the speaker wishes to share with the girl for a few cherished moments. Frost's timid manner of expressing his emotion comes across appealingly. And the repetition of "You come too" changes a mere invitation to a coaxing imperative. In the final analysis, then, this poem is not a pastoral poem after all, but a love poem.

"The Black Cottage" and "The Census Taker" belie the fact that Frost writes with nostalgia. In the first poem an abandoned cottage reflects the world of the old woman who once lived there.

¹³ Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1961), p.128. Hereafter cited as Thompson, Fire and Ice.

We chanced in passing by that afternoon
 To catch it in a sort of special picture
 Among tar-banded ancient cherry trees,
 Set well back from the road in rank lodged grass
 The little cottage we were speaking of,
 A front with just a door between two windows,
 Fresh painted by the shower a velvet black.

The path was a vague parting in the grass
 That led us to a weathered window sill.

(p. 45)

The warping boards pull out their old nails
 With none to tread and put them in their place.

(p. 46)

The tiny house, so weatherbeaten and in need of paint, absorbs so much moisture during a rainstorm that it turns the cottage the color of black velvet. A path leading to the house is barely visible through the undergrowth and old, shrunken boards add to this picture of deterioration. We are told by the minister that the deceased woman's two sons were to summer at the house, but they never came. This is not a place that one would long to return to; this is not a scene representative of a pretty pastoral.

"The Census Taker" furnishes an even more desolate picture.

I came an errand one cloud-blowing evening
 To a slab-built, black-paper-covered house
 Of one room and one window and one door,
 The only dwelling in a waste cut over
 A hundred square miles round it in the mountains:
 And that not dwelt in now by men or women. (p. 110)

An emptiness flayed to the very stone.
 I found no people that dared show themselves,
 None not in hiding from the outward eye.
 The time was autumn, but how anyone
 Could tell the time of year when every tree
 That could have dropped a leaf was down itself
 And nothing but the stump of it was left

Now bringing out its rings in sugar of pitch;
 And every tree up stood a rotting trunk
 Without a single leaf to spend on autumn,
 Or branch to whistle after what was spent.
 (p. 111)

This is hardly a pastoral setting. A bleak one-room house standing in equally bleak surroundings becomes a Frostian wasteland. The rotting trees not only have no leaves to shed, they have no branches from which to shed them. Nothing alive remains; one cannot ever determine which season it is, since everything is dead. This is actually a reversal of the pastoral in that the country appears morbid and unattractive. The country has been abandoned for the city, not because the hill people yearned for city life, but simply as a matter of survival.

Frost's characters are no more pastoral than his landscapes. The woman in "Home Burial" certainly is not a pastoral type. She is unable to cope with life after the death of her child. Every time she descends the stairway of her house, she can look out of the window and see the newly dug grave. She wonders why her husband never notices. Her husband replies that the little graveyard has been there since he was born and he's used to it. The woman then accuses him of being insensitive.

If you had any feelings, you that dug
 With your own hand--how could you?--his little grave;
 I saw you from that very window there,
 Making the gravel leap and leap in the air,
 Leap up, like that, and land so lightly
 And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
 I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.
 And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
 To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.
 Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice
 Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,
 But I went near to see you with my own eyes.
 You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
 Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave
 And talk about your every day concerns.

(pp. 43-44)

The woman thinks that her husband took the grave digging too lightly. If he cared, his thoughts would have been with the child and he could not have sat there with the earth from the grave still fresh on his shoes. Instead, his thoughts consist of something as mundane as whether or not the birch fence would hold up in bad weather.

You couldn't care! The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all.
No, from the time when one is sick to death,
One is alone, and he dies more alone.
Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand.
(p.44)

The husband now observes another problem in addition to his wife's inability to cope with her grief. He sees a mutual problem in lack of communication. In his attempt to relate to his wife he realizes that this is a situation common to male and female. Neither is to blame. The wife is overly sensitive and concerned with her own thoughts; and the husband, although he is sensitive, lacks verbal finesse for self expression and is preoccupied with worldly endeavors, particularly with the responsibility of his role as family provider. While the couple cannot achieve a solution to their problem, they at least recognize the fact that a problem exists. The woman is in a highly emotional state and wants to leave to talk it out with someone else; the husband threatens to bring her back by force if need be, but this is only a threat.

The situation in the poem is also similar to real life. Even though there is love on the part of each partner, there is often a communication gap. The husband says, "A man must partly give up being a man/ With women-folk," (p. 43), but the point that Frost makes is that

there have always been barriers to understanding between male and female simply because of their contrasting natures. The husband and wife in this poem are not pastoral characters. They are too caught up in a web of complexities of their personal lives and of society. They have progressed beyond the state of simplistic pastoralism.

The woman in "A Servant to Servants" decidedly is not a pastoral character either. She is a farmer's wife so broken by overwork that she considers herself merely a "servant to servants." She has been committed once and still totters in the delicate balance between sanity and insanity.

The speaker in the poem is based upon a farm wife whom Frost met while he was camping with his family one summer in northern Vermont. During his repeated visits to the farmhouse to buy milk and eggs, Frost had many opportunities to talk with the woman. He described her as "haggard and careworn from her daily rounds of cooking for her husband and his hired men." She confided her fears to him that she could not keep up the pace demanded of her much longer. Although Frost was sympathetic to her predicament, he was touched more by her fears. ¹⁴

I didn't make you know how glad I was
 To have you come and camp here on our land.
 I promised myself to get down some day
 And see the way you lived, but I don't know!
 With a houseful of hungry men to feed
 I guess you'd find . . . It seems to me
 I can't express my feelings any more
 Than I can raise my voice or want to lift
 My hand (oh, I can lift it when I have to).
 Did ever you feel so? I hope you never.
 It's got so I don't even know for sure
 Whether I am glad, sorry, or anything. ¹⁵

¹⁴ Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 352. Hereafter cited as Thompson, Vol.I. Subsequent volumes cited as Thompson, Vol.II or Vol.III.

¹⁵ Robert Frost, Complete Poems of Robert Frost, (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1949), p 82. Hereafter cited as Frost.

Here we see a woman struggling hard to contend with her difficult work-a-day world. She is so overworked and exhausted that she barely has the energy for any other physical or mental exertion except those which are now mechanical to her. She tries to console herself with the beauty of her surroundings, but she can't force her mind even to accept this.

You take the lake. I look and look at it.
 I see it's a fair, pretty sheet of water.
 I stand and make myself repeat out loud
 The advantages it has, so long and narrow,
 Like a deep piece of some old running river
 Cut short off at both ends
 (Frost, p.82)

It is tragic that she realizes her plight and cannot help herself, but it is more tragic that there is no one close enough to her to realize it, too. In this presentation Frost touches upon the need for close human relationships. "A Servant to Servants" shows an individual's desperate struggle for survival. There is no way in which this pathetic picture can be likened to that of the pastoral.

Frost's country, then, is not the epitome of innocence and purity; it is not a picture-book pastoral. To live in Frost's country one must be prepared to face the challenges with which one is confronted, particularly those of nature. This is not an easy life. The work is arduous as we can see from "A Servant to Servants"; it can break the spirit of the strongest. It's a lonely life, for often in the struggle for survival, there is little human contact. Frost's country is not an escape from the city; it's only an alternative to the city on a quieter and seemingly less hectic scale. The complexities are still there--for it is no pastoral landscape.

3. View of Nature

While Frost continually uses nature images, he cannot simply be

labeled a nature poet, any more than he can be easily called a romantic or pastoralist. Whether he writes about storms or stars, mowing or mending walls, his protagonists nearly always appear as farm people of remote areas. Sometimes it is Frost himself who is on a rural jaunt into encounters amid country surroundings. Frost supports the contention that he is a poet of man and nature; in a television interview in 1952, he said, "I guess I'm not a nature poet. I have written only two poems without a human being in them." ¹⁶

Nature poets are often too loosely grouped together. Because of this, Frost is found in close company with Emerson and Thoreau. In his essay "Nature" Emerson evaluated nature and achieved a kind of pantheistic unity of man, God, and nature. ¹⁷ In contrast, Frost's image of God is shadowy, remote, and not necessarily related to man and nature. As for Thoreau, he is more attuned to Emerson's concept of religion than to Frost's. Thoreau and Emerson considered themselves part or parcel of God. ¹⁸

There is, however, a similarity between Thoreau and Frost in their nature view. Thoreau's poem "Smoke," abundant with nature images, is reminiscent of many of Frost's poems. A closer inspection reveals that something very vital in Frost's poetry is missing in Thoreau's, that is Thoreau's use of nature alone, without a human being.

¹⁶ Donald J. Grenier, Robert Frost The Poet and His Critics (Chicago: American Library Assoc., 1974), p.207.

¹⁷ August Derleth, Emerson, Our Contemporary (London: Collier-MacMillan, Ltd., 1970), p.66.

¹⁸ T. Morris Longstreth, Henry Thoreau: American Rebel (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1963), p.53.

Light-winged Smoke, Icarian bird,
 Melting thy pinions in thy upward flight,
 Lark without song, and messenger of dawn,
 Circling above the hamlets at thy nest;
 Or else, departing dream, and shadowy form
 Of midnight vision, gathering up thy skirts;
 By night star-veiling, and by day
 Darkening the light and blotting out the sun;
 Go thou my incense upward from this hearth,
 And ask the gods to pardon this clear flame. 19

Like Thoreau, Frost was at peace in the woods. Frost's caretaker, Wade Van Dore, described him as "a deer at the edge of a forest ready to leap into it and never return." There are many passages which indicate Frost's desire to "steal away, and stay away," but, unlike Thoreau, Frost never went off to the wilderness to live. Perhaps he would have done so had not his early marriage and fast growing family reminded him that he had "promises to keep." 20

Frost's first published poem "My Butterfly" (1894) abounds with nature. This is an unusual poem for Frost, because it contains obvious influences from other writers, other periods; in none of his other poems does he appear as archaic.

Thine emulous fond flowers are dead, too,
 And the daft sun-assaulter, he
 That frightened thee so oft, is fled or dead:
 Save only me
 (Nor is it sad to thee!)
 Save only me
 There is none left to mourn thee in the fields.

The gray grass is scarce dappled with the snow;
 Its two banks have not shut upon the river;
 But is long ago--
 It seems forever--

19 Perry Miller, Gen.ed. Major Writers of America (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), p.680.

20 Wade Van Dore, "Robert Frost and Wilderness," The Living Wilderness, XXXIV, (Summer 1970), 47-49.

Since first I saw thee glance,
 With all thy dazzling other ones,
 In airy dalliance,
 Precipitate in love,
 Tossed, tangled, whirled and whirled above,
 Like a limp rose-wreath in a fairy dance.

(Frost, p.41)

With the use of such words as "thine" and "thee" Frost plucks us out of the twentieth century and drops us into the eighteenth century of the romantics for a touch of Robert Burns. The nature images and his usage of hyphenated words reflect Thoreau's poetic style. God's appearance in the fifth stanza as a gentle, albeit ungentle, being suggest overtones of Blake.

And there were other things:
 It seemed God let thee flutter from his gentle clasp:
 Then fearful he had let thee win
 Too far beyond him to be gathered in,
 Snatched thee, o'ereager, with ungentle grasp.

(Frost, pp.41-42)

In the next to the last stanza the poet expresses the joy given him by the butterfly, and in the final stanza he finds the sorrowful evidence of the butterfly's demise.

Then when I was distraught
 And could not speak,
 Sidelong, full on my cheek,
 What should that reckless zephyr fling
 But the wild touch of thy dye-dusty wing!

I found that wing broken today!
 For thou art dead, I said,
 And the strange birds say.
 I found it with the withered leaves
 Under the eaves.

(Frost, p.42)

Richard Reed is singularly unimpressed by "My Butterfly" and terms Frost's concern for departed wildlife as "the grossest example of sentimentality in A Boy's Will." ²¹ Lawrence Thompson reports that when

²¹ Richard Reed, "The Animal World in Robert Frost's Poetry," Frost: Centennial Essays, II, ed. Jac Tharpe, (Jackson: Univ. of Miss., 1976), p.160.

Frost finished this poem he was overjoyed in knowing that he had finally achieved, together with the poetic qualities, the technical qualities of sound, rhythm, and tone which heretofore had seemed just beyond his reach.²²

In "My Butterfly" the poet (man) is allied with the butterfly (nature) through similar experiences. It is an important poem because it serves as an introductory vehicle in establishing Frost's theme of man and nature, and also sets the pattern of this theme which is prevalent throughout all of Frost's poetry.

Nina Baym sees Frost as a nature poet of the unconventional variety. In her article, "An Approach to Robert Frost's Nature Poetry," she states that those who think of Frost as a nature poet and assume that he is a version of Emerson or Wordsworth are incorrect in thinking that this is the only way of being a nature poet. She maintains that to use nature one does not have to use it in Emersonian or Wordsworthian fashion.²³

Many critics, according to Baym, assume that Frost's use of seasonal imagery implies a theme of rebirth, but Frost hastens all his seasons toward winter instead of the usual regenerate spring. Baym cites "The Onset" as a poem in which the poet cannot commit himself wholly to an affirmation. In this poem the poet, fascinated by the first snowfall of the season, would like to lie upon the ground and die under the still, white blanket of snow. He is mindful that the earth's death under the snow is never permanent when he says, "I know that winter death has never tried/The earth but it has failed." (p.141). Today's

²² Thompson, Vol.I, p.163.

²³ Nina Baym, "An Approach to Robert Frost's Nature Poetry," American Quarterly, Winter 1965, pp.713-714.

snow drifts will become April's streams leaving the only reminder of white to be seen in a birch tree or a house or church. Ordinarily the color white connotes purity or innocence; to Frost it often represents snow, or winter, or death. The observation by Baym that this poem is a tribute to winter rather than spring is an astute one. Many other Frost poems can be seen the same way.

Another good observation by Baym is her consideration of Frost as the "one modern poet for whom scientific truth is not necessarily at odds with poetry." In "The Wood-Pile" Frost seems to be combining nature imagery with the second law of thermodynamics. This law states that the amount of disorder in our universe is always increasing. Heat cannot flow from a cold body to a hot body. "Since the predominant temperature of our universe is cold," according to Baym, "the predominant direction of heat flow is from individual bodies out into their environment, and as the temperature of the body approaches that of its environment it runs down, stops working. The process being irreversible, is one of a universe getting increasingly run-down, increasingly disorderly." ²⁴

It was a cord of maple, cut and split
 And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.
 And not another like it could I see.
 No runner tracks in the year's snow looped near it.
 And it was older sure than this year's cutting
 Or even last year's or the year's before.
 The wood was gray and the bark warping off it
 And the pile somewhat sunken.

Frost provides a description of the wood-pile, how it looked, its age, its strength. He describes not only what it was, but what it wasn't as well.

²⁴ Baym, pp. 713-719.

Clematis

Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.
 What held it though on one side was a tree
 Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,
 These latter about to fall. I thought that only
 Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
 Could so forget his handiwork on which
 He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
 And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
 To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
 With the slow smokeless burning of decay. (p.69)

The wood-pile was held intact by vines of clematis and a tree, as opposed to the man-made stake and prop which was about to collapse. The poet wonders why anyone would work so hard to cut and stack the wood and then go off and leave it to waste away. Here is a classic example of the thermodynamics law. The wood-pile, as man's encounter with nature represents movement toward nothingness.

While Baym considers both of these poems nature poems, she neglects to acknowledge the presence of Frost's man in addition to nature. Any detail as pertinent to Frost's writing should not go disregarded! Even though the man who chopped the wood has left years ago, his presence is still strongly felt.

Professor Theodore Morrison, who knew Robert Frost for many years, reveals a different perspective when he declares Frost a country poet rather than a nature poet. The difference, Morrison contends, is considerable. Frost may have known such rudiments of farming as planting a garden or cutting down trees, but he was never seriously a farmer. By the same token, he was not anti-metropolitan, either. Professor Morrison describes Frost as a "citizen of the world who cultivated his inclination toward country things." More went into his poems than superficial glances of the New England landscape, sprinkled here and there with rural inhabitants. Frost delved deep into the philosophy, mores, and

mental outlook of New England as he saw it and felt it.

Morrison suggests that to remove Frost's birches and rose pogonias from his poetry would take away the very essence which makes his poetry distinctive. And if most Americans are so cosmopolitan that they cannot identify with his pastures or hyla brooks, could it be because he fails to speak our language or because we fail to speak his?

A poet who is also a countryman perceives rural life too well to be taken in by nature's ostensible communiqué, yet there is a responsiveness to nature in "A Leaf Treader."²⁵ The first stanza portrays the poet as "autumn tired" after his long walk in the "autumn" of his life. In the second stanza, the poet reflects upon the summer leaves who seemed to speak to him.

All summer long they were overhead, more lifted up
 than I.
 To come to their final place in earth they had to
 pass me by.
 All summer long I thought I heard them threatening
 under their breath.
 And when they came it seemed with a will to carry me
 with them to death. (Frost, p.388)

All during the summer the leaves looked down upon him but they had to come past him in their final resting place on the ground. As they fell to their death he imagined he heard their whispering threats to take him with them. The last stanza is one of courage.

They spoke to the fugitive in my heart as if it were
 leaf to leaf.
 They tapped at my eyelids and touched my lips with an
 invitation to grief.
 But it was no reason I had to go because they had to
 go.
 Now up my knee to keep on top of another year of snow.
 (Frost, p.388)

²⁵ Theodore Morrison, "Frost: Country Poet and Cosmopolitan Poet," Yale Review, (Winter 1969), pp. 179-96.

The "fugitive" in his heart would like to accept the invitation to flee from life (even if the only alternative is death) because it would offer peace. But the speaker reflects upon the situation, and just as in "Stopping by Woods," he turns away from the invitation knowing that he must go on and triumph over death.

"Come In" is another poem in which Frost presents the separateness of man and nature.

As I came to the edge of the woods,
Thrush music--hark!
Now it was dusk outside,
Inside it was dark.

Too dark in the woods for a bird
By sleight of wing
To better its perch for the night,
Though it still could sing.

The last of the light of the sun
That had died in the west
Still lived for one song more
In a thrush's breast.

(p.222)

"Come In" begins with simple images that entwine with one another as the poem progresses. It is filled with nature contrast's of darkness and light, a bird's song and no song at all. The final stanzas become more than contrast and descriptive nature.

Far in the pillared dark
Thrush music went--
Almost like a call to come in
To the dark and lament.

But no, I was out for stars:
I would not come in.
I meant not even if asked,
And I hadn't been.

(p.222)

A thrush calls forth an invitation to come in, but a closer look reveals a key word in "almost" which tells us that any invitation is only a conjecture due to arrogance on the part of man. Man would like

to be important enough to warrant an invitation. The poet has long known that nature holds no particular regard for man so there could be no invitation at all, unless he conjured it up in his own mind. When the speaker says he was "out for stars" its an affirmation that he prefers the light of stars to the dark woods of the thrush's domain. Frost has no illusion about nature and will not be misled by her.

Frost's thrush as presented here is the reversal of Keat's nightingale. Elaine Barry notes that Keat's bird is a symbol of joy; and while the thrush sings a song of lament, the song is, nevertheless, an enticing "siren song."²⁶ Whatever the song, it has little effect on the poet because he has a strong sense of his direction in life.

Robert Rechnitz cites, "Once by the Pacific" as a poem of violence about man and nature. Rechnitz says that Frost in these lines demonstrates how easily the savage brutality in both man and nature may burst forth.²⁷

The shattered water made a misty din.
Great waves looked over others coming in,
And thought of doing something to the shore
That water never did to land before.
The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.
You could not tell, and yet it looked as if
The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
The cliff in being backed by continent;
It looked as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
Someone had better be prepared for rage.
There would be more than ocean water broken
Before God's last "Put out the Light" was spoken.

(pp.156-57)

²⁶ Elaine Barry, Robert Frost (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc., 1963), pp.27-28.

²⁷ Robert M. Rechnitz, "The Tragic Vision of Robert Frost," Frost: Centennial Essays, ed. Jac L. Tharpe, (Univ. Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 1974), p.139.

Here Frost alternates nature with man--first the violent confrontation of water against land, then the wildness of man with his hair blown over his face so that only the fierce gleam of his eyes is visible. Then, a prolonged darkness portends a terrible disaster which is about to befall man, and all the while the noise of the waves and the wind in the background add to the chaos. Frost then caps the whole picture by suggesting that the entire holocaust will take place on the shore of the Pacific (supposedly peaceful) Ocean!

The role of nature in Frost's poems is undeniably important, however, if one fails to see the role of man in his poetry, much of the meaning of what the poet has to say is lost. As a writer of twentieth century verse, Frost is realistic. If he were to write of nature without man he would project a perspective as erroneous as if he joined the two together. While Frost saw the miracles of nature, he was painfully aware of nature's destructive power. Man must keep his distance from nature in order to see her objectively. Nature is a force to be reckoned with not a force that man can identify with. Man, therefore, never does join with nature. Frost presents the two in conjunction with each other as though one were viewing the other through a pair of sage and watchful eyes. To understand Frost's use of man and nature is to understand what the poet is truly trying to convey through his poetry.

CHAPTER TWO

THEMES OF FEAR, ISOLATION, AND ACCEPTANCE

Few poets are more aware of the limitations of man than Robert Frost. In coping with man's limited capabilities Frost knew that he must have strong faith in himself if he was to maintain his balance against nature. It was not an easy task to tenaciously and staunchly defend his belief in his powers. Out of the inner conflict between his faith and his doubts emerge the themes of fear, isolation and finally acceptance.

1. Fear

Frost was always burdened with fears. As a child, he had been afraid of his father who regarded a parent's role primarily as the administer of correction and physical punishment. Frost's mother, on the other hand, counterbalanced the situation by her leniency, although it was she who instilled in him the fear of the Heavenly Father. Mrs. Frost believed that the fear of the Lord was the beginning of wisdom. Poor, young Robbie could not separate the fear of a Heavenly Father from the fear of an earthly father, and thereby regarded both as bestowers of uncontrollable and harsh punishment.¹

Thomas McClanahan's article on Frost's theodicy points out the difference between Frost and the Puritans who thought themselves to be sinners in the hands of an angry God.² McClanahan says, "Frost's fear is of a force whose power is uncontrolled, the arbitrary God who

¹ Thompson, Vol.I, p. 23.

² Thomas McClanahan, "Frost's Theodicy: 'Word I Had No One Left But God,'" Frost: Centennial Essays II, ed. Jac Tharpe, (Jackson: Univ. Press of Miss., 1976), p. 121.

surfaces in Steeple Bush to offer success or failure without regard for reason." The poet in "The Fear of God" warns:

If you should rise from Nowhere up to Somewhere,
 From being No one up to being Someone,
 Be sure to keep repeating to yourself
 You owe it to an arbitrary god
 Whose mercy to you rather than to others
 Won't bear too critical examination.
 Stay unassuming.

(p.258)

"Forgive, O Lord" displays much the same attitude about God.

Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee
 And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me. ³

In this satirical prayer Frost switches the position of God with man. The fearsome God that his mother taught him about has been replaced by a God of limited power and limited wisdom. McClanahan describes Frost's God as the "non-human otherness" manifested through nature in Frost's poems--a whimsical and often vindictive being. ⁴

Most of Frost's childhood fears remained with him all of his life. He was always afraid of the dark and slept with his door open so he could see a light. Thompson reports that until he was in high school Frost slept on a cot in his mother's bedroom. ⁵ Since all of their apartments were small and cramped, the sleeping arrangements were probably due more to a lack of space rather than any overwhelming fear or Oedipus complex. At any rate, he never entirely overcame his fear of the dark, and although the person in "The Night Light" is female, the poem appears to be autobiographical.

³ Robert Frost: The Poetry of Robert Frost, Edward Connery Latham, ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1972), p.428.

⁴ McClanahan, pp.114-115.

⁵ Thompson, Vol.I, p. 205.

She always had to burn a light
 Beside her attic bed at night.
 It gave bad dreams and broken sleep.
 But helped the Lord her soul to keep.
 Good gloom on her was thrown away
 It is on me by night or day,
 Who have, as I suppose, ahead
 The darkest of it still to dread. (p.255)

In his later years Frost's greatest fears occurred at night when everything was quiet. He would imagine that every creak of the old house announced the presence of an uninvited visitor. One particularly frightening noise took place in the house whenever the temperature dropped below zero. If a contracting nail in the wall pulled away from the wood, the revolver-like bang that ensued would set him trembling. ⁶

Snowstorms were always an immense concern to Frost. Even when a storm began with a whisper of fine flakes, it had a way of bursting into a full fledged blizzard. With winds driving snow in under the kitchen door, the old farmhouse would shake and rattle under its fury. Always fearful that the house would crumble before daybreak, Frost usually stayed up all night or, if he went to bed, he was unable to sleep. ⁷ Snowstorms of such intensity likely prompted the writing of "Storm Fear."

When the wind works against us in the dark,
 And pelts with snow
 The lower chamber window on the east,
 And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
 The beast,
 "Come out! Come out!--
 It costs no inward struggle not to go,
 Ah, no!
 I count our strength,
 Two and a child,
 Those of us not asleep subdued to mark

⁶ Thompson, Vol.I, p. 278.

⁷ Thompson, Vol.I, pp.279-280.

How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length,—
 How drifts are piled,
 Dooryard and road ungraded,
 Till even the comforting barn grows far away,
 And my heart owns a doubt
 Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
 And save ourselves unaided. (p.10)

Frost compares the wind to a doglike beast who taunts the inhabitants of the house to come out. He says he has no intention of going out because his little family is no competition against the ferocious world outside. As the storm continues and snow piles up, the barn, close by and replete with its warmth of animals and hay, appears to be beyond reach, and the poet voices his doubts that he will survive until morning.

As a young man, Frost was afraid of losing his future wife and ran away to the Dismal Swamp to escape disappointment. Later when she gave him back his ring, he threw it into the stove and stomped away vowing to kill himself.

Frost's fears never subsided. He was afraid of being a failure as a poet, he was afraid of becoming a conformist, he was afraid of talking in public. When he was a teacher in Derry, he wrote a commemorative poem for a chapel service in honor of Longfellow's birthday and although it was printed and distributed to the students, he refused to read it! ⁸

Since many of Frost's homes were located in secluded areas, Frost's fear of burglars and intruders was one fear that was justifiable and he bought a revolver for just such an unfortunate occasion. He considered any vagrant a potential murderer, barn-burner, or thief. ⁹ "The Smile: Her Word" reflects the fear of a person like this.

⁸ Thompson, Vol.I, p.328.

⁹ Thompson, Vol.I, p.279.

I didn't like the way he went away.
 That smile! It never came of being gay.
 Still he smiled--did you see him?--I was sure!
 Perhaps because we gave him only bread
 And the wretch knew from that that we were poor.
 Perhaps he let us give instead
 Of seizing from us as he might have seized.
 Perhaps he mocked at us for being wed,
 Or being very young (and he was pleased
 To have a vision of us old and dead).
 I wonder how far down the road he's got.
 He's watching from the woods as like as not. (p.82).

"The Fear" is another poem based on one of Frost's experiences.

One night when he was out walking with his son, he unintentionally was the cause of an episode in which a woman's secret fear was exposed. The woman, Frost had been told afterwards, had left her husband and now lived in an isolated farmhouse with another man. Darkness had just settled in and as the woman was driving home with her lover she saw Frost's face in the bushes. She mistakenly thought he was either her husband or someone sent by her husband to watch her. Frightened, she walked back to the road to find out who was there. ¹⁰

A lantern light from deeper in the barn
 Shone on a man and woman in the door
 And threw their lurching shadows on a house
 Nearby, all dark in very glossy window.
 A horse's hoof pawed once the hollow floor,
 And the back of the gig they stood beside
 Moved in a little. The man grasped a wheel,
 The woman spoke out sharply, "Whoa, stand still!
 I saw it just as plain as a white plate,"
 She said, "as the light on the dashboard ran
 Along the bushes at the roadside--a man's face.
 You must have seen it too."

"I didn't see it.

Are you sure--"

"Yes, I'm sure!"

"--it was a face?"

"Joel, I'll have to look. I can't go in,
 I can't, and leave a thing like that unsettled.
 Doors locked and curtains drawn will make no difference.
 I always have felt strange when we came home
 To the dark house after so long an absence,
 And the key rattled loudly into place
 Seemed to warn someone to be getting out
 At one door as we entered at another.
 What if I'm right, and someone all the time--
 Don't hold my arm!" "I say it's someone passing."

"You speak as if this were a traveled road.
 You forget where we are. What is beyond
 That he'd be going to or coming from
 At such an hour of night, and on foot too?
 What was he standing still for in the bushes?"

"It's not so very late--it's only dark.
 There's more in it than you're inclined to say.
 Did he look like--?"

He looked like anyone.

I'll never rest tonight unless I know
 Give me the lantern."

(pp.65-66)

.

The scene, filled alternately with darkness and lantern light, is a study in chiaroscuro. It bears more resemblance to a Gothic drama than a Frostian poem.

The frightened woman shouts her questions into the night, only half expecting a reply. The answer leaves her relieved but shaken.

"What do you want?" she cried, and then herself
 Was startled when an answer really came.

"Nothing." It came from well along the road.

She reached a hand to Joel for support:
 The smell of scorching woolen made her faint.
 "What are you doing round this house at night?"

"Nothing." A pause: there seemed no more to say.

And then the voice again: "You seem afraid.
 I saw by the way you whipped up the horse.
 I'll just come forward in the lantern light
 And let you see."

"Yes, do.--Joel, go back!"

She stood her ground against the noisy steps
That came on, but her body rocked a little.

"You see," the voice said.

"Oh." She looked and looked.

"You don't see—I've a child here by the hand.
A robber wouldn't have his family with him."

"What's a child doing at this time of night—?"

"Out walking. Every child should have the memory
Of at least one long-after-bedtime walk.
What, son?"

(pp.67-68).

The real cause of consternation in this poem arises from the image peering out of the darkness. It is because the woman saw a face like a "white plate" that her feelings of guilt and fear are aroused. The use of the word white, in this poem is somewhat different than Frost's previous references to winter or death. This time, Frost uses white as an image foreshadowing fear and it is around this theme that he builds his poem.

White, in "Design," is used in a slightly stronger sense, for here it is used to project a picture of terror. Randall Jarrell says of the spider; "this little albino catastrophe is too whitely catastrophic to be accidental, too impossibly unlikely ever to be a coincidence..."¹¹

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 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. (p.198).

¹¹ Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), p.42.

Because the spider is white instead of the usual brown or black it is no less sinister, it is, in fact, probably more so. As it rests upon a white flower, it holds up a dead, white moth as though performing some kind of pagan ritual. The flower, at first, appears to be out of place between the others, but when it is described as being "like froth" it changes into something mad or hydrophobic and then becomes truly companionable. Together, these three white objects become the potential ingredients in a witch's brew.

In the first eight lines of "Design" the color white is established as the opposite of purity and innocence by direct statement; the mood of the second half of the poem is changed by a series of interrogations. Tension builds as questions mount, and the poem ends on a tone similar to Blake's "Tiger"--a tone that is every bit as fearful. Is there really any design at all?

Frost never actually overcame any of his fears. He was always afraid of the dark, of rejection, of failure. Unfortunately he even manufactured new fears as he grew older. The fear that he was losing his poetic talents haunted him. He was ashamed of his fears and tried to hide them. Artists are generally considered to be insecure people. If insecurity is a measurement of artistic creativity, then Frost certainly is one person who meets the standard.

2. Isolation

Because he was an individualist, a loner, Robert Frost often used the theme of isolation in his poetry. To portray man's isolation he used the nature images of snow and storms, darkness and night, woods and sea.

Philip Gerber makes an interesting observation about Frost's

people and loneliness. Gerber says in Frost's poetry men exist as individuals, not as groups. If they are drawn together they are motivated through love and need. The need is that of sharing frailties, the love is that of companionship. Frost's people huddle about whatever lights are available so that they may escape from the world's darkness. They congregate like moths to candles by stars, bonfires, or lanterns. ¹²

Gerber makes a further observation: "Loneliness and the fear of loneliness are entrenched in the human heart. . . . Always there is the tremulous reaching out of the hand for a warm reassuring clasp. There is the search for warmth and illumination from a spark of light, all to drive back into the dark woods the knowledge that man stands alone." ¹³

"On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind" is a poem whereby the poet is drawn to such a spark of light. He sees the light from his train window while passing through the desert.

A flickering, human pathetic light,
That was maintained against the night,
It seemed to me, by the people there,
With a God-forsaken brute despair.
It would flutter and fall in half an hour
Like the last petal off a flower. (Frost, p.376)

The flickering of a lonely light is caused, the poet discovers, by the movement of the train through indistinct tree forms in the distance. Gerber says the light comes from a home where a husband and wife are drawn together through love. ¹⁴ If the poet were to return next year,

¹² Philip L. Gerber, Robert Frost (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1966), p. 147.

¹³ Gerber, p. 148.

¹⁴ Gerber, p. 149.

the light would, in all probability, still be burning as it is now, no brighter, no less intense, a tiny, solitary glimmer on the landscape.

In "Acquainted with the Night" the poet experiences a profound sense of loneliness; in this poem he is utterly lost.

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain--and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

(p.161)

If the poet has ever felt a sense of security from the appearance of a light, he cannot feel it now because he has "outwalked the furthest city light" and he is alone in the darkness. His mental outlook is equally bleak as he tries to avoid the watchman because he cannot explain his presence at this time of night, in this place.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been acquainted with the night.

(p.161)

He is aware of the moon watching him from an "unearthly height" but he feels no tie with it, little illumination from it. The word used in referring to the moon is not a word ordinarily used--Frost calls it a "luminary clock;"--which suggests an object indifferent to our planet earth. Not only does the poem represent physical alienation, it shows the mental alienation man can experience as well.

"Desert Places" and "Acquainted with the Night" are thematically similar because both show physical and mental loneliness, although the latter is possibly more spiritual than mental. With Frost's first line of black and white contrasts, "snow falling and night falling," the reader immediately becomes alerted to two fears at the same time.

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
 In a field I looked into going past,
 And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
 But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it--it is theirs.
 All animals are smothered in their lairs.
 I am too absent-spirited to count;
 The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness
 Will be more lonely ere it will be less--
 A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
 With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
 Between stars--on stars where no human race is.
 I have it in me so much nearer home
 To scare myself with my own desert places. (pp.194-5)

As night falls and the snow builds up so, too, does the poet's desperate feeling of loneliness. In the whiteness there exists a frightening darkness. There is nothing more desolate than "A blanker whiteness of benighted snow/With no expression." The blackness between uninhabited stars is not even as frightening as the fear within oneself, one's "own desert places."

Frost's life was filled with "desert places beginning when he was eleven with the death of his father and later, the mental illness of his sister. It continued into his own family with the death of his first-born at three years of age, the increasing mental problems of his daughter, Irma, and the death of another daughter, Marjorie, after she gave birth to Frost's granddaughter.

Marjorie was the one most like her father, the one who wrote poetry. Although he was grief-stricken by her passing, Frost retained his fatalistic attitude toward death. He felt that whatever life had in store--the good, bad, joyous, or unhappy--all were in the realm of human choice, whether the choice were conscious or unconscious. Shortly after Marjorie's death he composed the lonely lines of "Desert Places." 15

Perhaps Frost's most lonely poem of all is "Bereft." The speaker faces the chill of autumn alone in life or "bereft" of anyone. There is a complete severance from self, from friends, and from nature. The material for this poem came about when Frost spent the summer with his future wife, Elinor, and her mother. Instead of consenting to marry Frost at that time, Elinor had decided to return to college. Frost stayed on for a few more days at the old Saunder's place hoping that Elinor would feel sorry for leaving him there alone. He took pleasure in his self-pity and later, in "Bereft," he described the fear and emptiness he experienced each night when darkness came. 16

Where had I heard this wind before
 Change like this to a deeper roar?
 What would it take my standing there for,
 Holding down hill to a frothy shore?
 Summer was past and day was past.
 Somber clouds in the west were massed.
 Out in the porch's sagging floor,
 Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
 Blindly struck at my knee and missed.
 Something sinister in the tone
 Told me my secret must be known:
 Word I was in the house alone
 Somehow must have gotten abroad,
 Word I was in my life alone,
 Word I had no one left but God. (p.158)

15 Jean Gould, Robert Frost The Aim Was Song (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1964), pp.270-271.

16 Thompson, Vol.I, pp.152-3.

The speaker couldn't be in a more unfriendly atmosphere; he is alienated in the most hostile of environments. The wind is roaring as he stands at the door hoping for some kind of positive reinforcement, but there is none. Summer has gone and the day has ended, and there is no future for him. The leaves, like snakes, coil and hiss as though trying to attack him. He remains helpless against an alien world in which man and nature are entirely at odds. All he has left is God, but it is questionable if God will see him through this ordeal; he feels the need of another human being to help him or he is lost.

The old man of "An Old Man's Winter Night" is lost, too. Though darkness and cold look ominously in from outside, he cannot see out since the lamp he is carrying limits his vision. The lamp acts to emphasize his alienation because, though he is bathed in light, he cannot see beyond it. He wanders around the empty room unable to remember what it was he wanted.

All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him
 Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,
 That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.
 What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze
 Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand.
 What kept him from remembering what it was
 That brought him to that creaking room was age. (p.74)

Through a poetic shift, the outer night becomes frightened of the old man. While nature is observing man, the old man in return becomes a depersonified observer of nature and his vacant staring achieves the same eery inhumanness as that of the stars.¹⁷ With his inability to remember what he wanted he has lost his sense of purpose and he is frightened. To fight his fear he makes noise to try to scare it away. The night replies back to him with even more frightening noises.

¹⁷ Radcliffe Squires, The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1963), p.29.

He stood with barrels round him—at a loss.
 And having scared the cellar under him
 In clomping here, he scared it once again.
 In clomping off; and scared the outer night,
 Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar
 Of trees and crack of branches, common things,
 But nothing so like beating on a box.

Beating on a box suggests futility or vacuousness, while the images of sound show the separation between man and nature.

A light he was to no one but himself
 Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,
 A quiet light, and then not even that.
 He consigned to the moon, such as she was,
 So late-arising, to the broken moon
 As better than the sun in any case
 For such a charge, his snow upon the roof,
 His icicles along the wall to keep:
 And slept. (pp. 74-5)

His light goes out leaving him with only a sliver of moon to see by.
 His strength wanes along with the light and he drifts off to sleep.

. The log that shifted with a jolt
 Once in the stove disturbed him and he shifted,
 And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.
 One aged man—one man--can't keep a house,
 A farm, a countryside, or if he can
 It's thus he does it of a winter night. (p.75)

The old man does, at least, sleep soundly, and life continues on for him after his bout between himself and nature. "An Old Man's Winter Night" reaches a conclusion similar to Eliot's "Hollow Men"—"This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper."¹⁸ Both protagonists are old men for whom there is very little hope left in life. Frost's man is better off because he projects the feeling that to survive, if only physically, is a decided accomplishment in itself.

Barry says that while the old man may not triumph through his endurance, neither does he go down in defeat. It is simply that the

¹⁸ Maynard Mack, Leonard Dean and William Frost, ed., Modern Poetry (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1961), p.166.

old man realizes that there is a time for everything. "There is a time for attack and a time for retreat, a time for coping with the dark forces of nature and a time for husbanding one's resources. The old man's sleep is neither more nor less than that." ¹⁹

Barry also brings out an interesting point about lights. Besides the lamp light and the pale light of the moon there is the spiritual light that "he was to no one but himself." They have their limitations, yet together they tend to balance one another dramatically. The moonlight was so slight that it hardly mattered, but to it the old man consigns "his snow upon the roof/His icicles along the wall to keep." Barry questions the meaning of the word "keep," maintaining that the meaning is known only to those who understand the local idiom and it therefore could have several meanings including to keep watch over, protect, or control. Frost repeats the word again at the end of the poem: "One aged man--one man--can't keep a house,/A farm, a countryside, or if he can/It's thus he does it of a winter night." The repetition apparently links the moonlight to the old man's personal light to balance each other. The mechanical lamplight is ultimately used for limiting the old man's vision and acts as a foil for the other two lights. ²⁰

This poem is a portrait of the human condition; it shows man pitted against the world of nature, a world which saps almost every shred of vitality he possesses. Lynen, in The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost, sums it up quite well:

¹⁹ Barry, p.60.

²⁰ Barry, pp.57-58.

The great danger threatening man's world-- his farm, his countryside--is chaos, the lack of meaning and lack of order represented here by darkness. We see this in the opening line, where the man, all alone in the empty room, is threatened by the sinister night beyond the window pane. The threat of danger appears to be in nature, but actually it is in man himself.²¹

Frost's lonely people have gathered in the darkness around their personal beacons of light whether these beacons are lamps, or stars, or moonlight. They have tried to break through the darkness to psychic and physical survival and in doing so discover nature's indifferences. Man must realize nature's indifference to him and act accordingly. All he can do is make the most of his human condition.

3. Acceptance

In order to make the most of the human condition, man must learn to accept unchangeable factors. This was not always an easy concession for Frost, and more often than not, the only way he could deal with a problem was by running away from it. With maturity came the realization that man is a creature who possesses limitations as well as capabilities. A Boy's Will is Frost's conscious attempt to resolve his instinctive desire to escape and his maturing desire to accept through confrontation.

"Into My Own" is the first of Frost's escape poems. Frost wrote it on his Derry farm after some tensions had built up between himself and Elinor and he had returned from the woods, repentant. Thompson says that Frost, at times of stress, was of two minds as to whether running

²¹ Lynen, p.38.

away as a release of nervous fury was good, bad, brave, or cowardly.²²
 To seek solitude merely to sulk is immature, but to be alone to rationalize is far from cowardly.

One of my wishes is that those dark trees,
 So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,
 Were not, as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom,
 But stretched away unto the edge of doom.

I should not be withheld but that some day
 Into their vastness I should steal away,
 Fearless of ever finding open land,
 Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.

I do not see why I should e'er turn back,
 Or those should not set forth upon my track
 To overtake me, who should miss me here
 And long to know if still I held them dear.

They would not find me changed from him they knew--
 Only more sure of all I thought was true. (pp.5-6)

He knows that his actions are childish, but his refuge is in the trees. He would like to leave his society from time to time to become purged by the deep, dark woods but, at the same time, the pensive little boy in him cries out for sympathy. When he doesn't get it, he threatens with, "You'll be sorry if I don't come back."

Majorie Cook does not consider Frost an escapist. She feels that the questions raised are whether he accepts responsibility or whether he avoids commitment. Cook says Frost finds balance through his ability to see conflict as play. If man lives in a world of changing and opposing truths man must make judgments which contribute to inevitable conflicts. He must struggle with his conflicts for balance all the while recognizing his limitations. As if that isn't enough, man must not be too eager to accept his limitations because passive acceptance

²² Thompson, Vol. I, p.310.

can restrict his potential achievements and prevent him from achieving to his greatest potentialities.²³

"Reluctance" is a poem displaying man's unwillingness to accept things as they are. The first two stanzas of the poem begin quietly with the young poet, on his way home, looking over a landscape of woods and hills. It is autumn and all the leaves, except the oak, have fallen. The poet says that the oak leaves will remain on the trees to scrape across the crusted snow as if to remind the "sleeping" leaves beneath that they are on their way to join them. The last two stanzas conclude with the poet's questions.

And the dead leaves lie huddled and still
 No longer blown hither and thither;
 The last lone aster is gone;
 The flowers of the witch-hazel wither,
 The heart is still aching to seek,
 But the feet question "Whither?"

Ah, when to the heart of man
 Was it ever less than a treason
 To go with the drift of things,
 To yield with a grace to reason,
 And bow and accept the end
 Of a love or a season?

(p.22)

"Reluctance" is a dramatic elegy about the death of autumn. The leaves are dead and so are the flowers, but where have they gone? The poet knows that this is the way things are but rebels; he refuses simply to accept "the drift of things." He goes so far as to say that it is "treason" to give in to anything he doesn't want, be it the end of a love affair or the end of a season. Perhaps it is the frightening idea of the terrible coldness that confronts him which causes him to

²³ Marjorie Cook, "Acceptance in Frost's Poetry: Conflict as Play," Frost: Centennial Essays II, Jac Tharpe, ed., (Jackson: Univ. Press of Miss., 1976), pp.223-4.

rebel. The death of anything is too much for him to accept at this time of his life.

In "Nothing Gold Can Stay" Frost has matured sufficiently to cope with inevitable changes. Golden beauty can be replaced by something equally as beautiful, but the beauty of gold is never everlasting.

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

(p.138)

Frost relates the theme of change and death to nature. The first color in a new leaf is a bright gold. This color cannot last long; it deepens into a darker shade, blossoms forth quickly, then withers and dies. By the same token, Eden appears, sparkling like gold, filled with promise and youthful innocence. Youth cannot be restrained, and with maturity, wisdom grows and innocence is lost, "So Eden sank to grief," and to darkness. The dawn of a new day begins in a gently tinted gold. Day ends with sunset--a blazing, ferocious yellow--and finally dies with the coming of night.

This poem can also relate to money or material objects. Gold coins can buy beautiful, tangible things, but these things will not last either. Put the coins away and the gold will tarnish in time.

The poet concludes that none of these precious things represented by gold can survive in this world for long. Since life is transitory, Frost does not bewail the fact that golden things will not endure. He thinks that beauty is meant to be appreciated for the joy it gives us

so it is wise to savor the best moments before they pass. He has, in this poem, come to accept that which he cannot change.

"Carpe Diem" states a similar message. The poem begins as Age watches two children walking along. He doesn't know where they're going, but he tells them "carpe diem," seize the day of pleasure and be happy. Age says he's given this advice to others in poetry.

'Twas Age imposed on poems
 Their gather-roses burden
 To warn against the danger
 That overtaken lovers
 From being overflowed
 With happiness should have it.
 And yet not know they have it.
 But bid life seize the present?
 It lives less in the present
 Than in the future always,
 And less in both together
 Than in the past. The present
 Is too much for the senses
 Too crowding, too confusing--
 Too present to imagine.

(p.224)

One should live each day to the utmost and forget about the past because the past is over. Sometimes the present is so mind-boggling in its fullness of life that one forgets to separate each day of happiness until it has become the past.²⁴ The vital present holds more than enough to keep anyone content without looking back to a past that cannot be relived.

While man may learn what his limitations are, he still longs to break through barriers in search of the unattainable. If he thinks something is almost impossible, then he tries all the harder to get it. An element of danger makes the task even more exciting. Philip Gerber

²⁴ Reginald L. Cook, Robert Frost: A Living Voice (Amherst: University of Mass. Press, 1974), p.293.

sees "There Are Roughly Zones" as an illustration of man's refusal to accept limitations when a peach tree is brought too far north to survive winter's intense cold. ²⁵

We sit indoors and talk of the cold outside.
And every gust that gathers strength and heaves
Is a threat to the house. But the house has long
been tried.

We think of the tree. If it never again has leaves,
We'll know, we say, that this was the night it died.
It is very far north, we admit, to have brought
the peach. (pp.199-200)

As the temperature drops and the wind picks up, the poet becomes very uneasy about the tree's survival. He has brought a peach tree from a warm climate into a cold, temperate climate and this surely is the night that the tree will be tested.

What comes over a man, is it soul or mind--
That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?
You would say his ambition was to extend the reach
Clear to the Arctic of every living kind.
Why is his nature forever so hard to teach
That though there is no fixed line between wrong and
right,
There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed.
(p.200)

The poet knows we must accept laws for our own good, but it is difficult to stay within rigid bounds. Man is too adventurous not to explore his limits even if it means that he will sometimes be hurt by the outcome.

There is nothing much we can do for the tree tonight,
But we can't help feeling more than a little betrayed
That the northwest wind should rise to such a height
Just when the cold went down so many below.
The tree has no leaves and may never have them again.
We must wait till some months hence in the spring to
know.

But if it is destined never again to grow,
It can blame this limitless trait in the hearts of
men. (p.200)

²⁵ Gerber, p.155.

Marjorie Cook states that struggle is inherent in acceptance of human limitation. Man must be wise enough to make careful judgments, but adventurous enough to take risks. If man fails, he must also learn to accept this consequence. It is important to recognize the "rough zones" of possibility. In "There Are Roughly Zones" the poet expresses the necessity for both struggle and acceptance. According to Cook, he realizes that nature must be obeyed but exactly which laws of nature man must hold to is unclear. Man must make judgments and whether he succeeds or fails is due largely to fate.²⁶ Man must go through the risky business of knowing when to take a chance. Failure is always a difficult condition to accept whether or not it comes in the midst of struggle or in the midst of success.

Acceptance itself was not easy for Frost to deal with. Thompson offers the following revealing explanation:

. . . . Ample evidence has been offered here that R.F. was obsessively concerned with dark thoughts about his own sense of all the wrongs (real or imaginary) which had been done to him; that he was also concerned with his consequent resentment and with his desire for revenge. These attitudes conflicted with his ideal of submission, acceptance, obedience, formulated for him in childhood by his mother, within a Christian frame of reference. He tried to resolve the conflict, at times, by idealizing his own state and by claiming that he had achieved the ideal.²⁷

The opposition of darkness and light in "Acceptance" exposes Frost's inner conflict on the subject.

²⁶ Cook, pp.226-7.

²⁷ Thompson, Vol.I, p.586.

When the spent sun throws up its rays on cloud
 And goes down burning into the gulf below,
 No voice in nature is heard to cry aloud
 At what has happened. Birds, at least, must know
 It is the change to darkness in the sky.
 Murmuring something quiet in her breast,
 One bird begins to close a faded eye;
 Or overtaken too far from his nest,
 Hurrying low above the grove, some waif
 Swoops just in time to his remembered tree.
 At most he thinks or twitters softly, 'Safe!
 Now let the night be dark for all of me.
 Let the night be too dark for me to see
 Into the future. Let what will be, be.'
 (p.156)

Frost is not going to attempt to change what he cannot do anything about. He will not look back to lament the past and he has no intention of looking into the future. His, however, is a positive attitude of acceptance and struggle, not a negative attitude of resignation and passivity. He seeks out the beauty of nature while deriving satisfaction from the effort expended. ²⁸

Cook points out that while Frost sees darkness, he does not choose between the dark and the light. And while Frost ponders the question of "what to make of a diminished thing" he proceeds in a positive way to balance contraries. Eventually, Frost comes to accept the necessary limitations and imperfections. ²⁹ For Frost, to simply come to terms with acceptance is not enough. There is a certain art in being able to handle conflict with ease. Frost was a master of this craft; and apparently, for him, it was all in knowing how to play the game.

²⁸ Doyle, p.215.

²⁹ Cook, pp.234-5.

CHAPTER THREE

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS: PSYCHOLOGICAL, SEXUAL, LOVE

Frost's dramatic poems bring out intricate tensions in human relationships. It is through these longer narrative poems that inward fears coupled with external problems are revealed at length. Psychological and sexual problems appear frequently in the dramatic poems. Love, of course, is always present in various guises, often simply in the act of caring. However, since caring does intimate responsibility, perhaps caring is more important.¹

1. Psychological

If women in Frost's poems are more likely to succumb to mental disorders than men, the fact can be explained in this way: Frost's own moments of mental imbalance were rare, whereas his sister Jeannie actually broke down under stress. The lesson of Jeannie's fate taught Frost to keep a close watch over himself. Frank Lentricchia is probably right when he reasons that Frost's "ability to objectify those states of mental disturbance in his women in dialogue poems like 'Home Burial' and 'A Servant to Servants' was his way of slaying a self that might have been."²

Both women in "Home Burial" and "A Servant to Servants" are psychologically disturbed. While the husband in "Home Burial" can quickly take up his daily routine of life, the wife's morbid brooding

¹ Barry, p.75.

² Frank Lentricchia, Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1975), pp.180-181.

over her child's death renders her incapable of resuming a normal existence. It is surprising to find that much of the psychological furor in Frost's poems stems from a relationship of caring or not caring. The wife in "Home Burial" says, "You couldn't care!" She reasons that if she can regard her husband as being unfeeling, then, in her masochism, she can destroy her marriage at least as far as mutuality is concerned.

With the husband's description of the graveyard as "Not so much larger than a bedroom," the wife jumps at the chance to take offense, contending that he is referring to the act of sexual love from which their child came into existence. She deeply resents her husband's ability to accept the situation as well as his power to act rationally.³ There can be no sanctuary for this woman because she cannot let anyone into her world and she cannot see out of it. "Home Burial" is a poem about the burial of a child, the burial of a relationship, and the burial of a woman into a self-inflicted domestic tomb.

Similarly, the woman in "A Servant to Servants" cannot help herself. There is a history of insanity in the family and she has once been committed to an asylum. She works exceptionally hard and she, too, is concerned with the fact that no one cares.

We have four here to board, great good-for-nothings,
 Sprawling about the kitchen with their talk
 While I fry their bacon. Much they care!
 No more put out in what they do or say
 Than if I wasn't in the room at all.
 Coming and going all the time, they are:
 I don't learn what their names are, let alone
 Their characters, or whether they are safe
 To have inside the house with doors unlocked.

(Frost, p.84)

³ Lentricchia, p.64.

The boarders, with their coarse talk, make her wonder if she's safe from attack in her own house. With the thought of this kind of violence, her mind wanders back to stories told to her by her mother of another kind of violence. As a young bride, her mother was brought into her father's house to take care of her father's insane uncle. The uncle was kept in an attic "cage" which was covered only by straw. He would not keep clothes on and screamed throughout the night until he was exhausted. The servant said that in marrying her father, her mother had to ". . . lie and hear love things made dreadful/By his shouts in the night." Unable to suppress the thoughts of a traumatized mother and an insane uncle and nothing to look forward to but a day filled with debilitating work, her mind has become locked into a nightmare from which she cannot escape.

The woman who was previously discussed in "The Fear" is also beset by a psychological problem. This poem differs from "A Servant to Servants" in that it is a dialogue with two people presenting two viewpoints. The woman's view is irrational because she is full of fear and guilt that her husband will find her with another man; her lover's view is logical because he feels that her husband couldn't 'bare enough." After they have seen someone by the side of the road, Joel begins to remark that it is not her husband. She interrupts to say:

"It is--or someone else he's sent to watch.
 And now's the time to have it out with him
 While we know definitely where he is.
 Let him get off and he'll be everywhere
 Around us, looking out of trees and bushes
 Till I shan't dare to set a foot outdoors
 And I can't stand it. Joel, let me go."

(p.67)

Joel's statement about caring jolts the woman almost as much as the appearance of the figure in the bushes. It was the lack of caring that caused her to leave her husband initially, and everything she has now is based on caring and love with Joel.

"But it's nonsense to think he'd care enough."

"You mean you couldn't understand his caring.
Oh, but you see he hadn't had enough--
Joel, I won't--I won't--I promise you.
We mustn't say hard things. You mustn't either."

"I'll be the one, if anybody goes!
But you give him the advantage with this light.
What couldn't he do to us standing here!
And if to see was what he wanted, why,
He has seen all there was to see and gone."

(p.67)

When she discovers that there is only a man out there walking his small son she understands that the fear is within herself and has never been "out there." The "caring" relationship of a father walking hand in hand with his son on an after-bedtime walk is Frost's added touch of poignancy.⁴

The final poem in "The Hill Wife," called "The Impulse," is a culmination of a woman's disintegration into insanity. The absence of the husband in the first four poems is evidently responsible for the woman's dwindling hold on reality. When the husband finally appears in "The Impulse" it is apparent that his neglect has had significant bearing on her psychic behavior.

⁴ Barry, p.75

It was too lonely for her there,
 And too wild,
 And since there were but two of them
 And no child,

And work was little in the house,
 She was free,
 And followed where he furrowed field,
 Or felled tree.

She rested on a log and tossed
 The fresh chips,
 With a song only to herself
 On her lips. (p.83)

Because the hill wife is childless she is lonely in the house and follows her husband outside when he's working. One day the husband calls for her and suddenly she is gone.

And once she went to break a bough
 Of black alder.
 She strayed so far she scarcely heard
 When he called her--

And didn't answer--didn't speak--
 Or return.
 She stood, and then she ran and hid
 In the fern.

He never found her, though he looked
 Everywhere,
 And he asked at her mother's house
 Was she there.

Sudden and swift and light as that
 The ties gave,
 And he learned of finalities
 Besides the grave. (pp.83-84)

Patricia Wallace in "The Thematics of Imagination in Frost's Poetry" examines, step by step, the wife's actions before she disappears. She follows her husband, tosses log chips, sings a secret song, and just before she disappears, she breaks a tree bough. Her

breaking the bough symbolizes how divided the couple have been, how divided they are in activity, and how their language is divided. When he calls, she does not answer. It is as if, in a sense, she does not speak the same language, nor does she care to hear him at all.⁵ She is simply not to be found.

Estelle in "The Housekeeper" is still another woman with a psychological problem. While she never makes an appearance in the poem, her character is revealed through the mother's dialogue. For fifteen years Estelle and her mother had lived uncomplainingly with John. Then suddenly, almost as suddenly as the hill wife, Estelle was gone and John will have to fend for himself. John becomes disconsolate and cannot understand her actions. In the course of the poem the mother reveals how Estelle slips from housekeeper to common-law-wife and how her disappearance can be explained.

"We came here for a home for me, you know,
Estelle to do the housework for the board
Of both of us. But look how it turns out:
She seems to have the housework, and besides
Half of the outdoor work, though as for that,
He'd say she does it more because she likes it."

(Frost, p.107)

Estelle did enjoy the outside work and it was also true that John and Estelle had similar interests as well. The mother continues:

"One thing you can't help liking about John,
He's fond of nice things--too fond, some would say.
But Estelle don't complain: she's like him there."

(Frost, p.107)

They appeared happy with each other; however, trouble in the relationship is brought to light when a neighbor comments that John

⁵ Patricia Wallace, "The Thematics of Imagination in Frost's Poetry," Centennial Essays II, ed. Jac Tharpe, (Jackson: Univ. Press of Miss., 1976), p.181.

should have married her. Her mother says:

"I know."

"The strain's been too much for her all these years:
I can't explain it any other way.
It's different with a man, at least with John:
He know's he's kinder than the run of men.
Better than married ought to be as good
As married--that's what he has always said.
I know the way he's felt--but all the same!"

"I wonder why he doean't marry her
And end it."

"Too late now! she wouldn't have him.
He's given her time to think of something else.
That's his mistake. The dear knows my interest
Has been to keep the thing from breaking up.
This is a good home: I don't ask for better.
But when I've said, "Why shouldn't they be married,"
He'd say, "Why should they?" no more words than that."
(Frost, p.106)

John's choice is not to be married, while Estelle's is to live within the institution of marriage and respectability. In giving all her love and all her monetary possessions to John she had hoped that he would, in return, be honorable enough to offer marriage, but he did not. The strain of the relationship is more than she can bear, and when she receives a proposal from another man she accepts, leaving John to his chosen state of "single blessedness."

"The Death of the Hired Man" is a dramatic narrative in which a wife uses her psychological abilities on her husband in an effort to persuade him not to send an old, ailing hired man away. Warren, the husband, does not take kindly to the news that the hired man has returned at a time when he's not needed and that he left at a time when he was. The wife, Mary, asks him to be kind. She says that Silas has

come to help him ditch the meadow and reminds Warren of Silas' accomplishments, such as finding water with a hazel prong and building a load of hay. Warren begins to think better of Silas and agrees that to build a load of hay is an accomplishment.

" . . . Silas' one accomplishment.
 He bundles every forkful in its place,
 And tags and numbers it for future reference,
 So he can find and easily dislodge it
 In the unloading. Silas does that well.
 He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.
 You never see him standing on the hay
 He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself."
 (pp.27-28)

The boy referred to in the next stanza is now teaching at college and had once worked summers with Silas. Silas regarded the boy as a "likely lad, though daft/On education."

"He thinks if he could teach him that, [hay] he'd be
 Some good perhaps to someone in the world.
 He hates to see a boy the fool of books
 Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
 And nothing to look backward to with pride,
 And nothing to look forward to with hope,
 So now and never any different."
 (p.28)

Mary had pleaded her case for Silas well; she quietly breaks some dreadful news to her husband.

"Warren," she said, "he has come home to die:
 You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time."

"Home," he mocked gently.

"Yes, what else but home?
 It all depends on what you mean by home.
 Of course he's nothing to us, any more
 Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
 Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail."

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
 They have to take you in."

"I should have called it
 Something you somehow haven't to deserve." (pp.28-29)

The couple then speak of Silas' brother who is a banker living only thirteen miles away and decide that perhaps Silas never goes there because he feels inferior to him. Mary is truly upset by the fact that Silas has become such a broken man and again begs Warren to treat him with consideration. Warren leaves to see Silas then:

. . . . returned--too soon, it seemed to her,
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.

"Warren?" she questioned.

"Dead," was all he answered.
(p.30)

The gentleness with which he makes the unhappy announcement shows that he is in complete agreement with Mary. Their sympathy for the hired man portray two people who are deeply affected by other's misfortunes. Warren and Mary exemplify people whose tender expression of love, sympathy, and humanistic concern reaches out to envelop all of mankind with a feeling not unlike a compassionate embrace.

2. Sexual

While Frost writes about love both directly and subtly, he is seldom as direct about sex as he is in "The Subverted Flower." Stearns Morse considers this work "Frostian" since it is a poem of such sexual explicitness.⁶

"The Subverted Flower" was written early enough to have been included in A Boy's Will yet Frost hesitated to publish it because it seemed too daring and too autobiographical; he also knew that his wife would never have given her consent to publish it.⁷

Thompson speculates that the poem was written during the summer following Frost's and Elinor's graduation from high school. Frost

⁶ Stearns Morse, "The Subverted Flower': An Exercise in Triangulation," Centennial Essays II, Jac Tharpe, ed. (Jackson: Univ. Press of Miss., 1976), p.170.

⁷ Thompson, Vol.I, p.512.

had borrowed a rowboat for the vacation and he and Elinor conducted a riverbank courtship replete with secret hiding places. Frost's passionate attempts at lovemaking to the shy and reticent Elinor thwarted and embarrassed him immensely yet he continued to court her with the aid of Shelley's poetry. Shelley's unconventional attitude on the subject of lovers and marriage was taken seriously by the two; secretly, with the exchange of plain wedding bands, the couple pledged themselves to each other by conducting their own marriage ceremony. It would not be hard to imagine these excursions as the basis of inspiration for "The Subverted Flower."⁸

Richard Poirier, in Robert Frost The Work of Knowing, disagrees. He says that from the given details in the poem, it is an account of a nightmare in which such an incident was symbolically enacted. According to Poirier, Frost later made the comment in his Paris Review interview, that the subject of "The Subverted Flower" was "frigidity in women."⁹

She drew back; he was calm:
 'It is this that had the power.'
 And he lashed his open palm
 With the tender-headed flower.
 He smiled for her to smile,
 But she was either blind
 Or willfully unkind.
 He eyed her for a while
 For a woman and a puzzle.
 He flicked and flung the flower,
 And another sort of smile
 Caught up like finger tips
 The corners of his lips
 And cracked his ragged muzzle.
 She was standing to the waist
 In goldenrod and brake,
 Her shining hair displaced.

⁸ Thompson, Vol.I, pp.136-137.

⁹ Richard Poirier, Robert Frost The Work of Knowing (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p.58.

He stretched her either arm
 As if she made it ache
 To clasp her--not to harm;
 As if he could not spare
 To touch her neck and hair. (pp.225-226)

The scene is beautifully pastoral in the beginning with a girl standing waist deep in goldenrod. As the boy holds out a flower to her, she is overcome by feelings of sexuality that she cannot deal with. In trying to deny her feelings she transfers her inhibitions to him; suddenly, his human characteristics become those of a beast. When she hears her mother calling her, she is stunned by his change.

A hand hung like a paw,
 An arm worked like a saw
 As if to be persuasive,
 An ingratiating laugh
 That cut the snout in half,
 An eye becomes evasive.
 A girl could only see
 That a flower had marred a man,
 But what she could not see
 Was that the flower might be
 Other than base and fetid:
 That the flower had done but part
 And what the flower began
 Her own too meager heart
 Had terribly completed. (p.227)

With the beauty that the flower represented gone, he becomes frightened and turns to run away.

She heard his stumble first
 And use his hands in flight.
 She heard him bark outright.
 And oh, for one so young
 The bitter words she spit
 Like some tenacious bit
 That will not leave the tongue.
 She plucked her lips for it,
 And still the horror clung.
 Her mother wiped the foam
 From her chin, picked up her comb
 And drew her backward home. (p.227)

The poem ends—"Her mother wiped the foam/From her chin"—as the girl also takes on animalistic characteristics. The fact that she is drawn "backward home" rather than homeward suggests either that she hasn't learned anything by what has happened or that she refuses to, thus finding the world of innocent childhood preferable to one of experience.

In Frost's essay, "The Figure a Poem Makes," he reveals what a poem consists of in relation to love. Frost says they should be the same. In making a poem and in making love, action is required. According to Poirier, it is for this reason that Frost instinctively uses a language of ongoing sexual action to explain what a poem should do. ¹⁰

Frost says:

. . . . The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. ¹¹

"Putting in the Seed" is a poem personifying so intensely the idea in "The Figure a Poem Makes" that it might well be used as a companion piece. It begins in delight with a quiet request, it runs its lucky course of events in the orchard, and ends in the clarification of life with rebirth.

¹⁰ Poirier, p.64.

¹¹ Robert Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," Selected Prose of Robert Frost, Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem, ed., (New York: Collier Books, 1974), p.18.

Putting in the Seed

You come to fetch me from my work tonight
 When supper's on the table, and we'll see
 If I can leave off burying the white
 Soft petals fallen from the apple tree
 (Soft petals, yes, but not so barren quite,
 Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea;))
 And go along with you ere you lose sight
 Of what you came for and become like me,
 Slave to a springtime passion for the earth.
 How love burns through the Putting in the Seed
 On through the watching for that early birth
 When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
 The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
 Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

(p.79)

The title of the poem speaks for itself, setting the tone of the entire poem on two planes of meaning, between that of nature and that of the sexual. Like "The Pasture" this sonnet begins with an invitation. The farmer asks his wife to come down to the orchard with him after she puts supper on the table. He thinks that she will forget what she came for when she apprehends the beauty of the springtime.

The words that are used have, as in "The Figure a Poem Makes," strong sexual implications. "Burying" the "white soft petals" of their love which, if it is not "barren," implies that it will be fruitful. The capitalization of the words "Love" and "Putting in the Seed" indicates physical human love as do words such as "burns" and "birth," and Frost cleverly interweaves them to parallel the regeneration of nature. The soil, tarnished with weeds, like a tarnished Eden, gives way to the "sturdy seedling" with "arched body" who comes "shouldering" its way and "shedding the earth crumbs" again to show the image of nature in combination with the image of human birth.

John Robert Doyle in The Poetry of Robert Frost provides us with a very good analysis:

The important characteristic, however is not merely the merging of two worlds (all poets do that, in fact everyday observation does that) but the extent to which the poet's 'sight' is a fresh way of viewing the scene and the extent to which the poet has been able to make the multiple view contribute to the making of a poem which is a unified whole that is more significant than any part viewed in isolation seems to make it.¹²

Another sexually orientated poem is/"The Oft-Repeated Dream" which is part of the poem "The Hill Wife." It is a poem in which a woman appears unduly concerned with a pine tree. The question arises as to why only one of the two people in the bedroom is afraid. A little Freudian interpretation on the part of the reader supplies a simple explanation.

She had no saying dark enough
For the dark pine that kept
Forever trying the window-latch
Of the room where they slept.

The tireless but ineffectual hands
That with every futile pass
Made the great tree seem as a little bird
Before the mystery of glass!

It had never been inside the room,
And only one of the two
Was afraid in an oft-repeated dream
Of what the tree might do. (pp.82-83)

The young wife's distress seems to derive from traditional fears of the marriage bed. Her sexual problem is described by Lentricchia as a "latent paranoia, aggravated and exposed perhaps by the sexual shock

¹² Doyle, p.7.

of marriage." Lentricchia continues, "It shows itself in the hill wife's dreams in which her protected intimacy, the private space of the house of self, is penetrated by an alien force."¹³ If the "dark pine" is regarded as male and the house as female, there can be little doubt as to why only one of the two is in fear of the tree.

"The Witch of Coos" from "Two Witches" is a supernatural tale with a faintly humorous overtone. The witch, like all the women whom Frost writes about in a sexual context has a deeply rooted psychosis. She tells of how her husband murdered her lover and together they buried him in the cellar. To protect this "double guilt" away from herself, the witch invents the story that the dead lover is a skelton, and after she tells the story several times she even convinces herself. Her son begins:

It left the cellar forty years ago
 And carried itself like a pile of dishes
 Up one flight from the cellar to the kitchen,
 Another from the kitchen to the bedroom,
 Another from the bedroom to the attic,
 Right past both father and mother, and neither stopped it.
 (p.127)

As the witch reveals the events that took place on the night that the skeleton went upstairs, she also reveals an interesting relationship between herself and her husband.

The only fault my husband found with me--
 I went to sleep before I want to bed,
 Especially in winter when the bed
 Might just as well be ice and the clothes snow.
 The night the bones came up the cellar-stairs
 Toffile had gone to bed alone and left me,
 But left an open door to cool the room off
 So as to sort of turn me out of it.
 I was just coming to myself enough
 To wonder where the cold was coming from,
 When I heard Toffile upstairs in the bedroom
 And I though I heard him downstairs in the cellar. (p.127)

¹³ Lentricchia, p.70.

She hears some unusual footsteps on the stairs:

.....And then someone
 Began the stairs, two footsteps for each step,
 The way a man with one leg and a crutch,
 Or a little child comes up. It wasn't Toffile:
 It wasn't anyone who could be there. (pp.127-128)

The witch is aware that the skeleton is trying to get out of the house; he could never be allowed to leave because that would be an affirmation that her husband had killed him.

"He's after an open door to get outdoors.
 Let's trap him with an open door up attic."
 Toffile agreed to that, and sure enough,
 Almost the moment he was given an opening,
 The steps began to climb the attic stairs.
 I heard them. Toffile didn't seem to hear them.
 "Quick!" I slammed to the door and held the knob.
 "Toffile, get nails." I made him nail the door shut
 And push the headboard of the bed against it.
 Then we asked was there anything
 Up attic that he'd ever want again.
 The attic was less to us than the cellar.
 If the bones liked the attic, let them have it.
 Let them stay in the attic. (pp.129-130)

The witch, with her strange reasoning powers, thinks that her actions have been justifiable. The bones went to the attic of their own accord and there they must stay. She tries to punish the bones, just as she is punishing herself for her indiscretions.

.....When they sometimes
 Come down the stairs at night and stand perplexed
 Behind the door and headboard of the bed,
 Brushing their chalky skull with chalky fingers,
 With sounds like the dry rattling of a shutter,
 That's what I sit up in the dark to say—
 To no one any more since Toffile died.
 Let them stay in the attic since they went there.
 I promised Toffile to be cruel to them
 For helping them be cruel once to him. (p.130)

The "Pauper Witch of Grafton" is another poem associated with sex and witchcraft. The idea comes from an actual historical account of a witch from Warren, New Hampshire who had evil powers over her husband

and other men.¹⁴ Now the witch is old and on welfare. She is a charge of the town of Wentworth but due to a mixup in the town records, she has been declared a citizen of Warren. She says it is flattering to have "two towns fighting/To make a present of me to each other," but the court records are wrong and she proceeds to tell them so, in the language of a true "witch."

Right's right, and the temptation to do right
 When I can hurt someone by doing it
 Has always been too much for me, it has (p.132)

The story of her witchcraft activities has strong possibilities of sexual overtones. She says it was when she was a "strapping girl of twenty" that she became a witch—it was her way of allowing society an excuse for her unconventional behavior.

It wa'n't no sign, I s'pose, when Mallice Huse
 Said that I took him out in his old age
 And rode all over everything on him
 Until I'd had him worn to skin and bones,
 And if I'd left him hitched unblanketed
 In front of one Town Hall, I'd left him hitched
 In front of every one in Grafton County.
 Some cried shame on me not to blanket him,
 The poor old man. It would have been all right
 If someone hadn't said to gnaw the posts
 He stood beside and leave his trade mark on them,
 So they could recognize them. Not a post
 That they could hear tell of was scarified.
 They made him keep on gnawing till he whined.
 Then that same smarty someone said to look—
 He'd bet Huse was a cribber and had gnawed
 The crib he slept in—and as sure's you're born
 They found he'd gnawed the four posts of his bed,
 All four of them to splinters. What did that prove?
 Not that he hadn't gnawed the hitching posts
 He said he had besides. Because a horse
 Gnaws in the stable ain't no proof to me
 He don't gnaw trees and posts and fences too.
 But everybody took it for a proof. (pp.132-133)

¹⁴ Thompson, Vol.II, p.141.

Arthur Amy, that "smarty someone," rescued her from the difficulties caused over her illicit affair with Huse. Amy obviously enjoyed having for a wife a woman who could fulfill her sexual desires with such joy and wild abandon. Of her marriage she says:

He never said much after we were married,
But I mistrusted he was none too proud
Of having interfered in the Huse business.
I guess he found he got more out of me
By having me a witch. Or something happened
To turn him round. He got to saying things
To undo what he's done and make it right,
Like, "No, she ain't come back from kiting yet.
Last night was one of her nights out. She's kiting."
(p.133).

The end of the witch's second story contains some very intense images, both of sexual power and of dissolution. Patricia Wallace considers the nostalgia in this section. The moment before the snowberry melts suggest that the image is dissolving, for the snowberries are "wet." Wallace also regards "only bewitched so I would last him longer" as a nostalgic moment of young love, the moment of sexual union. ¹⁵

Well, I showed Arthur Amy signs enough
Off from the house as far as we could keep
And from barn smells you can't wash out of plowed
ground
With all the rain and snow of seven years;
And I don't mean just skulls of Rogers' Rangers
On Moosilauke, but woman signs to man,
Only bewitched so I would last him longer.
Up where the trees grow short, the mosses tall,
I made him gather me wet snow berries
On slippery rocks beside a waterfall.
I made him do it for me in the dark.
And he liked everything I made him do.
(p.133-134).

Of the passion in the last few lines Randall Jarrell remarks:

When I read the lines that begin "Up where the trees grow short, the mosses tall," and that end

¹⁵ Wallace, pp. 187-188.

"And he liked everything I made him do" (nobody
 But a good poet could have written the first line,
 and nobody but a great one could have forced the
 reader to say the last line as he is forced to
 say it), I sometimes murmur to myself, in a
 perverse voice, that there is more sexuality
 there than in several hothouses full of Dylan,¹⁶
 Thomas; and, of course, there is love there.

The witch says that if her husband can see her now she hopes he
 can't see how badly off she is. The townspeople don't matter to her,
 but the memory of him does.

. if I'd a-known when I was young
 And full of it, that this would be the end,
 It doesn't seem as if I'd had the courage
 To make so free and kick up in folks' faces.
 I might have, but it doesn't seem as if.
 (p.134)

One's sympathy is with the witch as the poem ends. Amy has died
 and left her destitute and lonely. They had a good relationship while
 their marriage lasted, but now it appears that there is nothing left
 for her. As with all of Frost's characters who are portrayed in an
 unorthodox or repressed sexual way, the witch has become alienated
 from society.

To Frost, sex is an element linking man and nature. He regarded
 man's physical urges as a part of reality, and his characters who
 could not reciprocate or accept this idea are portrayed as lonely,
 withdrawn, unhappy creatures. "Putting in the Seed" is the one poem
 that differs from the others in this section. While the element of
 sex is clearly evident, the manner in which Frost handles it is
 different. The poem tenderly portrays the act of "putting in the
 seed," the desire to procreate both in nature and in human terms. All
 the other poems show sex in an abnormal manner: "The Subverted Flower"

¹⁶ Jarrell, p.56.

begins normally but the girl's inhibitions transform her and the boy into beasts; both the women from "the witch" poems are oversexed, and the hill wife can be described as having sexual paranoia. "Putting in the Seed" is successful because Frost presents it on a mature level in which a free expression of sexual love is attained.

3. Love

Frost has said, "All of my poems are love poems." Besides the poems of love between man and woman, Frost writes about the love of nature, the love of a divine being, and the love of humanity. He maintains that the transference of love to objects in the natural world is because of our deep desire to assert our love.¹⁷

In "To Earthward" Frost shows the close bond between human love and the transference of that love to beauty in nature.

Love at the lips was touch
As sweet as I could bear;
And once that seemed too much;
I lived on air

That crossed me from sweet things
The flow of—was it musk
From hidden grapevine springs
Down hill at dusk?

I had the swirl and ache
From sprays of honeysuckle
That when they're gathered shake
Dew on the knuckle.

I craved strong sweets, but those
Seemed strong when I was young;
The petal of the rose
It was that stung.

(pp.142-143)

As a young man the poet tells about the sensations he has experienced. A kiss, faintly brushing the lips, was the sweetest of sensations. The scent of musky grapevines and sweet honeysuckle made

¹⁷ Thompson, Fire and Ice pp.184-185.

his head spin; he was painfully aware of the tiniest drop of dew on his knuckle, and the touch of a rose petal had the impact of a sting. The poet's craving for sweetness couldn't be fulfilled when he was young. As he becomes older, he changes.

Now no joy but lacks salt
That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault;
I crave the stain

Of tears, the aftermark
Of almost too much love,
The sweet of bitter bark
And burning clove.

When stiff and sore and scarred
I take away my hand
From leaning on it hard
In grass and sand,

The hurt is not enough:
I long for weight and strength
To feel the earth as rough
To all my length.

(p.143)

When he was young the barest touch upon his lips was enough to sustain him; sweetness was everything to him. In his old age he needs stronger, bitter things to satisfy his taste for life. This last desperate statement shows how tired he is of life. He craves the opposite of everything he's had in his youth—he yearns for tears, bitter bark, burning clove. His body has developed a numbness that can have feeling only under the pressure of heavy weight. He longs to become one with the earth and looks to death as the ultimate bitterness, an ultimate and final satisfaction.

Frost obviously enjoyed implementing opposites into his poetry. Whenever the opposites of heart and mind came into conflict with one another, the heart won out because Frost believed that love, even though

it is irrational, is the stronger of the two forces.¹⁸ "Bond and Free" gives a perfect example of love's power over thought.

Love has earth to which she clings
 With hills and circling arms about—
 Wall within wall to shut fear out.
 But Thought has need of no such things,
 For Thought has a pair of dauntless wings.

On snow and sand and turf, I see
 Where Love has left a printed trace
 With straining in the world's embrace,
 And such is Love and glad to be.
 But thought has shaken his ankles free.

.

His gains in heaven are what they are.
 Yet some say Love by being thrall
 And simply staying possesses all
 In several beauty that Thought fares far
 To find fused in another star. (pp.76-77)

Love stays to mingle with the earth, so appropriately said in "Birches": "earth's the right place for love." Thought, as though it has wings, flits from one object, then, to another. Love is left to predominate because it is the stronger bond. Frost reiterates this in the conclusion of "Wild Grapes."

I had not taken the first step in knowledge;
 I had not learned to let go with the hands,
 As still I have not learned to with the heart,
 And have no wish to with the heart—nor need,
 That I can see. The mind—is not the heart.
 I may yet live, as I know others live,
 To wish in vain to let go with the mind—
 Of cares, at night, to sleep; but nothing tells me
 That I need learn to let go with the heart.
 (pp.125-126)

Although one can let go with the hands and the mind, the heart has a more adherent quality. Frost says he hasn't learned to let go with his heart; however, nothing tells him that it is necessary to do so. Love is an all-important component for Frost.

¹⁸ Thompson, Fire and Ice, p.183.

"Meeting and Passing" is a love poem that Frost wrote for his wife during a summer vacation from college. Elinor's sister, a portrait painter, had been commissioned to paint portraits of the grandchildren of a well known manufacturer, and Elinor, also an accomplished painter, went along to help her out. Frost stayed nearby at a camp and often met her doing errands for her sister. Years later in "Meeting and Passing" Frost tried to recapture the special quality of the intimacy and estrangement of these meetings.¹⁹

As I went down the hill along the wall
 There was a gate I had leaned at for the view
 And had just turned from when I first saw you
 As you came up the hill. We met. But all
 We did that day was mingle great and small
 Footprints in summer dust as if we drew
 The figure of our being less than two
 But more than one as yet. Your parasol
 Pointed the decimal off with one deep thrust.
 And all the time we talked you seemed to see
 Something down there to smile at in the dust.
 (Oh, it was without prejudice to me!)
 Afterward I went past what you had passed
 Before we met and you what I had passed.

(Frost, p.148)

"Meeting and Passing" appears to be a simple love story. A young man is walking down a hill when he stops at a gate and sees a young woman with a parasol coming up. They meet and talk briefly; then each continues as before, alone. The action in the poem is all visual, not verbal. The entire poem is a subtle gesture; it is as though it had been written as a vehicle for impressionist Marcel Marceau.

After their meeting the young woman walks in his footsteps in the dust as if to predict a future in which they will be as one. He translates the decimal point she makes in the ground with her parasol as being "less than two/But more than one as yet." The last two lines are

¹⁹ Thompson, Vol.I, pp.203-205.

as charmingly awkward as the young lovers themselves are. Each goes off happily, seeing what the other has just seen, walking again in the other's footprints.

In "The Silken Tent" Frost uses the analogy of a woman to a tent. The poem is a delicate love sonnet; the woman for whom it was written is Frost's secretary, Kathleen Morrison. Frost asked Mrs. Morrison to marry him after the death of his wife, but she refused.²⁰ This is how Frost saw Kathleen Morrison:

She is as in a field a silken tent
 At midday when a sunny summer breeze
 Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
 So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
 And its supporting central cedar pole,
 That is its pinnacle to heavenward
 And signifies the sureness of the soul,
 Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
 But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
 By countless silken ties of love and thought
 To everything on earth the compass round,
 And only by one's going slightly taut
 In the capriciousness of summer air
 Is of the slightest bondage made aware. ²¹
 (p.220)

This is a sonnet in which Frost, carefully metaphoric, "captures more of the essentially ambivalent quality of love and spiritus:l

²⁰ During the summer following his wife's death, Frost was so upset that his concerned friends decided that he must spend some time at the Nathaniel Sage's summer home in W.Dover, Vt. Kay Morrison helped him with his unanswered correspondence and went on long walks with him botanizing and listening to him unburden himself of his accumulated troubles (Vol.II,p.5).

²¹ Frost enjoyed these walks with the attractive, intelligent Mrs. Morrison, but in the emotional havoc that was the aftermath of Elinor's death, their time together produced a result which neither of them had anticipated. Lonely and desperate for the companionship Elinor had always provided, Frost began to imagine that the gratitude and affection he felt for Kay was love. He astonished Kay by professing his love for her, and by following that with a proposal, amounting almost to a demand, that she leave her husband and become his wife. Kay told him that she was happily married and a marriage to him was out of the question, but they could continue to be dear friends (Vol.II,p.23).

strength than a dozen rhapsodic love poems eulogizing assorted parts of the anatomy."²² Each comparison refers to others in a self-supporting web of connections. She is not "like" a tent, she is "as a tent" when "its ropes relent" and it "gently" sways. The "supporting central cedar pole" is the highest projection and points the way "heavenward." The "central cedar pole" also suggests latent sexual implications, completely appropriate to a love poem in which the poet talks of "one's going slightly taunt/In the capriciousness of summer air."²³ While the pole "signifies the sureness of the soul," the tent's ropes are "silken ties of love and thought." Without these "ties" the tent would collapse; it is through the "loosely bound" "silken ties" that the woman makes life all the more beautiful.

Frost shows another kind of love, his love of God and of nature, in "A Prayer in Spring."

Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;
 And give us not to think so far away
 As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
 All simply in the springing of the year.

Oh, give us pleasure in the orchard white,
 Like nothing else by day, like ghosts by night;
 And make us happy in the happy bees,
 The swarm dilating round the perfect trees.

And make us happy in the darting bird
 That suddenly above the bees is heard,
 The meteor that thrusts in with needle bill,
 And off a blossom in mid air stands still.

For this is love and nothing else is love,
 The which it is reserved for God above
 To sanctify to what far ends He will,
 But which it only needs that we fulfill.

(pp.11-12)

The poet says a prayer so that we might live and enjoy the beauty of today and not concern ourselves with an "uncertain harvest"

²² Barry, p.97.

²³ Poirier, p.xv.

which is death and the afterlife. He urges man to take pleasure in such things as the beauty of an orchard that abounds with God's creations and to continually be motivated through love. "Hyla Brook" reveals Frost's love of nature. The poem relates a story about a lovely little brook that vanishes after the month of June. The brook has many different phases and to love it properly, it must be seen from all perspectives.

By June our brook's run out of song and speed
 Sought for much after that, it will be found
 Either to have gone groping underground
 (And taken with it all the Hyla breed
 That shouted in the mist a month ago,
 Like ghost of sleigh-bells in a ghost of snow)—
 Or flourished and come up in jewel-weed,
 Weak foliage that is blown upon and bent
 Even against the way its waters went.
 Its bed is left a faded paper sheet
 Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat—
 A brook to none but who remember long.
 This as it will be seen is other far
 Than with brooks taken elsewhere in song.
 We love the things we love for what they are.

(Frost, p.149)

The brook dries up in June and with it goes the croaking toads "That shouted in the mist a month ago,/Like ghost of sleigh bells in a ghost of snow." Sometimes weeds come up in its place, other times all that remains of the brook is a bed like "a faded paper sheet/Of dead leaves." Other brooks are still bubbling in song but this is all that is left of Hyla Brook.

The last line in the poem is certainly an interesting one. Not only does it summarize Frost's feelings about the brook, about why we love, but it also becomes the fifteenth line in the sonnet! Still,

"We love the things we love for what they are" means to convey exactly what it says—if we are to truly love, we "Love the things....for what they are."

In dealing with the relationship of man and nature, whether it was in his lyric, narrative or dramatic poetry, Frost handled it honestly, without sentimentality. While most poets grow during their careers, Frost did not appear to make any obvious developmental changes. He wrote as many good poems during his early years as he did after he was forty. If Frost's poetry changed, it was with his moods which ranged from the loneliness and isolation of "Desert Places" and "Bereft" to his inability to accept the ending of things in "Reluctance" and his ability to learn to accept limitations in "Acceptance." The fact that Frost's moods fluctuated as rapidly as nature's gave his work fresh and original appeal.

Frost's involvement with human relationships embraces a variety of complexities. Psychological and sexual problems interweave in "The Fear" and "A Servant to Servants." Love encompasses all relationships from the simplistic one between man and woman in "Meeting and Passing" to the intricate type involving all of humanity in "Once by the Pacific."

Through his craftsmanship and creative imagination Frost has become a major poet of the twentieth century, a poet of man and nature. His first concern has always been with man, then nature. If he seems to some to be a nature poet it is only because he has glazed his poetry with a generous coating of nature to give an already glowing performance even greater shine.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

1. Editions of Frost's Works

Selected Poems of Robert Frost, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1963.

The Poetry of Robert Frost, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1972.

Selected Prose of Robert Frost, New York: Collier Books, 1974.

Complete Poems of Robert Frost, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1949.

2. Biographies, Interviews, and Letters

Morrison, Kathleen. Robert Frost A Pictorial Chronicle. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974.

Thompson, Lawrance. Robert Frost The Early Years, 1874-1915. New York, Chicago, San Francisco, 1966.

Thompson, Lawrance. Robert Frost The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938. New York, Chicago, San Francisco, 1970.

Thompson, Lawrance and Winnick, R.H. Robert Frost The Later Years, 1938-1963. New York, Chicago, San Francisco, 1976.

"Robert Frost Master Conversationalist at Work," Saturday Review, March 21, 1959. (An interview with John Ciardi).

The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer. Edited by Louis Untermeyer. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963.

Secondary Sources

Baker, Carlos. "Frost on the Pumpkin." Georgia Review, Summer 1957.

Barry, Elaine. Robert Frost. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1973.

Barzun, Jacques. Classic, Romantic, and Modern. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1961.

Carmichael, Charles, "Robert Frost as a Romantic," Frost: Centennial Essays, Ed. Jac L. Tharpe, Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1974.

Coale, Samuel. "The Emblematic Encounter of Robert Frost," Frost: Centennial Essays, Ed. Jac L. Tharpe, Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1974.

Cook, Reginald L. Robert Frost: A Living Voice. Amherst: University of Ma. Press, 1974.

Cox, James M., ed. Robert Frost A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962.

Dabbs, J. McBride. "Robert Frost and the Dark Woods," Yale Review, March, 1934.

Dedinger, Lloyd N. "The Irrational Appeal of Frost's Dark Deep Woods," Southern Review, October, 1966.

Derleth, August. Emerson, Our Contemporary. London: Collier-MacMillan Press, 1970.

Doyle, John Robert. The Poetry of Robert Frost. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1962.

Farrar, John. "Robert Frost and Other Green Mountain Writers," English Journal, October, 1966.

Foster, Richard. "Leaves Compared with Flowers: A Reading in Robert Frost's Poems," The New England Quarterly, Summer, 1973.

Gerber, Philip L. Robert Frost. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966.

Gould, Jean. Robert Frost: The Aim Was Song. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1964.

Grenier, Donald J. Robert Frost The Poet and His Critics. Chicago: American Library Association, 1974.

Griffith, Clark. "Frost and the American View of Nature," American Quarterly, 1968.

Jarrell, Randall. Poetry and the Age. New York: Vintage Books, 1953.

Lindner, Carl M. "Robert Frost: Dark Romantic," Arizona Quarterly, 1973.

Longstreth, T. Morris. Henry Thoreau: American Rebel. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1963.

Lynen, John F. The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964.

Monteiro, George. "Robert Frost's Linked Analogies," The New England Quarterly, 1973.

- Morrison, Theodore. "Frost: Country Poet and Cosmopolitan Poet," Yale Review, Winter 1969.
- Rechniz, Robert M. "The Tragic Vision of Robert Frost," Frost: Centennial Essays II, Jackson: University of Miss., 1976.
- Reusch, Lora Ann. "Man and Nature in the Poetry of Robert Frost," Purdue University, 1972.
- Thompson, Lawrance. Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost. New York: Russell & Russell, 1942.
- Thompson, Lawrance. Robert Frost. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965.
- Thrall, William Fline and Hibbard, Addison. A Handbook to Literature, revised by C. Hugh Holman. New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960.
- Tharpe, Jac L., and Gordon Weaver, editors. Frost: Centennial Essays. Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1974.
- Van Dore, Wade. "Robert Frost and Wilderness," The Living Wilderness, Summer 1970.
- Wallace, Patricia. "The Thematics of Imagination in Frost's Poetry," Frost: Centennial Essays, II. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1976.
- Warren, Robert Penn. "The Themes of Robert Frost," The Writer and His Craft: The Hopwood Lectures 1932-1952. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1954.