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HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN ROBERT FROST'S  
DIALOGUE POEMS.

MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY, D.A., 1979

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HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN ROBERT FROST'S  
DIALOGUE POEMS

Louise Davis Bentley

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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August, 1979

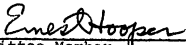
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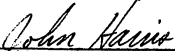
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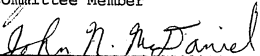
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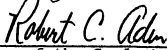
  
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ABSTRACT

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN ROBERT FROST'S  
DIALOGUE POEMS

by Louise Davis Bentley

Robert Frost's twenty-two dialogues written from 1905 to 1926, poems usually showing two characters conversing, illustrate both Frost's theory of the conversational voice as the sound of poetry and his ability to portray human beings interacting with other humans. The linking of his poetic skill and his knowledge of life resulted in a perceptive analysis of the dramatic characters in his dialogues. Four universal human relationships emerge in these dialogues supporting the thesis that Robert Frost was a man of keen personal observation and experience.

This study concentrates on analysis of these dialogues in the light of relevant criticism about the poet and his work. Chapter one treats the poet himself and considers his poetic theory and the early experiences that tempered him for later success. Frost's two loves--people and talk--appear even in the dramatic dialogues written when he was a lonely,

frustrated man who felt himself a failure. From his fame in 1914 began a gradual shift in his dialogue writing. This study ends with his 1928 publication of his last human-centered dialogue.

Chapter two focuses on the human relationships of strangers, situations that face all men at some time. Five dialogues treat this experience; significantly different reactions result from the strangers' sex, age, and perception of life. Emotions from suspicion and paralyzing fear to trust and delightful curiosity are revealed.

Chapter three considers six dialogues that trace the relationships of friends on a continuum from the casual to the close. The experiences of working together, sharing common interests, and uniting in tragedy--all reveal developing friendships. In such poems a different type of character and a different speech pattern are evident.

Chapter four investigates the relationships of parents and children in four dialogues. Two emphasize paternal situations, two maternal. One of the major conclusions of this study is that Frost failed to portray any but alienated, unhappy relationships in the parent-child dialogues, probably because of a failure of his own understanding. The variety of emotions

evident in the other relationships is missing in the area of filial concern.

Chapter five shows Frost at his best as he presents the relationship of husbands and wives, married lovers, even though this relationship is the most difficult to treat without irony or sentimentality. Seven dialogues explore the interaction of couples facing death, change, and the routine of everyday life. Frost suggests that their willingness to converse carefully and to reconcile the natural, opposing views of male and female is essential if their love is to grow.

The concluding chapter places these little dramas at the heart of Frost's early poetry. They epitomize both his poetic theory of the human voice speaking and many of his shaping personal experiences. Through all his dialogues he clarified his views of the individual worth and ability of man. These poems testify that individual persons offer the best example of what is meant by human, that emotions are the most important aspect of humanity, that people reveal their character through their conversation, and that talk is essential to right relationships. Although Frost was unsuccessful in his parent-child presentations, he succeeded in almost every subtle nuance in portraying the relationships of strangers, friends, husbands and wives.

Louise Davis Bentley

When Frost's writing shifted in the 1920s from human dialogues to philosophical and political writing, he had already given ample evidence that he understood being human in a confusing world.



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## CHAPTER I

### RELATIONSHIPS OF ROBERT FROST

Robert Frost fascinated people with his scintillating talk. Throughout the many years of what he called "barding around"<sup>1</sup> on American campuses and lecture circuits, he clearly showed his genius for the art of conversation and the art of making friends. This genius was evident not only because his public personality was so delightful to thousands but also because he, more than any other twentieth-century American poet, made the technique of conversation a distinctive trait both in his performances and in his poems. He never "read" his poems; he always "said" them.<sup>2</sup> Critical studies offer abundant testimony both to Frost's proficiency in conversation and to his poetic theory of conversation. Few critics,

<sup>1</sup> "To Eustace Seligman," 2 January 1957, Letter 435, Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), p. 561.

<sup>2</sup> Milton Bracker, "The 'Quietly Overwhelming' Robert Frost," in Interviews with Robert Frost, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 184.

however, have focused on the sensitive, keen understanding of the human relationships involved and exposed in his poetry through the characters' conversations. This study will analyze various universal human relationships that Robert Frost perceived and allowed his characters to portray as they talked together in his poems and revealed their multifaceted personalities.

Before analyzing his poetic characters, we should consider the poet himself. Frost's two loves--people and talk--controlled both his life and his poetry. The public Frost was, as Lewis P. Simpson has written, the "greatest exception to the private role of the poet in American society"<sup>3</sup> because he became so extraordinarily popular. He became the only American poet to be honored with the Pulitzer Prize four times: 1924, for New Hampshire; 1931, for Collected Poems; 1937, for A Further Range; and 1943, for A Witness Tree.<sup>4</sup> Partly because of his experiences as Poet-in-Residence and Fellow in Creative Arts at the University of Michigan in 1921-22 and partly because of his genial way with young people, Frost fathered a movement

<sup>3</sup> Lewis P. Simpson, Introd., in Profile of Robert Frost (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1971), p. iii.

<sup>4</sup> Simpson, Chronicle of Events, in Profile of Robert Frost, pp. 2-3.

that gained such momentum it reached far beyond college campuses. He fulfilled well the role he perceived as "a sort of poetic Radiator"<sup>5</sup> to excite and infuse with warmth the intellectual thought of those gathered near him. He always insisted, as he said in his days at Amherst, "I don't teach. . . . I talk."<sup>6</sup>

The first poet to be so acclaimed, he was given national recognition on his seventy-fifth birthday in 1950 by a Resolution of the United States Senate.<sup>7</sup> Accolades and forty-four honorary degrees came easily all during the decade of the 1950s, including honorary degrees from Oxford and Cambridge Universities in 1957.<sup>8</sup> This man who never completed college became the Official Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress, following Randall Jarrell in 1958.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "To Louis Untermeyer," 23 November 1921, The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), p. 139.

<sup>6</sup> As quoted in Louis Untermeyer, Introductory Note, The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrance Thompson and R. H. Winnick, Robert Frost: The Later Years, 1938-1963 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1976), p. 186.

<sup>8</sup> Donald J. Greiner, Robert Frost: The Poet and His Critics (Chicago: American Library Association, 1974), p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson and Winnick, p. 258.

Dozens of television appearances and interviews perpetuated what James M. Cox called the "myth of Robert Frost"<sup>10</sup> as a kindly, rugged New Englander--solid as America herself. Honored by other groups such as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and the Poetry Society of America, Frost also received several highly coveted cash awards, including the Bollingen Prize.

The apex of public honor for an American poet came on that blustery January inaugural day for President John F. Kennedy, 1961. Frost's rare attempt at poetry written for a special occasion was aborted when the bitter cold winds ruffled his pages and the intense sunlight dazzled his eyes. Unable to see to read his special "Dedication," he groped back twenty years into his memory for the lines that recounted American history: "The Gift Outright."<sup>11</sup> It was no accident, this emphasis on "The land" that "was ours before we were the land's."<sup>12</sup> Throughout his long

<sup>10</sup> James M. Cox, Introd., in Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James M. Cox (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson and Winnick, p. 282.

<sup>12</sup> "The Gift Outright," The Poetry of Robert Frost, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), p. 348. All further references to Frost's poems appear in the text.

life and career Frost was considered a man of the soil, but this image was figurative more than literal.

The short years before his death in Boston, January 29, 1963, offered him international attention in his role as Goodwill Ambassador for the State Department. He was sent to Israel, Greece, and England in 1961;<sup>13</sup> in September, 1962, he was part of a cultural exchange to Russia.<sup>14</sup> After seeing Frost off at the airport, Secretary of the Union of Soviet Writers Surkov wrote in Pravda:

I . . . was left with the impression that we were seeing off an honest and true friend, one who in many ways understands a solution to the most important issues of our time quite differently from us but who sincerely wishes to purge reciprocal relations between the peoples of the USA and the USSR of everything superficial and biased, to work for friendship, mutual understanding, and trust.<sup>15</sup>

Frost did not live to see the easing of international tensions. He also failed to achieve the one thing he desired more than all the other honors. According to C. P. Snow, Frost endured "a yearly agony" until the Nobel Prize was announced; during Snow's visit shortly before the poet's death, Frost confided that he felt

<sup>13</sup> Thompson and Winnick, p. 284.

<sup>14</sup> F. D. Reeve, Robert Frost in Russia (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> As quoted in Reeve, p. 129.

he should have that honor since T. S. Eliot had won it.<sup>16</sup>

Such glory and influence could never have been foreseen or predicted for a man who was thirty-nine years old before his first thin book of poems was published in England--A Boy's Will in 1913. At that time he had few friends and was painfully awkward at talking to people, but even though he felt a failure in everything else, Frost believed he could write poetry. When his second book, North of Boston, appeared in 1914, many readers echoed Frost's belief and said that a new voice of significance had arrived. These two books generated enough talk and enough change in circumstances to bring him out of his shyness, even in public.

Critical response offered a series of paradoxes. William Dean Howells, the "aging patriarch of American letters," and Ezra Pound, the "eccentric and rebellious exponent of the new poetry," both reviewed and praised Frost's poetry.<sup>17</sup> These two vastly different writers reflect only one of the paradoxes about his public recognition. Because Frost's first two books were

<sup>16</sup> C. P. Snow, Variety of Men (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), p. 183.

<sup>17</sup> Cox, Intro., Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 4.

published in England, a considerable controversy arose about British recognition of neglected American writers; some Americans felt the public should not patronize an American artist simply because the British had done so. This feeling led to the whole question of the ability of American editors and publishers to recognize and support American talent. All too few, however, noted the fact that when Frost had taken his family to live "under thatch,"<sup>18</sup> as Mrs. Frost had wished in the England of 1912, he had not gone in a pique because of rejection slips, although he had had plenty from various magazines. After his return to America, he told Louis Untermeyer in a letter from New Hampshire, "I went to England to write and be poor without further scandal in the family."<sup>19</sup>

In English journals public recognition of the first book was brief and anonymous, although the tone was favorable. Elinor wrote to her friend Margaret Bartlett back in America:

Rob has been altogether discouraged at times,  
but I suppose we ought to be satisfied for

<sup>18</sup> As quoted in Louis Untermeyer, "Robert Frost: The Man and the Poet," in Robert Frost's Poems, ed. Louis Untermeyer, Enlarged ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> "To Louis Untermeyer," 16 May 1915, The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer, pp. 6-7.



the present to get the book published and a little notice taken of it. Yeats has said to a friend [Ezra Pound] who repeated the remark to Robert, that it is the best poetry written in America for a long time. If only he would say so publicly, but he won't; he is too taken up with his own greatness.<sup>20</sup>

However, two specific essays in England about Frost's second book, North of Boston, started a long line of significant criticism about Frost. Lascelles Abercrombie, one of Frost's friends in England and part of the coterie of writers who shared the countryside excursions that resulted in Georgian poetry, pinpointed the unique aspects of Frost's writing. Abercrombie's article in London's Nation, June 13, 1914, insisted that Frost's verse was "new and vigorous" because of his simple language and concrete images. Donald J. Greiner believes this particular essay "laid some of the groundwork for future Frost studies" because of the "original observation in 1914" that Frost could be compared to Theocritus. Both Theocritus and Frost, according to Abercrombie, utilized "the traits and necessities of common life, the habits of common speech, the minds and hearts of common folk."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> "Elinor M. Frost to Margaret Bartlett," c. 3 July 1913, Letter 52a, Selected Letters of Robert Frost, p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> Lascelles Abercrombie, as quoted in Greiner, pp. 73-74.

Frost was already back home in America when the second article appeared in The Atlantic Monthly, August, 1915. His friend Edward Garnett was well aware of the hesitancy of American publishers about this poet's gaining fame first in England. Nevertheless, he spoke boldly: North of Boston he had "read . . . and reread. It seemed that this poet was destined to take a permanent place in American literature."<sup>22</sup> Garnett's prophecy was to be fulfilled. Ironically, this praise came in one of the prestigious magazines that had earlier rejected Frost's poetry.

Americans were soon publishing their own reviews and articles. The American Ezra Pound had sent from England a glowing article to Poetry: A Magazine of Verse for December, 1914. Although he stated facts inaccurately about Frost's family background, his emphasis was on Frost's subject matter that "sticks in your head. You do not confuse one of his poems with another in your memory. His book is a contribution to American literature."<sup>23</sup> Landing in New York on February 22, 1915, Frost bought a copy of the New

<sup>22</sup> Edward Garnett, rev. of North of Boston, by Robert Frost, Recognition of Robert Frost: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, ed. Richard Thornton (New York: Holt, 1937), p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Ezra Pound, rev. of North of Boston, by Robert Frost, Recognition, p. 52.

Republic and encountered Amy Lowell's somewhat qualified praise of his poetry. A few of her comments, however, annoyed him; her suggestion that he seemed lacking in humor bothered him for years after. Her misunderstanding of his portrayal of New England was to give rise to another controversy:

Mr. Frost's book reveals a disease which is eating into the vitals of New England life. . . . What is there in the hard vigorous climate of these states which plants the seeds of degeneration?<sup>24</sup>

Her later portrait of him in Tendencies in Modern Poetry was even more commendatory, but Frost did not like it because he still resented the earlier slight. From both England and America the long series of critical writing had started, however, and it would encompass a half century of literature and hundreds of critics.

Frank and Melissa Lentricchia's Robert Frost: A Bibliography, 1913-1974 offers convincing evidence that articles in American journals increased impressively through the decades:

<sup>24</sup> Amy Lowell, "North of Boston," New Republic, 20 Feb. 1915, pp. 81-82, as quoted in Lawrence Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970) pp. 3-4.

<u>Decade</u>	<u>Scholarly articles</u>	<u>Popular</u> <sup>25</sup> <u>articles</u>
1913-19	3	16
1920-29	6	62
1930-39	26	63
1940-49	34	31
1950-59	45	55
1960-69	166	75
1970-74	88	8
1975-77	13	4

} =101
} =12

From the chart one can see that although significant numbers of popular articles appeared, not much scholarly attention was focused on Frost for the first two decades. Reginald Cook believed the reason was that Frost

failed to impose upon his time any commanding literary image like Eliot's "waste land" and he failed to come to grips with the decadence of his culture, as Pound is thought to have done, if fragmentarily and somewhat incoherently, in the Cantos.<sup>26</sup>

Some representative voices in the 1920s were Gorham Munson's Robert Frost: A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense and John Freeman's essay showing Frost

<sup>25</sup> Frank Lentricchia and Melissa Lentricchia, Robert Frost: A Bibliography, 1913-1974 (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1976), passim. The additional figure is from a checking of The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, 1975-77.

<sup>26</sup> Reginald Cook, Robert Frost: A Living Voice (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1974), p. 300.

as "content to endure what can't be cured." Freeman admired Frost because "without melancholy, and without any pitiful impeachment of a deaf Fate, he pursues his own cheerful and candid conception."<sup>27</sup> Part of the poet's image was surely formed by his friend Sidney Cox in 1929, the title of whose book, Robert Frost: Original "Ordinary Man," shows his emphasis. In the 1930s Mark Van Doren praised Frost because "he has kept to his center. He has had nothing to do with the extremes where most of our shouting has been heard."<sup>28</sup> When Richard Thornton in 1937 presented the first collection of Frost criticism, he was wise to entitle it Recognition of Robert Frost. James M. Cox noted that all too clearly not enough serious criticism and recognition had been devoted to Frost's poetry instead of to the man himself and his customary technique.<sup>29</sup>

In the 1940s Lawrance Thompson's Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost presented what several scholars believe to be the first authoritative study of Frost's poetry. It was the first

<sup>27</sup> John Freeman, "In the English Tradition," in Recognition, p. 220.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Van Doren, "The Permanence of Robert Frost," The American Scholar, 5 (1936), 4.

<sup>29</sup> Cox, Introd., Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 5-6.

critical book that Frost himself approved; he had already selected Thompson to be his official biographer. Another look at the chart shows the steady growth of criticism in the 1950s. Of the many discussions, two are especially outstanding.

Perhaps the most appreciative recognition during Frost's lifetime came in 1953. Randall Jarrell, as a "member of the new generation," rhetorically explored what he called the "anomaly of his position" in an essay titled "To the Laodiceans." Jarrell cleverly ridiculed the critics who saw only the good or only the bad in Frost as well as those who were distressed that Frost was not "like Rilke" or "Eliot or Moore or Stevens or Auden." He insisted that posterity would vindicate Frost as "that rare thing, a complete or representative poet." Jarrell thought Frost "brilliant" in what he could do to "a portion of reality":

To have the distance from the most awful and most nearly unbearable parts of the poems, to the most tender, subtle, and loving parts, a distance so great; to have this whole range of being treated with so much humor and sadness and composure, with such plain truth; to see that a man can still include, connect, and make humanly understandable or humanly understandable so much--this is one of the freshest and oldest of joys.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Randall Jarrell, "To the Laodiceans," in Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 103-04.

Jarrell captured succinctly both the range and complexity of the poet.

Probably the most influential piece of the 1950s was Lionel Trilling's famous speech at Frost's eighty-fifth birthday dinner on March 26, 1959. As a former negative critic but now a "recent convert" to Frost's poetry, Trilling compared the poet to Sophocles:

Like you, Sophocles lived to a great age, writing well; and like you, Sophocles was the poet his people loved most. Surely they loved him in some part because he praised their common country. But I think that they loved him chiefly because he made plain to them the terrifying things of human life: they felt, perhaps, that only a poet who could make plain the terrible things could possibly give them comfort.<sup>31</sup>

Even Frost himself was unsure whether he was being flattered or insulted, but others quickly jumped to his defense and scathingly took Trilling to task in magazines such as the Atlantic and the Saturday Review as well as in several newspapers.

The attacks were so vicious and unexpected that Trilling answered in an essay by quoting some of the harsh judgments and then reprinting his entire speech to allow all to evaluate his position from the written text. The whole affair caused what Trilling considered

<sup>31</sup> Lionel Trilling, "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode," in Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 158.

"a cultural episode" of some moment; he was amazed at the fierceness and loyalty of Frost's supporters. Trilling's controversial speech continued to spark critical comment such as Lloyd N. Dendinger's insistence that there were two Frosts: the widely, "traditionally admired rural American poet who reassures us by his affirmations of old virtues . . . and the terrifying poet" that Trilling had identified.<sup>32</sup>

Since Frost's death dozens of articles have denounced and extolled him. Typical of the negative critic was Isadore Traschen, who acknowledged Frost's worth but lamented his "incapacity for the tragic howl" and the fact that he was not involved in the "complexities and contentions of our time."<sup>33</sup> On the positive side Alfred Kazin refuted the charge that Frost was accommodating only to average capacities and prejudices. Kazin presented Frost as an intellectual with a "bleak, if stoical, outlook." He defined Frost's strength cogently:

Frost does not write about poetry or about making the modern world safe for poetry, the usual themes of the romantic and symbolist poets, for whom the poet himself is the

<sup>32</sup> Lloyd N. Dendinger, "Robert Frost: The Popular and the Central Poetic Images," in Profile of Robert Frost, ed. Lewis P. Simpson, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Isadore Traschen, "Robert Frost: Some Divisions in a Whole Man," Yale Review, Oct. 1965, p. 61.



hero. Frost writes about situations which threaten the moral balance of the passerby who has fallen into the situation. He makes poetry out of the dramatic, startling contest with the negative blackness that begins everywhere outside the hard-won human order. . . . To read Frost's best poems is to have a series of satisfactions in the intellectual, emotional, and technical conquest of difficulties.<sup>34</sup>

Kazin's view continued to spark critical assessment. C. P. Snow judged Frost "a true artist" with "complete integrity," one who "kept to his own standards. There he was both simple and noble." He described Frost accurately: "Somewhere, at the lowest stratum of the shifting quicksand of his nature, there was rock."<sup>35</sup>

From these samples of critical opinion one can see that even the great quantities of talk and writing about this man who loved both talking and writing have not explained fully the complex man and poet. To understand any complicated man is difficult; with Frost the dichotomy between the private and public persons makes the job even more challenging. What shaped his life, his beliefs? What did he choose as his theory? Some likely answers can guide one in analyzing the dialogue poems.

<sup>34</sup> Alfred Kazin, "The Strength of Robert Frost," Commentary, Dec. 1964, p. 50.

<sup>35</sup> Snow, p. 193.

The nineteenth century, in which Frost lived for twenty-six years, offered "no commanding poetic voice in America," according to James M. Cox. There were only a spent Whitman, the "Good Gray Poet," and the dying Schoolroom Poets. Lawrence, Joyce, Eliot, and Pound had not begun their careers; the fiction giants--Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Hemingway--had not even been born.<sup>36</sup> Frost's first eleven years in California until his father's death offered more instability and violence than concern for school, let alone poetry. He was thirteen and back in New England before he ever read a book.<sup>37</sup> Of his classical studies, Latin became his favorite. His good training in grammar "stood him as a bulwark a whole lifetime,"<sup>38</sup> he told his friend Louis Mertins. His reading of Emerson and Thoreau planted ideas that were to become his own creed. Two books, singled out for Mertins, were "never quite out of mind": Thoreau's Walden and Defoe's Robinson Crusoe; he saw that "while Crusoe was cast away and Thoreau self-cast-away, each found

<sup>36</sup> Cox, Introd., Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Sidney Cox, Robert Frost, Original "Ordinary Man" (New York: Holt, 1929), p. 33.

<sup>38</sup> Louis Mertins, Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 42.

Self sufficient."<sup>39</sup> Of various experiences connected with work he was most directly and permanently influenced by his reading of Shakespeare in between trimming lights in a Lawrence mill from September, 1893, to February, 1894. He was captivated with the ease of conversation in the plays.<sup>40</sup>

When he was twenty-five, ill with what was feared to be tuberculosis, he and Elinor left Harvard before the end of his second year and moved to a farm near Derry, New Hampshire.<sup>41</sup> These lonely years were heavy with sorrows, failures, depression; some ease came in 1906 when he began to teach at Pinkerton Academy. From his own writing of poetry--one published poem had secured him his teaching position--and from his teaching came the synthesis of a poetic creed that never changed. Frost always believed the Derry years were responsible for giving his "life a direction which might reach beyond farming"; he called it "the place where he was reborn."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> As quoted in Lawrance Thompson, "Native to the Grain of the American Idiom," Saturday Review, 21 Mar. 1959, p. 55.

<sup>40</sup> Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 155.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Frost: Farm-Poultryman, ed. Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrance Thompson (Hanover: Dartmouth, 1963), p. 21.

<sup>42</sup> As quoted in Thompson, The Early Years, p. 298.

The best explanation of Frost's beliefs can be found in an address recorded at Amherst in 1930 entitled "Education by Poetry." He identified three beliefs basic to his own poetic life, the first of which was "self-belief" in which the poet must believe himself into "acceptance." The second was "belief in someone else, a relationship of two that is going to be believed into fulfillment," what might be called a "love-belief." Third was "literary-belief"--his creative endowment as an artist. All three were "closely related to the God-belief; the belief in God is a relationship you enter into with Him to bring about the future. . . ."43 It is no wonder colleges vied for this poet whose attitudes toward the close relationship between art and life could have "a fertilizing effect on the hearts and minds of the undergraduates."<sup>44</sup> For Frost "poetry was a way of life . . . [a] double role as human being and poet," according to Elizabeth Isaacs.<sup>45</sup>

Frost's long-famous definition of poetry had come years before that speech. In a letter to Louis

<sup>43</sup> As quoted in Thompson, The Early Years, pp. 363-64.

<sup>44</sup> As quoted in Thompson, The Early Years, p. 365.

<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Isaacs, An Introduction to Robert Frost (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1962), p. 39.

Untermeyer Frost objected bitterly to William S. Braithwaite's critical preference for E. A. Robinson. As part of his self-defense, Frost proposed this definition:

A poem is never a put-up job so to speak. It begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness. It is never a thought to begin with. It is at its best when it is a tantalizing vagueness. It finds its thought and succeeds, or doesn't find it and comes to nothing. It finds its thought or makes its thought. . . . It finds the thought and the thought finds the words.<sup>46</sup>

These ideas held lasting importance for Frost, as his later remarks show. For example, Frost told Reginald Cook in a conversation at South Shaftsbury, Vermont, May 1, 1931, that he saw poetry as a "renewal of words." "Renewal" for Frost meant the use of words so accurate and sensitive that they evoked the idea they stood for as signs. Cook explained this "renewal" as "the enforcement through words not only of a freshly perceived idea but of a passionate feeling."<sup>47</sup> Frost's poem "To Earthward" has a stanza that illustrates this passionate freshness well:

<sup>46</sup> "To Louis Untermeyer," 1 January 1916, The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer, p. 22.

<sup>47</sup> Cook, p. 224.

I craved strong sweets, but those  
 Seemed strong when I was young;  
 The petal of the rose  
 It was that stung. (p. 227)

This use of the rose is original and startling, but the experience evoked in "stung" is felt intensely.

Seriously committed to the vocation of poetry, Frost longed to write as well as one of his favorite poets, John Keats. Writing well for Frost meant using the ordinary speech of ordinary people. When writing from England to John Bartlett, his former student, Frost frankly claimed, "I am one of the most notable craftsmen of my time. I alone of English writers have consciously set myself to make music out of what I call the sound of sense."<sup>48</sup> Later that same year he wrote again to Bartlett:

In North of Boston you are to see me performing in a language absolutely unliterary. What I would like is to get so I would never use a word or combination of words that I hadn't heard used in running speech.<sup>49</sup>

Two years later he was still discussing this with John: "There are tones of voice that mean more than words. Sentences may be so shaped as definitely to indicate

<sup>48</sup> "To John T. Bartlett," 4 July 1913, Letter 53, Selected Letters of Robert Frost, p. 79.

<sup>49</sup> "To John T. Bartlett," 8 December 1913, Letter 67, Selected Letters of Robert Frost, p. 102.

these tones."<sup>50</sup> Similar explanations were to continue for his long lifetime, not as defenses but as explanations that showed logic and good sense.

When Edward Thomas reviewed Frost's first volume, he said that the poems showed "the most absolute necessity of speaking in a natural voice and in the language of today."<sup>51</sup> He emphasized Frost's great principle of "sound-posturing . . . the sound of sense." Frost himself in a written statement to Braithwaite used an example recognizable by almost everyone.

Words in themselves do not convey meaning, and to prove this, which may seem entirely unreasonable to anyone who does not understand the psychology of sound, let us take the example of two people who are talking on the other side of a closed door, whose voices can be heard but whose words cannot be distinguished. Even though the words do not carry, the sound of them does, and the listener can catch the meaning of the conversation. This is because every meaning has a particular sound-posture, or to put it another way, the sense of every meaning has a particular sound which each individual is instinctively familiar with.

Frost went on to explain that, without being conscious of any exact words, a person can understand the idea

<sup>50</sup> "To John T. Bartlett," 30 May 1916, Letter 148, Selected Letters of Robert Frost, p. 204.

<sup>51</sup> Edward Thomas, rev. in Georgian Poetry 1911-1912, as quoted in Thompson, The Early Years, p. 418.

or emotion conveyed. He concluded, "Meter has to do with beat, and sound-posture has a relation as an alternate tone between the beats. The two are one in creation, but separate in analysis."<sup>52</sup> Long before, the poet had told his young friend Sidney Cox that his aim had been "tones of voice. I've wanted to write down certain brute throat noises so that no one could miss them in my sentences."<sup>53</sup> This deliberate strategy, according to John Lynen, explains why Frost's sentences seem to ramble either because of "abrupt stops" or "sharp transitions."<sup>54</sup> It would be possible, however, for a poet to fill his lines with phrases of everyday conversation and still fail to capture the speaking tone. Frost avoided this pitfall.

John Doyle believes that what Frost has actually done is to "reduce his poems to the illusion of conversation, not to the level of actual conversation."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> As quoted in Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 35.

<sup>53</sup> Sidney Cox, A Swinger of Birches: A Portrait of Robert Frost (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1957), p. 110.

<sup>54</sup> John F. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), p. 87.

<sup>55</sup> John Robert Doyle, Jr., The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand Univ. Press, 1962), p. 15.



One remembers the search in the last century by the English Romantic poets Wordsworth and Coleridge for a simpler language. This aim was best stated in Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads when he declared that the "incidents and situations" of common life would be described or related "as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men."<sup>56</sup> It is partly from his view of language that Cook analyzed Frost's language and decided that handling country words was one of Frost's "major accomplishments in poetry."<sup>57</sup> This practice will be studied in detail in the analysis of the dialogues in the following chapters. Mark Van Doren ascribed a "permanence" to Frost's poems because of the conversational tone the poet "built into his verses."<sup>58</sup>

The subject matter Frost embodied in these sounds came not only from the country but also from "all life . . . a fit subject for poetic treatment," so Frost told Carl Wilmore of the Boston Post.<sup>59</sup> The

<sup>56</sup> William Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads, in Wordsworth: Poetical Works, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, rev. Ernest de Selincourt (1936; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), p. 734.

<sup>57</sup> Cook, p. 229.

<sup>58</sup> Van Doren, p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> Carl Wilmore, "Finds Famous American Poet in White Mountain Village," Boston Post, 14 Feb. 1916, p. 16, as quoted in Thompson, Years Of Triumph, p. 68.

country that reflected the life he pictured was, of course, New England. Specific locations for the early poems are to the north of Boston in the White Mountains and the Derry countryside of southern New Hampshire. Later poems focus on the Green Mountains in Vermont's heartland.<sup>60</sup> The New England locale was not popular in literature then, as we have already noted in Amy Lowell's comments. Other writers had voiced similar opinions. When Henry James revisited the New Hampshire country late in his life, he recorded these famous impressions:

These scenes of old, hard New England effort, defeated by the soil and climate and reclaimed by nature and time--the crumbled, lonely chimney-stack, the overgrown threshold, the dried-up well, the cart-track vague and lost--these seemed the only notes to interfere, in their meagerness, with the queer other, the larger eloquence that one kept reading into the picture.<sup>61</sup>

Frost's uniqueness is that he was able to take scenes such as these and fill them with real people in real situations.

Place itself was not sufficient to distinguish subject matter, Frost felt. One must have a special

<sup>60</sup> Cook, p. 17.

<sup>61</sup> Henry James, The American Scene, ed. Leon Edel (1904; rpt. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 14-15.

feeling for objects, for birches, dark woods, ice, pastures. The special feeling is clear in "Hyla Brook" when Frost explains that "We love the things we love for what they are" (p. 119). However, objects alone do not make poetry. One must be "versed in country things" (p. 242) and in understanding human needs. The human element in these poems is superior to all others.

Frost's subject matter did not include the autobiographical in the way that some contemporary poets such as Theodore Roethke, James Dickey, and Anne Sexton have used their personal experiences. Roger Kahn noted after a visit to see Frost at Ripton that the poet felt the "crudely personal" was out of place in poetry.<sup>62</sup> This avoidance of the excessively personal suggests that although his subject matter was ordinary life, Frost was concerned with its universal scope. In a talk at the Bread Loaf School of English, July 27, 1960, Frost told his audience about the note he had tried to get his publisher to add with the appearance of Mountain Interval. The note was, "I talk of universals in terms of New England. I talk

<sup>62</sup> Roger Kahn, Interview published in The Saturday Evening Post, 16 Nov. 1960, as quoted in Interviews with Robert Frost, p. 245.

about the whole world in terms of New England."<sup>63</sup>  
 Another New Englander, Emily Dickinson, had earlier asserted her own universality; when some felt she saw merely "New Englandly," she reminded them, "The robin's my criterion for tune."<sup>64</sup>

The forms Frost's poems took were varied. As an introduction to his Complete Poems, Frost wrote the essay "The Figure a Poem Makes" in which he explains that he sees form as identical with the act of creation. Thus every poem by virtue of its form becomes a deed. He explained, "Form, as I conceive it, is inseparable from the content or thought of a poem."<sup>65</sup>

Two beliefs shaped his forms. Frost told Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant: "I believe in what the Greeks called synecdoche: the philosophy of the part for the whole; skirting the hem of the goddess. All that an artist needs is samples."<sup>66</sup> Another critical formal principle was Frost's insistence that "the

<sup>63</sup> Robert Frost's Formal Talk, Bread Loaf English School, 27 July 1960, as quoted in Cook, p. 309.

<sup>64</sup> "The Robin's my Criterion for Tune," Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), pp. 131-32.

<sup>65</sup> As quoted in Lynen, p. viii.

<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence (New York: Holt, 1960), p. 148.

height of poetry, the height of all thinking, the height of all poetic thinking, [is] that attempt to say matter in terms of spirit and spirit in terms of matter."<sup>67</sup> It was this latter belief that probably led to some confused analyses of Frost's poems, especially the famous "Stopping by Woods." In a fit of impatience because some critics seemed intent on probing for obscurities, he told Louis Mertins: "These people can't get it through their heads that the obvious meaning of a poem is the right one. That's too easy. . . ."<sup>68</sup>

Frost had been a long-time admirer of Longfellow and often defended the earlier poet. Frost especially appreciated Longfellow's discipline in rhymes and diction. On several occasions he defended his own use of verse rhymes, simple forms, and ordinary words in an age that often considered all three old-fashioned. To Frost they were the most "fecund of the old ways to be new."<sup>69</sup> Frost did not like "practitioners of loose and limp lines"; he objected to the "invidious relaxation of the prescriptive rules of art" that

<sup>67</sup> As quoted in Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 364.

<sup>68</sup> Mertins, p. 372.

<sup>69</sup> As quoted in Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost (1942; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), p. 40.

vulgarized material and manifested an undisciplined form.<sup>70</sup> A tennis lover, Frost used that game to make his famous witticism to Elizabeth Sergeant in a tirade against free verse. He thought vers libre was as ridiculous as playing tennis "with the net down."<sup>71</sup>

The majority of Frost's poems are lyrics such as the one which comes first in all volumes of his completed works: "The Pasture." The easy invitation of "I'm going out to clean the pasture spring; / --You come too" (p. 1) contrasts with other lyrics filled with fear--"When the wind works against us in the dark, / And pelts with snow" a world that makes humans doubtful "Whether 'tis in us to arise with day / And save ourselves unaided" (p. 10). The short narrative that relates the sounds of the Vermont saw that "snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled" until it took the hand of a boy who "saw all spoiled" and died (p. 137) is difficult to erase from one's hearing. Longer narratives in monologue and dialogue form are about people at work, people in love, people facing death, people confused and distraught. These give way to later philosophical discourses about work, social action, and government assistance such as "Build Soil." Besides his more than three hundred poems Frost wrote

<sup>70</sup> Cook, p. 220.

<sup>71</sup> Sergeant, p. 411.

two one-act plays--The Cow's in the Corn (verse) and A Way Out (prose)--and two long poems in dramatic form: "A Masque of Reason" and "A Masque of Mercy."<sup>72</sup> The latter two deal with Scriptural subjects and problems; the first uses the Job theme in reasoning about issues. In the second Jonah offers the argument for God's mercy.

Frost was a poet who could work deftly with two lines:

We dance round in a ring and suppose  
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.  
(p. 362)

He could adroitly combine a Shakespearean sonnet and a dramatic monologue as in "Putting in the Seed" (p. 123). He wrote long dramatic monologues like "A Servant to Servants," dialogues like "The Death of the Hired Man," and trialogues like "Snow." He could appear personal as in "Stopping by Woods":

I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep. (p. 224)

Yet the poet utilized distance when analyzing the people looking at the sea:

<sup>72</sup> Lynen, p. 109.

They cannot look out far.  
 They cannot look in deep.  
 But when was that ever a bar  
 To any watch they keep? (p. 301)

Versatility in speech patterns, subject matter, and form resulted in a great range of poems.

This study, however, is restricted to an analysis of the dialogues that reveal Frost's ability to portray human beings going about the business of being human and interacting with other humans. "It is the intensely human situation" in Frost, as John Doyle says, "that captivates the reader."<sup>73</sup>

Frost's early reading of Shakespeare's plays as well as his production of several plays at Pinkerton Academy reinforced for him the importance of both the correct tone of voice and the significant motion--the shrug of a shoulder, the wrinkled frown, the touch of a hand. In Frost's first year at the University of Michigan as Poet-in-Residence he told Morris Tilley that "conversational tones are numerous in dramatic poetry. As a result, the dramatic is the most intense of all kinds of poetry. It is the most surcharged with significance."<sup>74</sup> The dialogues of Frost combine voice and motion in a dramatic way.

<sup>73</sup> Doyle, p. 107.

<sup>74</sup> Morris P. Tilley, "Notes from Conversations with Robert Frost," in Interviews with Robert Frost, p. 25.



Robert Frost, of course, was not the first to employ the dramatic monologue and dialogue. Many others used this art form in the nineteenth century; Robert Browning made it a popular technique in such memorable poems as "My Last Duchess," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and "Andrea del Sarto." E. A. Robinson was already using this form early in the twentieth century when Frost first adopted the mode. T. S. Eliot used the technique in poems like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917) because, as Hugh Kenner argues, Eliot saw the "dramatic as an interplay of speeches . . . the play as existing only while people are talking."<sup>75</sup>

Technically, the dramatic monologue is "a lyric poem which reveals a soul in action through the conversation of one character in a dramatic situation."<sup>76</sup> The dramatic speech emerges in specific circumstances which make possible a deep insight into the character of the speaker. These same elements are heightened in dramatic dialogue when two speakers vie with each other for the empathy of the reader.

<sup>75</sup> Hugh Kenner, The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot (New York: Harcourt, Brace, World, 1959), p. 213.

<sup>76</sup> William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, rev. C. Hugh Holman (1936; rpt. New York: Odyssey, 1960), p. 155.

The dramatic technique of both monologue and dialogue fascinated Frost. Although his first book, A Boy's Will, contained only lyrics, his second book, North of Boston, in 1914 was bursting with characters. Frost always talked and thought of it as his "book of people."<sup>77</sup> Of the sixteen poems, ten are lengthy dramatic dialogues and two are dramatic monologues. His Mountain Interval, published two years later, contains thirty poems of which five are dramatic dialogues. The New Hampshire volume of 1923, for which he won his first Pulitzer Prize, has forty-four poems of which six are dialogues. Of the forty-two poems he published in West-Running Brook (1928), only one is a dramatic dialogue, the last of his character-focused dialogues that show real people in plausible situations. This paper will concentrate on the twenty-two dialogues contained in these four volumes.

Exempt from this analysis are Frost's plays, masques, and the last four dramatic dialogues. These four dramatic dialogues are: "Build Soil," subtitled "A Political Pastoral," a speech given at Columbia University on May 31, 1932, to take issue with government interference in private lives during Depression days; "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus"

<sup>77</sup> Doyle, p. 35.

published in A Witness Tree in 1942, an investigation of popular science and gadgets; "From Plane to Plane" from Steeple Bush of 1947, a contrast of differing views of work; and "How Hard It Is to Keep from Being King When It's in You and in The Situation," written in 1950 but not published until 1962, in In The Clearing. All four of these dialogues center on social commentary and do not explore the relationships of the characters involved. All deal with political issues and current controversies, some in a plainly satirical manner with hard, cutting humor.

Although the dramatic dialogues slackened within the early years of his poetical fame, they are the poems that offer a wide field for discovering Frost's perceptions of human nature and for analyzing the relationships that continue in some form for all people. About the dialogues Frost told C. Day Lewis in a recorded interview for BBC on June 11, 1957, "Yes, there's a story implied in every case. They are rather the sort of thing you speak of; they're gossip . . . they show our interest in each other." When asked about the kind of interest in human beings that often comes out in the poems as hero-worship, Frost explained: "That's it. It is hero-worship, you see, and one of the things that makes you go is making a hero of somebody that nobody else had ever noticed was a

hero."<sup>78</sup> In a drugstore back in Littleton, Colorado, in 1922 Frost had told Sidney Cox there "should always be people in poems. If there are two or more people, we see (rather hear) how they affect each other."<sup>79</sup>

Frost read and often quoted from Robert Browning. Lawrence Thompson believes Frost may have learned from Browning such things as his "manner of striking into the middle of an emotional or psychological crisis" in his dramatic poems.<sup>80</sup> One big difference, however, between Browning and Frost is the periods of time their poems embrace. Browning's poems often show a crisis of the past, whereas Frost's permit the psychological study of characters to develop through the give and take of dialogue that usually highlights an immediate crisis. This was one of the qualities Cornelius Weygandt pointed to in his review of New Hampshire; Frost, he says, "sticks to the drama of the moment."<sup>81</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Cecil Day Lewis, "It Takes a Hero to Make a Poem," in Interviews with Robert Frost, p. 176.

<sup>79</sup> Sidney Cox, A Swinger, pp. 107-08.

<sup>80</sup> Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 107.

<sup>81</sup> Cornelius Weygandt, "Frost in New Hampshire," The White Hills (New York: Holt, 1934), p. 245, as quoted in Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 248.

The poet's biographical and psychological backgrounds support the thesis that Frost was a person of genuine understanding. Many others were aware of this special ability, among them President Stanley King of Amherst. Regretting that Frost was resigning from teaching in 1938, King wrote a letter that specifically praised this trait: "In the field of human understanding you are one of the wisest men I have ever met."<sup>82</sup> What brought Frost to such understanding? The following chapters will continue to offer evidence that the experiences of life, particularly before he became famous, helped shape many of the dramatic dialogues that show this trait of understanding at its best.

Frost's early childhood in San Francisco mixed into his consciousness two influential ingredients that remained forever a part of his life and his poems. First was his admiration for the rebel he saw exemplified in his father, William Prescott Frost. At the head of his graduating class at Harvard, William so disliked tradition-bound New England that he headed west to make a name for himself. A Copperhead, he named his first son Robert Lee in recognition of his Southern sympathies.<sup>83</sup> That son was regaled

<sup>82</sup> As quoted in Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 507.

<sup>83</sup> Cook, p. 41.

with stories of the battles and leaders of the War between the States. With his father serving as editor of the San Francisco Bulletin, Robert saw other battles--political campaigns such as the heated one involving Grover Cleveland when Frost was nine years old.<sup>84</sup> The death of the father from consumption halted the California life of eleven-year-old Rob who was taken across a continent to live in the bleak, hostile New England environment of a disapproving grandfather and other unfamiliar relatives.<sup>85</sup>

The second ingredient of the biographical aspect was Frost's mother, Belle Moodie Frost. He greatly admired her courage and loved her stories from classical, Biblical, and Ossian sources.<sup>86</sup> Young Frost built his ideals on tales of courage, skill, cunning, wit, and nobility. Lawrance Thompson, Frost's official biographer, believes it was this particular influence that ultimately caused Frost to vary accounts of his own life story so that "whenever the bare facts troubled him, he discreetly clothed them with fictions."<sup>87</sup> He insisted on trying to make his life fulfill the ideals he had cherished since boyhood.

<sup>84</sup> Mertins, pp. 25-26.

<sup>85</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 53.

<sup>86</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 69.

<sup>87</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. xiii.

The psychological background, however, was by far the more significant influence upon Frost's acquiring the unusual understanding that reveals itself in his poetry. He experienced very early many of the traumas and fears that would haunt him a lifetime and furnish the truth of experience to his poetry. The California years nourished numerous fears; he developed an obvious nervous condition. The erratic behavior of a father who drank and often punished his son severely caused serious conflicts between parents. To compensate for the father's rashness, Frost's mother became possessive, sought supernatural help through her devotion to Swedenborgianism, and often insisted to her son that she "heard voices" that cheered her. Some of the emotional disorders Rob and his sister Jeanie later suffered are thought to be results of their unstable childhood in this highly charged atmosphere. Part of Rob's regret was that his father surrendered "to defeat" instead of fighting the holds of drink and consumption.<sup>88</sup> Much of the foundation for Frost's unforgiving nature was thus laid early.

As a teenager growing up in New England he learned other baffling things--contradictions in himself and others that he could not reconcile. His fits of

<sup>88</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, pp. 36, 44.

jealousy, his uncontrollable temper, and his increasing sense of competitiveness confused him. Although he had never read a book until he was back East, he began quickly to make up for the school he had missed because of sickness and the experiences he had missed by being taught at home by his mother. He and his future wife, Elinor White, were co-valedictorians; his jealousy of her skills and her brilliance never ceased through forty-three years of marriage. His desire to dominate surfaced early and continued through their marriage. In fact, Frost ran away to Virginia's Dismal Swamp and tried to kill himself just to make Elinor sorry she would not marry him before finishing college.<sup>89</sup> Their troubled paths merged in marriage in 1895; thus began the tempestuous route of life together through joy and happiness, illness and death, conflicts and tensions, depression and despair.

Emotionally and physically Frost at twenty-five was so ill, with suspected consumption, that he was unable to finish his second year at Harvard. Depressed and in debt, he moved his small family to a farm supplied by his grandfather. Grandfather Frost, fuming because his grandson would not stay long enough at any

<sup>89</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, pp. 211-12.



job to succeed, sent him on to the farm with this encouragement: "You've made a failure out of everything else you've tried. Now go up to the farm and die there. That's about all you're fit for anyway."<sup>90</sup>

In this alienation and isolation Frost was forced to encounter the stark issues of life and death he had thus far been unable to come to terms with.

His new career as a farmer-poultryman brought him the friendship of Carl Burell, the hired man on his farm; Carl helped him become interested in the land, its orchards, its seasons, its plants because of his own interest in botany. Frost did not seek other friends and was on speaking terms with only a few people. Later he recounted those days for his friend John Bartlett:

I was ambition-less, purposeless. For months on end I would do no work at all. . . . I would exchange work with another farmer, perhaps, during the haying, and for three weeks would sweat and toughen up.

He continued:

During the entire eight years there [Derry] there was no friend ever sat down within our home. I'd have conversations from time to time with a trader interested in buying or selling a horse, or a poultry buyer. Friends never came. There were no friends. I

<sup>90</sup> As quoted in Mertins, p. 65.

sometimes think of those years as almost a fadeout . . . as an escape into a dream existence.<sup>91</sup>

It was there, too, so he told Elizabeth Sergeant later, that he rationalized that he did not need or want people. Frost knew there "were good people down the road, the Lowes and the Berrys and Websters, ready and glad to 'change words' with him, but he shunned them."<sup>92</sup> His perceptions of human beings were storing valuable lessons.

Meeting death was a trauma he faced. In July, 1900, he sustained the loss of his firstborn son Elliott, partly through his failure to get the doctor quickly enough, and the loss of his mother from cancer in November. The guilt and sorrow he felt were almost more than he could bear. He was tormented daily by Elinor's long silences; she had decided the whole world was "evil" and that no God she had ever heard of would let such things happen. Ironically, the woman who had delivered a valedictory titled "Conversation as a Force in Life" grew silent.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Margaret Bartlett Anderson, Robert Frost and John Bartlett: The Record of a Friendship (New York: Holt, 1963), p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> Sergeant, p. 65.

<sup>93</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 129.

It was during the agonizing Derry years that Frost began to stay up at night to write poetry after everyone else was in bed. Most of the poems for A Boy's Will were written then as well as several for the later North of Boston. Frost had to learn to find orderly ways of dealing with the dangerous conflicts he kept finding within himself--and between himself and others. Much of the time he used his poems to help resolve some of these conflicts. His poetic imagination began to provide some new ways of grappling with old problems. Later he told Robert Chase that in the Derry days, "The only thing we had plenty of was time and seclusion."<sup>94</sup> But the isolation provided the interval he needed to acquire self-discipline, to reflect deeply, and to practice technique. Stoically, like the lady in "A Servant to Servants" written then, he learned to live with what had to be faced--"the best way out is always through" (p. 64).

Psychologically, Frost's experiences ranged the gamut of emotions. During the Derry years he fought guilt and feelings of failure; he was depressed that he was a failure as a father, failure as a husband, failure as a poet, failure as a man. Sometime between

<sup>94</sup> "To Robert Chase," 4 March 1952, Letter 427, Selected Letters of Robert Frost, p. 552.

1902 and 1906 he began to feel better physically, he gained two more children who loved him, and he drew courage to go about his business from his annual readings in Emerson and Thoreau. Later he would say it was the Derry years that gave his life a direction, whereby he had been "reborn."<sup>95</sup>

His venture into society and into more varied relationships was helped when, because of his publication of "A Tuft of Flowers," he was asked to teach at Pinkerton Academy and later moved to Franconia. Experiences with students lifted his spirits and gave him some productive years of teaching before his leaving for England--and fame. He was still fighting emotional battles, especially with fears. As a child he had been so troubled that he often panicked; as a grown man he still had unreasoning fears that crippled him. Night sounds, especially of horses, meant danger. Numerous poems capture these fears.

Frost also experienced psychological growth as a result of the loneliness that became a central impulse in his poetry. In "An Old Man's Winter Night" he explained the intimate loneliness of New England country folk in solitary places where "All out-of-doors looked darkly" in at the old man (p. 108). To

<sup>95</sup> As quoted in Thompson, The Early Years, p. 298.

read "House Fear," "Storm Fear," and "The Hill Wife" is to know that Frost understood the fears that loneliness generates.

One emotional battle he fought throughout much of his life was that of escape, either running away or destroying himself. At Harvard Frost read much of William James's work, especially his essay "Is Life Worth Living?" later published in The Will to Believe.<sup>96</sup> He felt a kinship with a man who had also attempted suicide and had been able to adjust his thinking to repudiate that escape. Frost's sonnet "Despair" discloses some potentially destructive elements. Furthermore, Elinor's tart comments about his self-pity stirred him to action of a more positive kind.

It should be noted that Frost had a strong but somewhat unsystematic belief in God. He was sure that

the trust and faith and confidence which are available to human beings who align themselves on the side of God, in the warfare between good and evil, should serve as a form of inner defense and should not be paraded.

He felt the "flaunting" of such a belief, however, tripped one with the sin of pride. The considerable evidence that Elinor grew more atheistic through the

<sup>96</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 232.

years and often taunted him about God may account for his fear of flaunting.<sup>97</sup>

Another emotion developing slowly through these years was sympathy. His poem "The Tuft of Flowers" shows what Frost was later to call "caring" in the process of the "kindly contact of human beings."<sup>98</sup> This poem that became the key to his social relationships and the new world of teaching marked his return to society and the human contact essential in keeping him balanced: "'Men work together,' I told him from the heart, / 'Whether they work together or apart'" (p. 23). Perhaps this is also why he wanted to use a different name for A Boy's Will: "The psychologist in me ached to call it 'The Record of a Phase of Post-Adolescence.'"<sup>99</sup> His contacts in teaching, the attention he received for his innovations in education--the state superintendent of schools had called him the best teacher in New Hampshire<sup>100</sup>--and his own

<sup>97</sup> "To Louis Untermeyer," 21 March 1920, The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer, p. 101.

<sup>98</sup> Rose C. Feld, Interview published as "Robert Frost Relieves His Mind," New York Times Book Review, October 21, 1923, as quoted in Interviews with Robert Frost, p. 49.

<sup>99</sup> As quoted in Thompson, The Early Years, p. xxi.

<sup>100</sup> James M. Cox, Introd., Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 3.

teaching of psychology for a year at Plymouth, New Hampshire, had brought him to a more positive, wholesome outlook. Frost needed this affirmative spirit in England after he became close friends with Edward Thomas, someone who shared the doubts, frustrations, and fears he had. Frost felt that he was needed to help his friend through psychological difficulties; a deep bond was broken when Thomas was killed in France during World War I.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, with these experiences from the past, in 1912 Frost assessed himself and realized he had more courage than he had supposed. His rather aggressive behavior in England to get his poems published, his self-made entry into circles of contemporary poets, his friendships with influential people who could help him--all bridged the gap of rejection, alienation, and loneliness of his past. The scars of insecurity and the sense of failure began to heal. His own wavering belief in himself became stable; the results of slowly increasing fame and recognition did wonders for the forty-one-year-old man who came back to America to a new life. His friend, John Bartlett, however, would observe later that Frost had not changed entirely from his earlier days: "I never knew a person who was

<sup>101</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 464.

more sensitive to slights, rebuffs, acts of unfriendliness than Frost. He seemed to carry the scar of them longer."<sup>102</sup> Much of this particular sensitivity went with him to his grave.

Frost's changes in personality were slow, traumatic, complex; however, they helped make the poet whose ability was clearly recognized on both sides of the Atlantic after his publication of the book of people, North of Boston. This book and the following three supply a basis for understanding four human relationships universal to mankind. These relationships follow the pattern Robert Frost actually experienced but, more importantly, they trace a logical progression in most people's lives. The four are relationships of strangers, of friends, of parents and children, and of husbands and wives.

Being a stranger--reacting to and coping with new situations--is a condition that faces all men. Four dialogues and one monologue from North of Boston treat this tense, uneasy experience of confrontation. From Mountain Interval of 1916 comes the other example, "Christmas Trees." Frost's dramatic monologue "A Servant to Servants" shows the kind of intimate detail a lonely person will relate to a complete

<sup>102</sup> As quoted in Thompson, The Early Years, p. 572.



stranger. In the poem the reader knows that a fern specialist stopping at the farmhouse is the "listener." From the unusual conversation of this frustrated, defeated woman, the reader is shocked to see both the insane past she has revealed and the harsh future she fears. The poem provides no interaction of another voice; but the monologue offers proof that strangers sometimes offer helpful sounding boards.

Three of the five dialogues show a man-to-man confrontation in totally unexpected situations. A traveler stops an ox-cart driver to inquire about directions, and is surprisingly launched on a long conversation in "The Mountain." A traveler, delayed because of a late train, decides to sleep the four-hour wait. His confrontation with the half-drunk traveling salesman Lafe exposes characteristics of two strangers assigned one room in "A Hundred Collars." In another poem a farmer is perturbed when a city man comes to buy his Christmas trees.

The remaining two dialogues of strangers treat more complex conversations with members of the opposite sex. In "The Fear" a woman and her lover confront a stranger on the dark road; she fears an avenging husband. Both conversation and action are tense and terse. More familiar and less tense is the meeting of a young girl and a young man at a rained-out family

reunion in "The Generations of Men." Here the young are shown meeting a stranger not in fear but in anticipation and excitement at what the strange meeting may produce. In these poems Frost uses a remarkable variety of approaches governed by the characters' ages as well as circumstances.

Slowly the Frosts established friendships that helped relieve the strains and aches of life's difficulties. One chapter of this study will treat these relationships of friends. In dialogues treating friends are evident different sorts of characters and different speech patterns from those of strangers who eye each other suspiciously and reservedly. Six dialogues from the two books already used and Frost's next, of 1923, called New Hampshire, reveal situations and confrontations that move from strangeness to an intimate ease and comradeship.

"The Star-Splitter" recounts Brad McLaughlin's burning "his house down for the fire insurance" to buy a telescope. His friends are disbelieving and confused, but one of them attempts to understand the motivation. "The Code" and "Snow" reveal facets of human personality under duress. The lesson a farm-hand teaches his city-bred farmer-boss involves an unwritten code based on a solid understanding of human nature as it reveals itself among workers and friends.

In "Snow" are the tangled mixtures of two families' lives during a snowstorm in which friends desire to offer protection and shelter and are refused.

Two dialogues show good-humored give-and-take between men who have significant things in common. Going to look at a piece of property leads two friends to an abandoned house in "A Fountain, A Bottle, A Donkey's Ears, and Some Books." The fine craftsmanship required in tools and the knowledge two friends share about a common object are evident in "The Ax-Helve." The last dialogue concerns two very close friends at a tragic, awkward confrontation with an insurance man come to pay a token sum to the friend whose feet have been crushed in a mill accident. The intercessions of the healthy friend for more than the offered \$500.00 create poignant drama in "The Self-Seeker."

The family relationships of parents and children are familiar to all in one role or the other. This chapter analyzes four poems. Two dialogues rely heavily on the father's conversations with his children: "Bonfire" and "Maple." Raking up leaves and dead branches for a bonfire is routine until the fire races out of control. The incident suggests to the family some serious analogies about fires and wars. In "Maple" the parents' choice of a name for their little

daughter evolves into a mystery. After the mother's death, it is the father's responsibility to explain to the growing child the meaning and significance of her unusual name.

Two other filial dialogues focus on mothers and conversations with either children or friends about the children. The woman in "The Witch of Coös" and her son reveal the hidden secrets of a lifetime to a listener not expecting such a family exposé. The old, rotund mother in "The Housekeeper" seems almost to enjoy relating to a friend the story of her daughter's running away from her common-law spouse to marry someone else. The complications of these relationships pose no problem for the mothers, who understand both sides.

The final relationship--the closest, most risky--is that of husbands and wives. Dialogues for this chapter are from all three previously used books and the one dialogue in the 1928 publication, West-Running Brook. Two of these poems deal with the remorse and pangs of conscience that death causes husbands and wives. The couple in "Home Burial" face the agony of death within the family and the problem of how life is to be faced. In "The Death of the Hired Man" death is, obviously, outside the immediate family; yet that death in their house greatly affects the couple's

understanding of and relation to each other. Both of these poems were written in the Derry period.

How couples respond to change is clear in two poems. One brief dialogue concerns the reaction of a wife whose wounded soldier-husband is sent home briefly to recover but is, as the title says, "Not to Keep." A longer poem, "In the Home Stretch," relates the reactions of a couple moving from the city to the farm. The anxieties they both feel are lessened by their willingness to adjust and make their new life successful.

The last three dialogues in this chapter relate the happy, casual, ordinary experiences couples share with each other. From the discoveries these couples constantly make about each other come a new love and a deeper appreciation. Whether apart, as in "The Telephone," or together in the simple activity of picking blueberries, in "Blueberries," both couples think only of each other and the pleasures of sharing life together. The last poem, "West-Running Brook," begins with a couple taking a walk and observing the contrariness of their brook that is supposed to run east. Their physical pleasure of being together leads to a philosophical discussion of life that shows not only their love but also their intellectual respect for each other's ideas.

All these poetic relationships offer the reader a new understanding of human nature as it was perceived by a poet sensitive and perceptive enough to know and to express the anxieties of real people. The poems speak with authority and a sure grasp of reality. Frost is not great because he acquired more honors and a wider audience than anyone else. He is not great because he is different from anyone else or like someone else. He is great because his poems touch reality. These dramatic dialogues assure the reader that the poet is a genuine person who knows life and its struggles. The sound of humanity in the grip of fears, loneliness, joy, love, and sadness rings with unmistakable authenticity. What Emerson said of Montaigne's essays could be said of Frost's poems about people: "Cut these words and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive; they walk and run."<sup>103</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, Journals, 24 June 1840, as quoted in Cook, p. 64.

## CHAPTER II

### RELATIONSHIPS OF STRANGERS

Robert Frost understood from personal experience the dilemma of being a stranger. In his moves from California to New England, from the Harvard campus to the bleak Derry farm, and from America to England, he had explored nearly every facet of the confusion and frustration of being a stranger. At the time he wrote his second book North of Boston, containing five of the six poems that focus on strangers, he himself was in England in strange surroundings among strangers. All but three poems in the book were written in England after September, 1912, but the material had been slowly gathered and stored away in the lean years prior to his going abroad. John Doyle suggests that Frost gained perspective by his "complete detachment from the New England scene."<sup>1</sup> In England he was among literary people, and so he felt neither guilty nor apologetic for his writing. Back in New Hampshire his writing late at night and sleeping late

<sup>1</sup> John Robert Doyle, Jr., The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand Univ. Press, 1962), p. 259.

in the morning had caused criticism by neighbors who made him aware that they thought him a lazy farmer.<sup>2</sup> Frost's relief at escaping this hostile environment resulted in poetry that Cecil Day Lewis describes as an "example of Wordsworth's 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'" mode, the same approach evident in the earlier poet's lines about Tintern Abbey.<sup>3</sup> What Frost was remembering in a strange place were familiar people, familiar places, and familiar events that had shaped his life early in the new century.

His writing about the encounters of strangers was not something new. In every major period of Western literature writers have used plots built on the unexpected meeting of strangers. Frost puts himself in the company of Homer and Virgil with their Odysseus and Aeneas when he allows unknown travellers to meet strangers. Chaucer's pilgrims enroute to Canterbury and Boccaccio's refugees from the Black Death are strangers thrust together by a unifying purpose. Frost treats similar situations. Cervantes' Don Quixote, Swift's Gulliver, and Hawthorne's kinsman

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Bartlett Anderson, Robert Frost and John Bartlett: The Record of a Friendship (New York: Holt, 1963), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Cecil Day Lewis, Preface to Selected Poems by Robert Frost (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), in Recognition of Robert Frost: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, ed. Richard Thornton (New York: Holt, 1937), p. 299.



of Major Molineux undergo many unhappy experiences with strangers not so different from those Frost presents.

The human relationships in these encounters offer evidence of how people perceive and treat each other in unexpected circumstances. Classic is Jesus' parable of the robbery victim made famous by the response of the stranger from a half-breed, outcast society who became memorialized as the Good Samaritan. Among writers contemporary with Frost was Thomas Hardy, whose short story "The Three Strangers" captures the ironic situation of the various treatments of strangers, one of whom is later found to be a criminal. Both Hardy and Frost were keen observers of people's reactions to the unexpected. Frost's uniqueness, however, is that his presentations were basically in blank verse dialogues instead of prose.

The use of conversational poetry had been growing and developing for Frost. In 1894 he had accepted William Hayes Ward's check for fifteen dollars for the publication of "My Butterfly," his first poem to merit payment, but he had rejected Ward's advice to "study Sidney Lanier" for his "music"; he decided instead that he wanted his poems to sound "like talk."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> As quoted in Robert S. Newdick, "Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense," American Literature, 9 (1937), 297.

Magazines later rejected his poems because they sounded "like talk"; yet he was convinced the "ear-image" was superior to the "eye-image." His life on the Derry farm and his association with John Hall, the poultry fancier, and Dr. Charlemagne Bricault, the veterinarian, reinforced his interest in conversational, picturesque speech.<sup>5</sup> He gradually modified his own way of talking and began unconsciously to slur words, drop endings, and clip sentences as he listened to and learned from the people living north of Boston.<sup>6</sup> When William Butler Yeats protested in a London speech of March, 1911, that "the voice" had fallen into neglect as the true vehicle for communication in literary art, Frost was pleased. Although literary art had been "traditionally sung or spoken," Yeats felt it suffered in this century from its "deadly foe--music."<sup>7</sup> Again, Frost was convinced he was on the right path with his emphasis on sound in speech.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Frost: Farm-Poultryman, ed. Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrence Thompson (Hanover: Dartmouth, 1963), p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), pp. 370-71.

<sup>7</sup> William Butler Yeats, "The Evils of Too Much Print," Literary Digest, 11 Mar. 1911, as quoted in Thompson, The Early Years, p. 376.

Malcolm Cowley seems to think that because North of Boston was mostly a product of the brief years in England it was influenced by the Georgians such as Lascelles Abercrombie, Wilfred Gibson, and Edward Thomas. According to Cowley, they helped Frost learn "to abandon the conventional language of the late Victorians and to use his own speech without embarrassment."<sup>8</sup> Reginald Cook and Gorham Munson offer more convincing argument that Frost knew what he wanted to do with his poetry long before he went to England. Cook is convinced that the strongest evidence was the poet's reading Shakespeare "from the hip pocket"<sup>9</sup> while he was a light fixer in the dynamo room of Arlington Textile mill in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Munson's evidence rests upon the testimony of many people who talked to Frost, especially Charley Hall in Windham, New Hampshire, who was pleased that Frost's speech had a "racy commonness" that was unlike the "correct speech of college instructors" and that made his poetry more pleasing.<sup>10</sup> Reuben A. Brower's most

<sup>8</sup> Malcolm Cowley, "Frost: A Dissenting Opinion," New Republic, 111 (1944), 313.

<sup>9</sup> Reginald Cook, Robert Frost: A Living Voice (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1974), p. 227.

<sup>10</sup> Gorham Munson, Robert Frost: A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense (1927; rpt. Port Washington: Kennikat, 1968), p. 35.

convincing argument is almost exactly that of Reginald Cook. From reading Shakespeare as well as directing plays, Frost mastered Henry James's lesson--"Dramatize it, dramatize it!" Brower presents Frost as superior in comparisons of Frost with Ezra Pound and Yeats in their attempts to "make characters talk to one another."<sup>11</sup>

These "talking" poems centering on strangers and their encounters exemplified one of the first lessons Frost gave his students at Pinkerton Academy in 1906. The best composition, he insisted, comes from things "common in experience--uncommon in writing."<sup>12</sup> Although many stories and novels had treated the stranger, practically no one had accomplished the feat in conversational verse dialogue. William H. Pritchard explains that the dialogues in North of Boston are talk "without benefit of narrative omniscience and intrusion . . . the sheer presentation of the characters' speech"; thus, he asserts, "Character is talk."<sup>13</sup> The voices, then, tell us more than a simple story. It

<sup>11</sup> Reuben A. Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 176.

<sup>12</sup> As quoted in Thompson, The Early Years, p. 331.

<sup>13</sup> William H. Pritchard, "North of Boston: Frost's Poetry of Dialogue," in In Defense of Reading: A Reader's Approach to Literary Criticism, ed. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1962), p. 40.

is as though we are permitted to overhear ordinary people as they reveal their anxieties and concerns in the experiences of daily life.

What are the responses that strangers can make? As we listen to their conversations, what characteristics of human nature and what facets of character show the reader people as individuals and people as part of humanity? The stranger often becomes a symbol of danger, of duplicity; hence, he is to be feared, treated with suspicion and caution. Other encounters with strangers may be based on curiosity and anticipation. Of the many possible reactions, Frost's poems emphasize at least six relationships with strangers; each poses a different relationship between characters.

Bombarding a stranger with talk so that he is dumbfounded can create an overwhelming control over the stranger. For this reason we will look briefly at the monologue "A Servant to Servants" as an introduction to the five dialogues to be studied. Here in compelling form is the epitome of one stranger's controlling another. Here is the constant flow of talk, what Elizabeth Isaacs calls a "stream of unconsciousness,"<sup>14</sup> without the interruption of a second

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Isaacs, An Introduction to Robert Frost (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1962), p. 130.

voice, and this talk reveals all. The intensity of language, the sudden changes of subject matter, the intimate revelations to a stranger--all embody the mysterious psychological release that makes this poem unique. What causes a person to reveal to a captive audience things not told to friends? Is it fear, is it nervousness, is it a kind of protective shield, or is it insanity?

The poem "A Servant to Servants" is the direct speech of a farm woman interrupted at her work. The visiting botanist never speaks, although from the woman's responses the reader understands what he has said: "Our Willoughby! How did you hear of it? / In a book about ferns? Listen to that!" (p. 63). At the end of her multiplied revelations it is clear he is tactfully trying to escape this talking woman. She says, "Bless you, of course, you're keeping me from work . . . / I'd rather you'd not go unless you must" (pp. 67-68). She is probably misled into thinking that a man wandering over the countryside looking for ferns is not "working"--in her understanding of the word; to spend a half-hour talking will not bother him at all. He becomes a true sounding board.

She talks freely because she has been storing up this talk. She tells him she is glad he is camping at nearby Lake Willoughby, that she has planned to

visit his camp, and that she has even lain awake at night thinking of him. In her mind, therefore, he is no longer a stranger, and so her conversation is uninhibited. Too, the fact that she lives far enough away from neighbors with whom she might relieve some of her stored pressures forces him to become the listener without choice.

It is ironic that the stranger's interest is in her special growing fern; she offers him instead a perceptive analysis of a stunted human being whose growth has been arrested to a state of numbness: "There's nothing but a voice-like left inside / That seems to tell me how I ought to feel, / And would feel if I wasn't all gone wrong" (p. 63). Three times she breaks her train of thought with the sad indecisiveness of "But I don't know!" It is ironic that she perceives herself to be a "servant to servants" and bone-weary with doing "things over and over that just won't stay done" (p. 64). Yet she is dictating that he will listen. To see before her a man who came to discover the secrets about a lovely fern overcomes her shyness. She can unleash a flood of facts and feelings because to her he is no stranger.

She tells three stories. Her lingering over the horrors of the past lets the reader believe she sees that as the worst of the three. A crazed uncle--"He

was before my time--I never saw him"---focuses the horror of life for her parents who cared for this man kept upstairs in a "beast's stall" made "comfortable with straw"; his shouts in the night made life miserable until "they found a way to put a stop to it" (p. 67). This woman had continued to live in that house with those memories until Len, her husband, at "some sacrifice" had moved her away from those surroundings.

This mad relative in the past points to the future she envisions for herself. Echoing the rational, clinical phrases she heard during a stay in the State Asylum, she says that institutional life is "superior" to staying home and "darkening other people's lives." Significantly, she confesses, "You can't know / Affection or the want of it in that state" (p. 65). Here is the basis of the most wretched of the three stories she tells--her present existence among uncaring "good for nothings" for whom she cooks meals, "hungry hired men"--who treat her as invisible because they think she is "not right" (p. 64).

Sadder than being treated so disrespectfully by the boarders is the relationship between her husband and herself. Len, she explains, "looks on the bright side of everything, / Including me" and "thinks I'll be all right" (p. 64). Although she and Doctor Lowe



know she needs rest, not medicine, Len is unable to comprehend her emotional or physical needs. To solve any problem he thinks, "One steady pull more ought to do it," but she knows that "work ain't all." While he is busily engaged with ambitious projects, she is deteriorating before him. Although she sees no hope, she decides he must be right that "the best way out is always through" because she "can see no way out but through" (p. 64). The emphasis surely is on the can and but, a desperate resolution.

Her comparison of the lake to a "deep piece of some old running river / Cut short off at both ends" is apt for her own life which has ceased to flow and feel; it has been "cut short" at the ends by her past and by what she sees as her future. She accepts her closed boundaries--"I s'pose I've got to go the road I'm going: / Other folks have to, and why shouldn't I?" (p. 67). Brower notes that Frost offers her no defense against the problem beyond "taking it."<sup>15</sup> It is this woman's acceptance of difficulties that Philip Gerber claims makes Frost a true realist.<sup>16</sup>

The stranger, held by his shock at her situation, learns more than he wishes that day. The intensity

<sup>15</sup> Brower, p. 173.

<sup>16</sup> Philip L. Gerber, Robert Frost (New York: Twayne, 1966), p. 145.

of her stories and the volcanic outpouring of feelings clarify for him the sadness of a lonely farmer's wife. Her talking is "safe" in the sense that he does not argue or dispute her analysis of the situation. As a listener, he perseveres nobly when he discovers not the ferns he sought but human frailties. She feels he has helped by giving her an excuse to "be kept" from the menacing work (p. 68).

This relationship, although unusual, is plausible. The listener learns more than he bargains for in assuming that a lovely house beside a lake contains happy, peaceful people. The conditions of being unappreciated and feeling lonely are not solved by an environment of natural beauty. A stranger is introduced to the hard realities of life, as Ezra Pound noted in his review:

Frost has been honestly fond of the New England people, I dare say with spells of irritation. He has given their life honestly and seriously. He has never turned aside to make fun of it. He has taken their tragedy as tragedy, their stubbornness as stubbornness. I know more of farm life than I did before I had read his poems. That means I know more of "Life."<sup>17</sup>

Frost was most irritated at some critics such as Mark Sullivan of Collier's and Franklin P. Adams of

<sup>17</sup> Ezra Pound, "Modern Georgics," as quoted in Brower, p. 174.

the New York Tribune who thought the poems were merely short stories "disguised as poetry." Earlier, according to Lawrance Thompson, Edward Garnett had anticipated this possible criticism and wrote:

But why put it in poetry and not in prose? the reader may hazard. Well, it comes with greater intensity in rhythm and is more heightened and concentrated in effect thereby. If the reader will examine "A Servant to Servants," he will recognize that this narrative of a woman's haunting fear that she has inherited the streak of madness in her family, would lose in distinction and clarity were it told in prose. Yet so extraordinarily close to normal everyday speech is it that I anticipate some person may test its metre with a metronome, and declare that the verse is often awkward in its scansion.<sup>18</sup>

To Garnett, Frost's skill in blank verse was exceptional.

This poem represents Frost's recollections of past days. Plagued with severe bouts of hay fever, Frost decided in 1909 to buy tents for his family and camp out in the Vermont mountains at Lake Willoughby during August and September. For six weeks they swam, went mountain climbing, and enjoyed botanizing for ferns. The poet's official biographer mentions that one of the casual acquaintances "touched him deeply enough to inspire a poem." Visiting the Connolley

<sup>18</sup> Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), pp. 59-60.

farmhouse to buy fresh milk and eggs, Frost talked "with the farmer's wife." What Frost told with poetic artistry later were the fears and worries of this woman.<sup>19</sup> Years later Frost admitted the poem's character was "a composite of at least three farm wives one of whom [Mrs. Connolley] I was glad to learn years afterwards didn't go the way I foresaw."<sup>20</sup>

There were, however, many other people who lived in New England who might fit the more expected, "normal" type of stranger one meets. Frost had first planned to call his "book of people" Farm Servants or New England Eclogues. Instead he grouped the individuals of his poems according to locale, not occupation. In England he remembered the advertisement section of the Boston Globe years earlier that listed some real estate as "north of Boston." Although the poems had not been written toward that title nor toward any particular idea, it is apropos that he chose North of Boston for his second book.<sup>21</sup>

The following dialogues chosen for analysis offer considerable contrast to the introductory monologue. When conversation is between two or more people, there

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, pp. 350-51.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 568.

<sup>21</sup> Cook, p. 86.

is opportunity for differing views, reactions, feelings. Two of the dialogues show man-to-man encounters of travellers. In both poems the personality of each traveller predetermines how he will respond to the stranger he confronts. A man's basic attitude toward life determines whether he will respond with trust or suspicion, curiosity or nonchalance, when thrust into an uneasy relationship with a stranger.

Because "A Hundred Collars" had been published in December, 1913, in Harold Munro's Poetry and Drama, some readers had already been entertained before seeing it in Frost's second book.<sup>22</sup> Woodsville Junction's one hotel furnishes the setting for the humorous confrontation of two men who could not be more unlike. The fact that these two face each other "after eleven o'clock at night" in a small, third-floor room makes their conversation all the more touchy. Doctor Magoon, the second man to claim a share in the room, has already noticed another man downstairs "sleeping in the office chair" because "he was afraid of being robbed or murdered" (p. 45).

Dr. Magoon, the well-educated professor, is in for an illuminating experience with a man he first thinks of as "a brute" because of his huge body "naked

<sup>22</sup> Louis Mertins, Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 134.

above the waist" (p. 46). The professor is quickly disconcerted by two things: Lafe's drinking and his candid observations. Before Lafe leaves the room at the end of the dialogue to go "out" on the town, both strangers reveal their personalities, their philosophies, their professions, and their possessions. The last come first.

Offering his openhanded trust, Lafe decides there is a solution. "Let's have a show down as an evidence / Of good faith. There is ninety dollars. / Come, if you're not afraid." More to convince himself than Lafe, Dr. Magoon insists, "I'm not afraid. / There's five: that's all I carry" (p. 47). Because Lafe knows the latecomer is afraid of him he offers good advice: "Tuck your money under you / And sleep on it the way I always do / When I'm with people I don't trust at night" (p. 48).

From the show of possessions flows Lafe's revelation of his profession. Although Dr. Magoon's job is barely mentioned, Lafe likes to talk about his job as a "collector" for the Bow Weekly News. He travels over the countryside seeing people, feeling "out the public sentiment" for editor Fairbanks, and collecting "a dollar at a time" (p. 48). Lafe is pleased to hear that the professor knows the paper; it furnishes a common ground on which to be friendly. Because

Magoon knows the paper, "Then you know me," Lafe says; "Now we are getting on together--talking" (p. 48). Loquacious Lafe, hardly the stereotype of the quiet, tight-lipped New Englander, reveals more than his profession.

Lafe's love of life, love of people, and love of nature ring sincerely in his straightforward speech. "In politics," he says, "I'm Vermont Democrat," although the paper he works for is Republican. As he travels over the countryside, he especially likes "the lay of different farms, / Coming out on them from a stretch of woods, / Or over a hill or round a sudden corner" (p. 49). He responds not only to physical beauty but also to the people. He says, "I like to find folks" at their seasonal chores of raking or working. His description of both pleasures reflects a progression of seasons from spring to winter. Even his horse, according to Lafe, thinks of him as "sociable" because he chats and visits with folks "from the kitchen doorstep, / All in a family row down to the youngest" (p. 49). They seem as glad to see him as he is to see them, although the professor suspects they hate to see him come. Lafe refutes that suspicion: "I never dun. / I'm there, and they can pay me if they like." He is a man they can trust because he doesn't "want / Anything they've not got" (p. 50).

The professor, by great contrast, is both an unfriendly and a frightened man. When Lafe asks a simple question about the professor's collar size, the doctor's throat catches "convulsively" as he wonders if this half-drunk man means to strangle him. At Lafe's invitation to relax, the professor makes "a subdued dash" for the bed and props himself against the pillow. Lafe even offers to remove the stranger's shoes, but the teacher is emphatic: "Don't touch me, please--I say, don't touch me, please. / I'll not be put to bed by you, my man" (p. 47). The last two words reveal his superior conception of himself, although we have been told "He's a democrat, / If not at heart, at least on principle" (p. 44).

Therein lies the basis of both the personality and philosophy of the doctor. The poem's opening lines point in a slightly satirical tone to his self-importance--"Lancaster bore him--such a little town, / Such a great man" (p. 44). He is enroute to the "old homestead" to join his wife and children. He often sees friends but "somehow can't get near," primarily because he is "pre-occupied . . . as he talks." It is no wonder "they seem afraid" (p. 44). Unlike Lafe, he does not know how to make people at ease; a "great scholar," he has not learned much about people.



Frost's dialogue suggests that the professor could learn several lessons from Lafe. Lafe can laugh at himself and enjoy others; because he likes and trusts people, people like and trust him. Magoon is suspicious of others because he is so insecure about himself and so preoccupied with himself. Lafe can admit that his pride kept him wearing collars a size too small, but he finally changes and feels better. The collars become symbolic of change, flexibility. Lafe, no longer needing his supply of small collars, can accept his larger size and generously offer his collars to a stranger as a gesture of good will. When the professor rejects the offer and chooses to wear only his collars, it is obvious that he is too proud to accept a gift. Refusing to accept another's generosity, even in so ridiculous a gift, is rude and insulting. Dr. Magoon is as imprisoned in his set routine and pattern of life as he is in his special collars. Thus an ordinary object such as shirt collars can reveal one of Frost's basic beliefs: "There's nothing so entertaining as each other's attitudes."<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, Frost could not always follow his own beliefs. When prejudiced Amy Lowell saw "the

<sup>23</sup> As quoted in Cook, p. 70.

modern New England town, with narrow frame houses, visited by drummers alone . . . in all its ugliness," she assumed that Frost saw New England the same way-- as "a civilization . . . decaying . . . sinking to insanity." She wrote that Frost intended "A Hundred Collars" to be humorous; but concluded, "I find it nothing except a little dull."<sup>24</sup> Lowell's judgment made Frost furious. Although he explained in great detail why she was so wrong about her views in this poem, she did not change her attitude; neither did Frost find Lowell's attitude "entertaining."

The second dialogue--"The Mountain"--shows another response possible between two strangers, one of them a traveller. The two men in the later poem offer less obvious contrast than Lafe and the professor. A stranger up at dawn "to see new things" (p. 40) accosts a man and his "slow-moving cart with white-faced oxen" (p. 41) to inquire about the land, the town, and the mountain. Spending the previous night in the town he thought closest to the mountain, he now discovers the deceptions of distance. The ox-driver informs him that the closest village is Lunenberg, which is "no village--only scattered farms" with "sixty voters last election" (p. 41). Thus begins an amazing

<sup>24</sup> Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), pp. 125, 107.

conversation between two strangers who establish a congenial relationship because of their mutual desire to talk.

The newcomer is curious and full of questions--thirteen, to be exact. They all involve the mountain Hor, which "takes all the room," according to the native. To the ox-driver the mountain is "that thing"--a huge hulk of earth "like a wall" (p. 41) which shelters him from the wind. It is, however, distinguished in one way. On its top is a "curious thing"--a brook that starts "up on it somewhere" and is "always cold in summer, warm in winter." Although the native has never seen the brook, he describes it appreciatively as "one of the great sights going" (p. 42). This special brook steams "in winter like an ox's breath" so that the "bushes all along its banks / Are inch-deep with the frosty spines and bristles-- / You know the kind. Then let the sun shine on it!" (p. 42). It is this last, unexpected sentence from the plodding ox-driver that startles the reader. Solely from the stories of others, the driver has concocted a vision of beauty.

The visitor, however, seems less impressed by a distant brook than by the possible view "around the world, / From such a mountain." He notes the trees and cliffs as well as the "little ferns in crevices"

(p. 42). The native's one-track mind will not be deterred; he mentions again the brook that "ought to be worth seeing." When the questioner doubts "it's there," the ox-driver grows philosophical. He knows someone who once climbed the mountain, he says, but that fellow "never got up high enough to see" because he climbed from the wrong side (p. 43). As if to authenticate his vision further, he confesses, "I've always meant to go / And look myself." Not the kind to climb simply for a view, he has thought of going as if looking for his cows or as if hunting bear. Clearly, "'Twouldn't seem real to climb for climbing it" (p. 43). To this man who has lived all his life at the foot of Hor it would be downright foolish to climb "for the sake of climbing" (p. 43).

The native may appear to be unassuming and gullible; yet two examples of his talk reveal to the newcomer a thoughtful, articulate man who has meditated on things others have taken for granted. His sense of perspective and his understanding of words are unusual. In discussing the brook up top, he is precise about what "top" means. "It may not be right on the very top: / It wouldn't have to be a long way down" to be still considered top and have "some head of water from above" (pp. 42-43). From the other direction he can see the perspective, too, for the

brook could be a "good distance down" and "might not be noticed / By anyone who'd come a long way up" (p. 43). The relativity of things applies not only to the true perspective of "top" but also to the legend of the stream that is "warm in December, cold in June." In dealing with this legend, the native includes the questioner in a shared knowledge. "You and I know enough to know it's warm / Compared with cold, and cold compared with warm." Then follows another unexpected remark. "Warm" or "cold"--these are only words, "But all the fun's in how you say a thing" (p. 44). Eyes twinkling and pleased at what he has said, the ox-driver moves off in the middle of the thirteenth question to the fields, and the poem ends.

Two men see different things in the mountain. Even though the driver has "been on the sides, / Deer-hunting and trout-fishing" (p. 42), the greater part of his dialogue concerns the brook he has never seen. In contrast the newcomer carefully assesses the views within sight. Before he crosses the river to "swing closer to the mountain," he notes specifically the various fields and observes the "good grass-land gullied out" by the river's spring flooding (p. 40). With climbing in his blood, he sees the mountain as "Great granite terraces in sun and shadow, / Shelves

one could rest a knee on getting up . . . / Or turn and sit on and look out and down" (p. 42). Two men with two views: one is more sure of what he has never seen, and the other is curious and careful about the near, the available. It is not a question of whether one is right, the other wrong; it is two views of the same mountain.

Two strangers meet at dawn one morning and converse good-naturedly without suspicion or animosity. Neither expresses any fear or hostility toward the other; the encounter is simple and matter-of-fact. This relationship produces good will because the physical beauty exerts a powerful effect upon both men. The superiority of the mountain has a way of awing humans.

That these two men offer a contrast is evident. Although both admire and appreciate nature, their differences lie in method and technique. Although, as Reuben Brower explains, both seem to see that "the word makes the fun of the thing and in a sense makes the thing," they differ significantly concerning how to solve the mystery of this New England mountain, factually not in Lunenberg.<sup>25</sup> To the traveller it is ironic that one can know and explain a mystery

<sup>25</sup> Brower, pp. 90-91.

he never bothers to investigate. The two men illustrate the fundamental distinctions between the contented one and the seeker after reality. Neither will forget their encounter; the relationship has added something new to meditate about. These new thoughts, of course, also extend to the reader. During a 1928 visit to England Frost dined with the critic, Edward Garnett, who told him "The Mountain" was the "one nearly perfect pastoral poem which discerning people would not soon forget."<sup>26</sup>

Frost regarded the poem as one of his most perfect in form and one which, as he told Thomas Hornsby Ferrill in 1931, he "should prefer to have in anthologies."<sup>27</sup> This poem and others that embody a real love of New England and a deep respect for its people were often subjects for discussion during the Depression years. Unlike the Agrarians and "unreconstructed" Southerners in the 1920s and 1930s who made a serious case for a mass exodus from urban life back to the land, Frost would not allow his sympathies to turn programmatic. Peter J. Stanlis quotes Frost's view that "modern technology and division of labor

<sup>26</sup> Edward Garnett, as quoted in Thompson, The Years of Triumph, p. 340.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Hornsby Ferrill, unpublished diary entry, 19 Aug. 1931, as quoted in Thompson, The Years of Triumph, p. 654.

despite all its abuses should not be abandoned. Only a few can do what Thoreau did."<sup>28</sup> Writing to Louis Untermeyer in 1938, Frost reiterated his defense of North of Boston as "merely a book of people, not of poor people. They happen to be people of simplicity or simple truth miscalled simplicity."<sup>29</sup> The ox-driver of "The Mountain" is one of these--quite content with his simple, unadventurous life at the foot of Mount Hor.

A third kind of response to strangers generates a relationship that brings two differing standards into conflict. Whether a man is motivated by duplicity or integrity will often show in the questions he asks. Frost sent one such dialogue, "Christmas Trees," as the family Christmas greeting for 1915; the subtitle is "A Christmas Circular Letter." Each handwritten poem included a sketch by daughter Lesley "of the fir-covered slope deep in snow"; at the bottom of each Frost penned a personal note.<sup>30</sup> Published in the 1916 edition of Mountain Interval, the poem is somewhat

<sup>28</sup> Peter J. Stanlis, Robert Frost: The Individual and Society (Rockford: Rockford College, 1973), p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> "To Louis Untermeyer," 10 March 1938, The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), pp. 304-05.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Gould, Robert Frost: The Aim Was Song (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1964), p. 175.



similar to "Mending Wall," the poem that opens his second book. That prologue poem explains simply the arrangement two men had for mending the wall, but, as in "Christmas Trees," the two men's statements reveal their different motivations and standards.

"Christmas Trees" came from a personal experience of the poet. Away at Cambridge lecturing in November, 1915, he was called home to Franconia because of Elinor's miscarriage. Lesley was unable to manage the household, and so Frost became both cook and manager. One afternoon while Elinor sat up mending and the children were compiling their usual Christmas notebooks, they had company.<sup>31</sup> Here is where the poem begins.

On a snowy day "a stranger" arrives from the city. Apparently versed in country ways, he sits and waits for someone to come out. His mission is to buy the narrator's trees from "the slope behind the house," to negotiate for those "young fir balsams" (p. 106). The narrator is immediately struck both with the incongruity of the city's being unable to keep Christmas without "something it had left behind" and with his own surprise at being asked to sell his special trees. To the reader he muses, "I doubt if I was tempted for

<sup>31</sup> Gould, p. 174.

a moment / To sell them off their feet to go in cars"  
(p. 106).

The narrator's minor dilemma poses the problem of timing as he thoughtfully considers whether to keep or sell the young trees. Showing reluctance, he finally takes the buyer to look--but with the clear warning: "don't expect I'm going to let you have them" (p. 106). When the city buyer decides he wants the thousand available trees for thirty dollars, the farmer has to remind himself "never show surprise!" in business dealings. But he knows the quoted figure is ridiculous--"three cents . . . apiece" (p. 107). He also knows the buyer will sell them for at least a dollar in the city; so he refuses to deal.

The duplicity of a buyer who pretends the trees are really only fair and who offers a mere three cents for each contrasts with the integrity of the owner who admires their beauty and refuses to sell them too cheaply. Although he looks upon the trees from more than a business view, he has not ignored business. There is no indication in the poem that he will not sell in the future; only the present conditions cause his refusal. The owner will not hold these trees "beyond the time of profitable growth" (p. 106); this suggests he sees "profitable" in relation to the potentialities of the trees. For, finally, his pleasure

in the trees must be weighed against the value of the trees, the "trial by market." But until then, he decides the market may not have them, these trees he had not "thought of . . . as Christmas trees" (p. 106).

The idea of "trial" intrigued Frost. Years earlier he had written "The Trial by Existence" in which the "surprise" of discovery was "to find that the utmost reward / Of daring should be still to dare" in "the trial by existence named" (pp. 19-20). Almost twenty years after "Christmas Trees" on May 31, 1932, he has his "Meliboeus, the potato man" comment in "Build Soil--A Political Pastoral":

To market 'tis our destiny to go.  
 But much as in the end we bring for sale there  
 There is still more we never bring or should bring;  
 More that should be kept back--the soil for instance,  
 . . . . .  
 Build soil. Turn the farm in upon itself  
 Until it can contain itself no more,  
 But sweating-full, drips wine and oil a little.  
 (pp. 321, 323)

In Frost's view, people too often go to market with an unready product because the primary consideration is profit rather than creating, building, and preserving. The man in "Christmas Trees" does not succumb to what Doyle labels the "get-all-you-can-now-out-of-it attitude."<sup>32</sup> Although he is tempted, his integrity remains intact.

<sup>32</sup> Doyle, p. 232.

The stranger, undoubtedly, feels confident any farmer would desire money near the holiday season. He misjudges this man who decides his trees are worth more "to give away than sell." The only problem, so the narrator says to the friend in his poem-letter, is that he can't "lay one in a letter" as he would like to do in wishing him a "Merry Christmas" (p. 107). Two strangers meet and part without consummating a business deal; the reader learns a lesson in values.

This poem is another example of Frost's use of conversation or at least what Doyle calls the "illusion of conversation."<sup>33</sup> A normal, spoken version of the first two lines might sound thus: "At last, the city had left the country to itself." But Frost has made art by changing the point of view and adding an irregular beat: "The city had withdrawn into itself / And left at last the country to the country" (p. 105). The poet's skillful lines--"Regular vestry-trees whole Sunday Schools / Could hang enough on to pick off enough"--suggest size simply by the unusual arrangement of the words "enough on" so as to "pick off enough" (p. 107). What Edward Thomas had said of Frost's poetry two years earlier applies here:

<sup>33</sup> Doyle, p. 15.

These poems are revolutionary because they lack the exaggeration of rhetoric, even at first sight appear to lack the poetic intensity of which rhetoric is an imitation. . . . They succeed in being plain though not mean, in reminding us of poetry without being falsely "poetical."<sup>34</sup>

In this sixty-two line poem we have narration, conversation, and drama, as well as atmosphere, conflict, philosophy, and sympathy. In so brief an interlude the relationship of two men establishes the conflict of values.

A fourth response to an unknown individual is fear, surprise, shock. The previous man-to-man encounters offer revealing facets of personality, but most of the situations are not highly charged emotionally. When a woman is introduced into the dialogue, however, the undercurrent of emotions becomes more forceful. Differences involve the tone of voice, the silences, and the unexpected responses of those caught off guard. One such dialogue, more technically a triologue with three speakers, is "The Fear." Here emotion develops from the opening lines about a lantern's "lurching shadows on a house" (p. 89) through to the final crash of the lantern as it goes out (p. 92).

<sup>34</sup> Edward Thomas, as quoted in The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer, pp. viii-ix.

"The Fear" tells of a couple coming after dark to a lonely house and of the woman's compulsive insistence to confront a stranger they passed on the road. Her companion is amazed at her bravado in accosting a stranger to inquire his business on that road at night. The door of the barn provides the setting for their argument as to whether there even was a person; he did not see anyone and thinks she should forget the incident. Her conversation exposes the deep psychological problem that motivates her behavior; she fears the seeking eyes of a former lover or husband who she thinks is watching her every move with another man. She insists, "Joel, I'll have to look. I can't go in, / I can't, and leave a thing like that unsettled" (p. 89). She has to know who is in the darkness.

His attempts to restrain her are useless. She takes the lantern, orders him "not to come" because it is her "business," and declares, "Now's the time to have it out with him" (p. 90). Joel deflates her ego by saying, "But it's nonsense to think he'd care enough" (p. 91). She retorts angrily and then stops short by saying, "We mustn't say hard things. You mustn't either" (p. 91). Rational, levelheaded Joel reminds her that their standing and talking in the light has probably already had its effect--"if to see

was what he wanted, why / He has seen all there was to see and gone" (p. 91). She is not stopped and shouts, "What do you want?" When there is no answer, Joel tells her, "You're wrong." But her second shouted question receives an answer: "Nothing." Still unsatisfied and made brave by fear, she shouts, "What are you doing round this house at night?" (p. 91). The identical answer silences her.

The stranger offers to show himself and explains that he and his son are merely "out walking. Every child should have the memory / Of at least one long-after-bedtime walk" (p. 92). It is his simple three-word statement--"You seem afraid" (p. 91)--that causes her embarrassment. In her confusion she foolishly suggests he walk somewhere else, but he gently reminds her this public highway is leading to the Dean home where he and his son are "stopping for the fortnight" (p. 92).

Her humiliation shows in the concluding explanation to Joel: "You understand that we have to be careful. / This is a very, very lonely place." When her call to Joel goes unanswered, the tension of the situation causes her more anxiety. Having already felt "faint," she is unable to catch the lantern as it falls and goes out (p. 92). The unwelcome dark then surrounds a limp, fearful woman who has acted foolishly before two men and a child.

A kind stranger willing to identify himself is, obviously, not what she expects. His innocent actions and surprise at her fear emphasize the greater problem. Her real fear is of an avenging lover or husband who will

be everywhere  
 Around us, looking out of trees and bushes  
 Till I sha'n't dare to set a foot outdoors.  
 And I can't stand it. (pp. 90-91)

Such tension grips her that "doors locked and curtains drawn will make no difference" (p. 89) unless she satisfies her curiosity. Beneath all her reasons lies a great guilt that activates her fears. Like the woman in "The Hill Wife," she rattles the house key to "warn someone to be getting out / At one door" (p. 89) as they enter another; unlike the hill wife who runs away from everything because of her fears, this woman takes a lantern and dares to shout aloud for answers. She appears to be bravely in control, but her bravery leads to humiliation and the possibility of losing her second companion.

The rushing, insistent conversation shows the surging emotional stress within the woman. Her companion asks:

"Are you sure--"

"Yes, I'm sure!"

"--it was a face?"  
 (p. 89)



The lines themselves, both in content and tension, suggest that the couple may already be at odds. Past events may have given rise to his stressed "Are you sure" (emphasis added). Her insistence--"I'm sure"--may imply that he has often been indecisive and unsure. Their relationship shows signs of frustration and uncertainty. Frost's use of images here heightens the tenseness. The contrast of one lantern and "all the dark" creates an uneasy atmosphere while they argue. Inside the barn the "horse's hoof pawed once the hollow floor" (p. 89)--not a reassuring sound in a lonely place where a stranger's kicking a stone on the road sounds loud. In the excitement, she holds the lantern too close to her skirt, and the "smell of scorching woolen" (p. 91) punctuates the night air. All these events must have made a memorable walk for a small boy who puzzles about adults' behavior.

The woman's strange behavior at the end of the poem led Amy Lowell to an even stranger conclusion. She asks a question that indicates her own misunderstanding in calling the stranger the "first husband." Then she asks about Joel, "Does he kill her, or does she merely think that he is going to do so?"<sup>35</sup> The poem clearly shows that the stranger is simply a

<sup>35</sup> Lowell, pp. 121-22.

stranger, not her husband; furthermore, her present companion would hardly be likely to "kill her" because of an embarrassing case of mistaken identity.

The woman is so distraught that fear and guilt rule her actions. George Nitchie thinks that contact with anyone else becomes for her a source of "perpetual dread because of the possibility of exposing her common-law status."<sup>36</sup> This may be a greater source of fear than simply a husband's revenge. Neither of the men--the stranger or her companion--fears as she does. Neither would have faced the confrontation she ordered because they felt no need, saw no importance in the simple incident. Both men exemplify a more rational, healthy outlook on life, an attitude which Howard Mumford Jones feels is often predominant in the men of Frost's poetry.<sup>37</sup>

Frost was a "habitual nightwalker," according to Paul Elmer, a man who "loved the dark" yet who greatly "feared it."<sup>38</sup> He was, therefore, probably sympathetic with the characters of his poems. His years of

<sup>36</sup> George W. Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1960), p. 124.

<sup>37</sup> Howard Mumford Jones, Belief and Disbelief in American Literature (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 125.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Elmer, "Robert Frost: The Design of Darkness," in Four Ways of Modern Poetry, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (Richmond: John Knox, 1965), p. 37.

alienated isolation at the Derry farm made him understand the psychological effects of environment and the mental suffering that is intensified by darkness.<sup>39</sup> He reported in a letter to Miss Ward, February 10, 1912, an encounter with "a mysterious figure at the juncture of two roads," an encounter with a presence he did not understand but called his "second self."<sup>40</sup> He and five-year-old-son Carol had actually been the innocent, surprised strangers accosted on the South Road by the woman in the poem. He did not understand the woman's situation until his hosts, the Lynches, explained. A local girl in the White Mountains, trained as a nurse in Boston, fell in love with one of her patients and ran away from her husband. The lovers hid on a small farm not far down the road from the Lynches' farm.<sup>41</sup> As one "acquainted with the night" (p. 255) in the city and the country, Frost had often heard the "interrupted cry" and knew emotional sufferings as intense or worse than physical pains. The recurring motif of darkness and strangers was no idle choice but an adherence to truth. He told Edward Garnett in 1915: "A realist I may be if by that they mean one

<sup>39</sup> Cook, p. 299.

<sup>40</sup> As quoted in Elmer, p. 45.

<sup>41</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 344.

who before all else wants the story to sound as if it were told the way it is because it happened that way."<sup>42</sup>

In his evaluation of the monologues and dialogues in North of Boston, Roy Harvey Pearce believes their primary subject is the "failure of communication." Frost's characters, he says, ". . . can communicate only the fact that they cannot communicate. . . ."<sup>43</sup> The previous analyses of poems will support Pearce's view, but another kind of poem merits consideration. One of the dialogues differs drastically both in its presentation of strangers and in its characters' ability to communicate effectively. In looking at many of Frost's characters a reader might be tempted to think the poet's interest was only in adults with problems. Such is not the case in at least two dialogues: "Blueberries," to be treated in a later chapter, and "The Generations of Men." The longest of Frost's dialogues in this study is the nine-page conversation between two young people in "The Generations of Men."

<sup>42</sup> "To Edward Garnett," 12 June 1915, Letter 122, Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), p. 179.

<sup>43</sup> Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), p. 277.

Frost based the poem on Governor Frank W. Rollins' initiation of Old Home Week late in the nineteenth century. The plea for all family members to return to their place of birth was designed to stimulate business in struggling towns and to encourage people to "reestablish their New England identities."<sup>44</sup> The Bow, New Hampshire, location of the Stark clan gathering forms the setting for the meeting of "stranger cousins." The reunion has been rained out; yet these two, a young man and a young woman, bored with inactivity, "idle down" during a letup in the rain to the site of their vanished ancestral home--an "old cellar hole in a by-road" (p. 73). It is here at the appointed time the group will stand "together on the crater's verge / That turned them on the world, and try to fathom / The past and get some strangeness out of it" (p. 73).

Each returning Stark has been provided with a card indicating his exact position on the family tree.<sup>45</sup> The couple quickly establishes that they are both Starks with his one card and her three; they then begin discussing complexities of genealogy. Taking

<sup>44</sup> Perry Westbrook, "Abandonment and Desertion in the Poetry of Robert Frost," in Frost: Centennial Essays II, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1976), p. 294.

<sup>45</sup> Westbrook, p. 297.

seats on "the cellar wall" to "dangle feet among the raspberry vines," they discover a rapport that is a pleasure to both of them. Cleverly they banter imaginative fancies as an indirect way of getting acquainted. Her analogy of the Indian "myth of Chicamoztoc" with the Biblical "pit from which we Starks were digged" (p. 76) interests him--both for its idea and for her show of being "learned." Two young people staring into a "cellar hole" can conjure up reality or make-believe; they mix both. He looks and sees "Grandsir Stark distinctly"--then decides it is really Granny instead, smoking a pipe and looking for cider in the cellar (p. 77).

Her excuse to go is that the "mist" is getting heavier. He tries to detain her saying, "A bead of silver water more or less / Strung on your hair won't hurt your summer looks." He wants to keep her a while longer to hear "the noise / That the brook raises in the empty valley." They have fantasized scenes; now he wants to "consult the voices" from the brook (p. 77). She stays, they listen to the brook, and a fantasy of the future unfolds that clearly involves them both: "The voices seem to say: / Call her Nausicaä, the unafraid / Of an acquaintance made adventurously" (p. 78). Captivated by his cleverness, she listens while he insists the "voices" command him

to build a cottage on the ancient spot. Not mistaking his intentions and interests, she counters that the voices are not authentic because they lack native dialect. He insists, then, that "it's Granny speaking: 'I dunnow!'" before she gives her command again: "'Son, you do as you're told'" (p. 80).

The listening girl, sensing real possibilities, tells him, "I can see we are going to be good friends" (p. 80). But as quickly she decides the meeting must end. They decide to meet tomorrow in the rain or even "in sunshine"--and so she goes (p. 81).

The relaxed atmosphere creates relaxed phrases, longer passages of dialogue because two strangers meet and wish to prolong that chance encounter. Variations in meter abound in the usual blank verse form, but the most striking feature is the use of country words in the young man's creation of Granny's imagined speeches. Three such examples are "dite," and the slang "Mebbe" and "dunnow." Two educated offspring of an ancient family discover their relationship to the past but more importantly project future possibilities for the Stark clan. They come as strangers to the ancient site; they leave as friends. No reunion takes place, but a possible new alliance takes shape. The possibility of a marriage exists because, according to George Nitchie, the cousins are "sufficiently

remote in kinship" so that they could marry and "revitalize the family farm."<sup>46</sup>

Their conversation raises three questions that are never answered. Puzzled, they question why each has felt drawn to the ancient spot "like wild geese on a lake before a storm?" (p. 76). The question-- "What will we come to / With all this pride of ancestry, we Yankees?" (p. 76)--is not answered. It may reflect the poet's concern that so much of Old Home Week degenerated into journalistic doggerel and mere entertainment. He has the young man say near the end, "What counts is the ideals" (p. 80). This statement suggests that there is the need not only for roots and identity but also for a code to live by. The last question of whether "the meaning of it all" is to be found in people or out of what "the voices really say" (p. 78) is also left open.

The past, the present, and the future merge in a happy encounter of two strangers who discover the catalyst of love. Not fear, guilt, suspicion, nor duplicity but interest, curiosity, and trust form the basis of their relationship. One is aware of the trivial banter of young people using time and words to prolong a pleasant experience in such lines as

<sup>46</sup> Nitchie, p. 123.



"You poor, dear, great, great, great, great Granny!" (p. 77) and the following lines devoted to establishing the correct number of "greats" in order to show respect. Frost ingeniously illustrates that talk is significant--even apparently idle chitchat. The couple would agree with the native in "The Mountain" that "all the fun's in how you say a thing."

The brook they consult for its voices acts as an object for discussion as it does in "The Mountain." The brook serves in this poem, and in "West-Running Brook" to be discussed later, as the physical symbol of an imaginative journey that helps create a sense of intimacy. Both speakers note its flowing throughout the history of the Starks. As an object of the past, it continues to flow amid present change. She is clearheaded enough to know that the voices of the brook "give you what you wish to hear" (p. 78); the brook supplies an image for their desires. Symbolic of past and present, then, it also shows the conjunction of their love, or love-to-be, with time. The two appear eager, according to Frank Lentricchia, to "redeem the past by asserting the will to renewal."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Frank Lentricchia, Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1975), p. 51.

This last dialogue focuses on two young people in contrast to the older characters in the other five poems. The optimistic expectations of the young contrast with the others' fears and reticence to make friends. The situation in "The Generations of Men" is designed for strangers to become friends; this poem allows two people to accept each other as equals, to communicate freely and productively, and to hope for a future together.

All the poems analyzed in this chapter except "A Hundred Collars" occur outdoors so that nature has an obvious effect upon the characters. All recount a past that affects the present situation; all involve a changed idea or mood because of a confrontation with a stranger. All but "The Generations of Men" show different backgrounds--usually between the educated outsider and the native--different interests, and different social levels. The two poems with characters from Bow involve people who are trusting: Lufe of "A Hundred Collars" and the young couple of the last poem. Frost does not show merely the quaint or the peculiar; he shows the ordinary and the normal. Bernard DeVoto notes Frost's ability to present the essential qualities of men:

His is the only body of poetry of this age  
which originates in the experience of humble

people, treated with the profound respect of identification, and used as the sole measure of the reality and the value of all experience.<sup>48</sup>

Just as the relationships of strangers produce various responses between people, so do the relationships of friends. Frost's dialogues treat almost every aspect of human behavior because, as David Lambuth explains, the "substance and meaning of Robert Frost's poetry is human life."<sup>49</sup> Part of life for every human is the process of acquiring a friend or many friends. An analysis of these relationships constitutes the next chapter.

<sup>48</sup> Bernard DeVoto, "The Critics and Robert Frost," Saturday Review, 1 Jan. 1938, p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> David Lambuth, Foreword to Robert Frost: A Bibliography by W. B. Shubrick Clymer and Charles R. Green, in Recognition, p. 142.

## CHAPTER III

### RELATIONSHIPS OF FRIENDS

That Robert Frost himself did not make friends easily may account for the fact that few of his works relate specifically to friendship. Howard Mumford Jones has noted that the poet lacks Whitman's "love of comrades" and personal poems with the theme of friendship such as Tennyson's great In Memoriam to his friend Arthur Henry Hallam.<sup>1</sup> Three of Frost's volumes, however, are dedicated to special friends. In 1923 he dedicated his Selected Poems "To / Helen Thomas / In Memory of / Edward Thomas," his British poet-friend who had been killed in World War I.<sup>2</sup> The dedication in A Witness Tree of 1942--"TO K. M. FOR HER PART IN IT"<sup>3</sup>--refers to Kathleen Morrison, wife of Harvard's Theodore Morrison, who helped bring

<sup>1</sup> Howard Mumford Jones, Belief and Disbelief in American Literature (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), p. 636.

<sup>3</sup> The Poetry of Robert Frost, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), p. 564.

order and hope to the forlorn poet after his wife's death in 1938.<sup>4</sup> His last volume, In the Clearing of 1962, was dedicated to three long-time friends: John Bartlett, Sidney Cox, and Louis Untermeyer.<sup>5</sup> It is significant that of the twenty-plus dialogues Frost wrote, six definitely concern the relationships of friends on a continuum from the casual to the close.

In contrast to the stranger, a friend is a person one knows. From the universal trait of sociality flows a wide spectrum of friendships: transitory and lasting, false and true, bitter and sweet, casual and close. When one lets down his barriers and risks friendship, he can never be assured what will be the relationship that follows. That risk is essential, however, as John Donne succinctly reminds us: "No man is an island, entire of itself."<sup>6</sup>

Frost's attitude about friends is probably best reflected in the short lyric, "Revelation," from his first book:

We make ourselves a place apart  
Behind light words that tease and flout,

<sup>4</sup> Lawrance Thompson and R. H. Winnick, Robert Frost: The Later Years, 1938-1963 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1976), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> The Poetry of Robert Frost, p. 574.

<sup>6</sup> John Donne, "Meditation XVII," The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne, ed. Charles M. Coffin (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 441.

But oh, the agitated heart  
Till someone really find us out.

'Tis pity if the case require  
(Or so we say) that in the end  
We speak the literal to inspire  
The understanding of a friend.

But so with all, from babes that play  
At hide-and-peek to God afar,  
So all who hide too well away  
Must speak and tell us where they are.  
(p. 19)

The first three dialogues in this study exemplify the idea of stanza one--people with whom we banter words. Such casual encounters of friendship may or may not hold a meaningful place in our lives.

The first dialogue for which the poet received a cash prize was "Snow,"<sup>7</sup> a dialogue of neighbors becoming friends through circumstances. At midnight Fred and Helen Cole are awakened by a passing neighbor who seeks temporary shelter and rest in a snowstorm. Meserve, the preacher of the Racker sect, has spent three hours coming four miles from town; he wants to call his wife before going the last three miles. From the telephone conversation it is clear that Lett, his wife, begs him to stay the rest of the night with the Coles, but he asks, "What's the sense?" He assures her, "My dear, I'm coming just the same" (p. 143).

<sup>7</sup> "To Harriet Monroe," 2 Nov. 1917, Letter 171, Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), p. 222.

While he returns to the barn to check his horses, the Coles discuss their midnight visitor.

It is quickly evident that Helen thinks Meserve a "pious scalawag" (p. 146) who has no business out on such a night. She has heard enough to decide: "I detest the thought of him-- / With his ten children under ten years old. / I hate his wretched little Racker Sect" (p. 144). Yet she is afraid to let him leave for fear he will freeze in a snowbank. She empathizes with another woman she does not know because that woman certainly needs this man. She decides, then, that Meserve cannot go back out in the storm that night; she will convince him to stay.

Fred, her husband, amused at both his wife's irritation and her sudden concern, is intrigued with the tough little man. He tells Helen:

Only you women have to put these airs on  
To impress men. You've got us so ashamed  
Of being men we can't look at a good fight  
Between two boys and not feel bound to stop it.  
(p. 146)

He thinks Meserve should do as he wishes. Fred teases Helen about saving the life of this savior of men's souls and urges: "Stick to him, Helen. Make him answer you" (p. 145).

The poem's conflicts involve the feminine and masculine responses to danger. In the beginning of

the poem it appears that the Coles and Meserve's wife are opposed to Meserve's travelling further; soon, however, Fred sides with Meserve in his challenging of the elements. Fred, therefore, appearing to side with Helen and urging Meserve to stay, is basically daring Meserve on while Helen pleads for the visitor to stay. Thus both women, Helen and Meserve's wife, appear as the practical realists in their fear of the storm; both men appear as idealistic and sure of conquering the snow's fury. The opposing views of couples are often conspicuous in Frost's poetry, as we will see in a later chapter. When Meserve returns from the barn, the reader is fully aware of the couple's private feelings about a man they know casually; by the time Meserve leaves, the reader has seen the opposing views of the couple revealed to the visitor.

"Meserve," a name Frost probably coined for "Meserve," is "strong of stale tobacco" (p. 145) and full of surprises that refute Helen's preconceptions. Cold and weary from a three-hour fight, he still sees the snow's beauty and majesty: "You can just see it glancing off the roof / Making a great scroll upward toward the sky / Long enough for recording all our names on" (p. 143). Such a sight others would gladly ignore at midnight. Frost has carefully made Meserve's language plausible and allusive to his ministerial



calling, although even Helen is surprised that Meserve does not talk of God. Strong and tough, Meserve is yet sensitive and perceptive. Before he calls home he decides, "I'll call her softly so that if she's wise / And gone to sleep, she needn't wake to answer" (p. 143). He stands in the warm room and philosophizes about life, books, warmth, and human understanding. He is as loquacious and visionary as Lafe in "A Hundred Collars" as he tells stories and ponders life's puzzles. With the assurance that "Our snowstorms as a rule / Aren't looked on as man-killers" (p. 150), he ignores Helen's common-sense arguments about staying. He reasons that it is the storm "that says I must go on. / That wants me as a war might if it came" (p. 151). Then he goes into the snow again and leaves Fred to wonder if Meserve has "the gift / Of words, or is it tongues?"

Morris P. Tilley recalls Frost's comments to him about this poem:

I have three characters speaking in one poem, and I was not satisfied with what they said until I got them to speak so true to their characters that no mistake could be made as to who was speaking. I would never put the names of the speakers in front of what they said. They would have to tell that by the truth to the character of what they said. It would be interesting to try

to write a play with ten characters and not have any names before what they said.<sup>8</sup>

One needs to read only a few lines of this poem, and he can be quite sure of the speaker. Whether the speaker is Helen, Fred, or Meserve, the personality emerges in the speech.

The poem does not end with Meserve's leaving. Deciding they can be no help by sitting and "living his fight through with him" (p. 152), the Coles go to bed. After 3:00 A.M. the telephone awakens Fred. Meserve is not home, and Lett's angry voice questions, "Why did you let him go?" (p. 153). When Helen goes to the telephone there is no answer because the telephone on the other end has been left off the hook. Intensity builds as Fred and Helen take turns listening and imagining. Helen says, "I hear an empty room-- / . . . I hear a clock--and windows rattling" (p. 153). Later Fred decides "A baby's crying!" Alarm builds: "Frantic it sounds, though muffled and far off. / Its mother wouldn't let it cry like that, / Not if she's there" (p. 154). Helpless, they fear the worst, but eventually comes the "chirp" of the phone bell. Fred hears Meserve's voice announcing

<sup>8</sup> Morris P. Tilley, "Notes from Conversations with Robert Frost," in Interviews with Robert Frost, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 23.

he is home safe, that his wife had gone to let him in the barn. Relieved, Fred joyfully tells Meserve, "We're glad. Drop in and see us when you're passing" (p. 155).

The concluding repartee between Helen and Fred analyzes the incident. She thinks the "whole to do seems to have been for nothing." She is irritated at having provided a "half-way coffee house 'twixt town and nowhere" (p. 155) and then having her advice ignored. What good was it to be friendly with this neighbor who refused her help? Fred decides: "But let's forgive him. / We've had a share in one night of his life. / What'll you bet he ever calls again?" (p. 156). Seeing the world through Meserve's adventurous eyes that night will be something Fred will long remember.

This couple, disturbed in the middle of the night, are willing and eager to be friendly and to help a distant neighbor in need. They manifest true neighborliness, what Thompson calls a "love in action,"<sup>9</sup> that ignores cold, disturbances, and loss of sleep. They are unsatisfied by the encounter, however, because, as Frost says in "Revelation," their "light words" to Meserve merely "teased" him back into the

<sup>9</sup> Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost (1942; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1961), p. 214.

storm. It is unlikely Meserve will ever stop again or attempt to develop a friendship with this couple; he seems almost oblivious to their inconvenience and concerned only with his own thoughts. It may be, on the other hand, that his are the teasing words that leave the Coles frustrated because they cannot seem to "find out" enough about this strange neighbor.

Because of its conflict and suspense, "Snow" has also been performed as a one-act play. It makes tense drama with its 349 lines of direct discourse as opposed to only 26 lines of narration. Robert Newdick, however, notes that the beauty of the opening lines-- "The three stood listening to a fresh access / Of wind that caught against the house a moment, / Gulped snow, and then blew free again" (p. 143)--would have to be lost in stage directions.<sup>10</sup> The reader of the dialogue has the double pleasure of both dramatic intensity and unforgettable narration that sets the scene for a friendly encounter. This unexpected and casual acquaintance made in the middle of a snowy night will not likely develop into a warm friendship.

Other circumstances produce similar acquaintances, but work offers people excellent opportunity to move

<sup>10</sup> Robert S. Newdick, "Pinkerton Academy, Derry, New Hampshire," in Recognition of Robert Frost: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, ed. Richard Thornton (New York: Holt, 1937), pp. 86-87.

from being strangers to becoming friends. Frost felt his North of Boston with its varied people portrayed the idea from "The Tuft of Flowers" in A Boy's Will that there is a fellowship when "'Men work together . . . / Whether they work together or apart'" (p. 23). This fellowship, developing friends, is not a mere ideal but a reality if men try with what G. R. Elliott calls the "human spirit of neighborliness." He explains this as:

the spirit which enables people to live together more or less fruitfully in a small community, and with all its meanness comprises the basal conditions of the wiser human brotherhood.<sup>11</sup>

It is this fellowship of friends, of neighbors, that becomes the basis by which Frost defines values, so George Nitchie believes, and these values are defined in terms of human relationships of the individual to the individual.<sup>12</sup> The second dialogue is an excellent example.

"The Code" concerns the circumstances of men at work as well as the significance of words that "tease

<sup>11</sup> G. R. Elliott, "The Neighborliness of Robert Frost," The Nation, 109 (1919), 713.

<sup>12</sup> George W. Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1960), p. 124.

and flout" as the men work together. The dialogue contains two stories--accounts of two farmers who are taught lessons by farm hands, one in anger and one in friendship. As a summer storm threatens, three men are quickly piling hay in a meadow when one helper suddenly leaves without a word. The other hired man stays because, he tells the farmer, "You didn't know" and "you don't understand our ways" (p. 70). As a friend he proceeds to explain the offense taken by the fleeing James: "You've found out something. / The hand that knows his business won't be told / To do work better or faster--those two things" (p. 70).

This incident serves as a frame for another story about the time when the hired man-narrator worked for a man named Sanders up at Salem. Although none of the workers liked Sanders, they all grudgingly admired his endurance and stamina. Their greatest dislike was his habit of driving workers by getting behind them, keeping "at their heels" while threatening "to mow their legs off" (p. 71). The crisis in that situation was precipitated by Sanders' thoughtless admonition to the narrator, on top of the load of hay: "Let her come." Enraged by this slur on his knowledge and integrity, the narrator explains: "Never you say a thing like that to a man, / Not if he values what he is. God, I'd as soon / Murdered him as left

out his middle name" (p. 71). In this angry mood, then, the narrator dumped the whole load of hay on Sanders, who "squeaked like a squeezed rat" (p. 72).

Fearing the boss was dead, the other workers forked hay with no success in finding him. When one went to keep Sanders' wife away, the seeker discovered the object of their frantic searching "setting slumped way down in a chair, with both his feet / Against the stove, the hottest day that summer" (p. 72). Sanders knew he had done wrong in saying what he had and was unable to face the workers.

The brief conclusion returns to the present "city-bred farmer" who is still puzzled at the story and at his own worker's leaving. The farmer thinks Sanders discharged the narrator over the other incident; so the hired hand explains further. Sanders had been perturbed by the load of hay and also by how foolish he was made to look, but Sanders had not discharged the helper because the helper had done "just right" (p. 73). The poem ends on this note with the narrator's assumption that his story has helped his own boss understand "country ways"; future dealings with hired help can be more pleasant.

To the New England farm hand "code" here implies two meanings: one is a form of communication; the other is a standard of integrity. The meanings merge.

Since a person's integrity and his work are one, the simplest-sounding words become cause for insult if the listener understands those words to convey the slightest hint that the speaker is finding fault with the work. Words are doubly significant in content and tone of voice. Sanders' simple "let her come" involves also tone and stance. What probably enraged the narrator as much as the unneeded words was the fact that "the old fool" seized "his fork in both hands, / And looking up bewhiskered out of the pit," shouted "like an army captain" (p. 71). That strident sound created great anger in a man who already thought Sanders a slave-driver.

In this poem, as in "The Mountain," it is the native's knowledge, however gained, that is used to offer friendly help and advice to the newcomer who is unaware of the code. The hired man becomes a friend to a farmer whom he respects. The hired man has perceived the difference in Sanders and this farmer-boss; his response is to stay for the one he calls friend. The difference in the response of the hired man in the two situations indicates the qualities that warrant friendship. This "city-bred farmer" did not know that saying what was in his mind would be offensive. The hired man stays because he recognizes the farmer's concern about the approaching storm in spite



of his nervous chatter. The hired man detects before the incident that his boss is no driver; the farmer's concern outweighs his hasty words. A matured hired man shows his respect by explaining to the farmer.

The poem does not offer a certain answer as to whether the hired man's revenge on Sanders was right or wrong. Frost avoids any clear decision of accepting either the Yankee helper's point of view or the standard of the city-bred farmer. Instead, the integrity of both is maintained because Frost has honestly presented both. Ezra Pound singled out this poem in his assessment of Frost's objectivity:

"The Code" has a pervasive humor, the humor of things as they are, not that of an author trying to be funny, or trying to "bring out" the ludicrous phase of some incident or character because he dares not rely on sheer presentation.<sup>13</sup>

This willingness to let each character be himself, however silly that self may appear to others, offers valuable insight into human relationships that show people trying to understand others. If ever words teased and flouted, they do in "The Code" which relies heavily on words, their tone and their meaning. One

<sup>13</sup> Ezra Pound, as quoted in William H. Pritchard, "North of Boston: Frost's Poetry of Dialogue," in In Defense of Reading: A Reader's Approach to Literary Criticism, ed. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1962), p. 39.

man, as a true friend, even speaks "the literal to inspire / The understanding of a friend" (p. 19).

In a third dialogue, one of the few in which Frost employs dialect, the circumstances of work again provide the basis for an acquaintance to develop into a friendship. "The Ax-Helve" recounts the story of two men who know each other only casually at first, but by the poem's end they are good friends because they discover several common qualities both physical and metaphysical. The Frenchman Baptiste stops the narrator at his work of chopping wood one day by grabbing the ax "expertly on the rise" (p. 185) and then expressing anxiety over the "made-on-machine" ax-helve. The narrator wonders, "What was that to him?" The cordial offer of "Come on my house, and I put you one in" is immediately followed by the declaration, "It's cost you nothing" (p. 186).

Unsure of the real intent of the Frenchman, the narrator nevertheless goes that night to see Baptiste and his wife who "ain't spick too much Henglish" (p. 187). The narrator decides a man "cast away for life with Yankees" ought to "get his human rating" (p. 186) on a one-to-one basis. Soon the pronounced difference between the educated native, much like the poet himself, and the uneducated foreigner is apparent. Almost as quickly is their commonality established.

Dragging out a quiverful of ax-helves for the visitor to choose from, Baptiste offers commentary on how to choose and what to look for. The "lines of a good helve" are best if "native to the grain before the knife" begins its work; the curves are "no false curves / Put on it from without." This inner integrity is the distinguishing element that insures "its strength . . . / For the hard work" (p. 187). Quickly Baptiste begins to hone a helve for his friend.

More important than the gift of a new, handmade helve is the fascinating conversation between two new friends that evening. The native's surprised comment is: "Do you know, what we talked about was knowledge?" (p. 188). More specifically they discuss their own children's education, which in both families is done not at school but at home. The narrator carefully mentions "our doubts / Of laid-on education" and then begins to see some connection between the ax-helve and the evening's invitation. He wonders, "Was I desired in friendship" (p. 188) to offer the uneducated woodsman reassurance from an educated native of the rightness of both of their actions?

Brushing away the shavings, Baptiste offers the finished gift to his new friend. Proudly he stands the helve erect "as when / The snake stood up for evil in the Garden." Squinting at it, Baptiste is pleased:

"See how she's cock her head!" (p. 188). At the ending the poet-neighbor sees the reason for this planned encounter, for both education and ax-helves become related to the Fall and its consequent labor for all. The two men talk about education, but the initial word is "knowledge." The image, then, of the snake in the garden is a reminder that nature and men are no longer perfect. Man's knowledge is imperfect; he cannot know anything except by approximations. If we are to recover any approximation of what nature ideally intended, there must be hard work and a respect for the form of individual entities, whether children or pieces of wood. Both men perceive that work is necessary if one is to get down "to the grain of things," the lines in nature which one cannot otherwise know or see. Richard Poirier praises this progression:

The work, the labor, and the subsequent discovery of the "lines in nature"--all these bring to consciousness both the Fall which made labor necessary, and the good fortune of our having henceforth to discover the world for ourselves.<sup>14</sup>

That discovery may need reassurance, as Baptiste does in his decision about the children's education at home.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Poirier, Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 283.

The poem deals with surfaces, superficiality in general. Explicitly, Baptiste questions "laid-on education"--education without relation to the one being educated. The poem projects the ax-helve as a symbol of the relation between what is done to the outside (that machine-made helve or laid-on education) and what is on the inside (the lines of the grain of wood or the one being educated). Baptiste's knowledge of ax-helves is his symbol of defending his position about his children's education. His reference to the serpent is a reminder that there is always in everything the potentiality for evil as long as one is in this world. The qualities of Baptiste's helve are the same qualities for which he stands; he is what Doyle calls the "living embodiment" of the qualities that comprise his beliefs.<sup>15</sup>

The situation of the two men in "The Ax-Helve" is not unlike that in "Two Tramps in Mud Time." In that poem, as here, the reader is asked more or less "to trust the figure who stands for the poet," as Poirier suggests.<sup>16</sup> In "Two Tramps" the speaker's tone characterizes him as someone on the defensive, trying to justify to himself and the reader his claim--

<sup>15</sup> John Robert Doyle, Jr., The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand Univ. Press, 1962), p. 127.

<sup>16</sup> Poirier, p. 281.

that in the chopping of wood, even though two needy tramps watch him and want his job, he is exercising a prior right. A man's beliefs and standards are not separated from his behavior and reflect themselves in his work, regardless of what it is. It is in the exercise of manual labor that his vocation and avocation become one, a job done for "Heaven and the future's sakes" (p. 277). Baptiste and the poet-neighbor in "The Ax-Helve" understand and believe that; their actions in educating their own children at home reflect their commitment to consistency and integrity. Just as Baptiste makes an ax-helve with special care for the lines "native to the grain," in his profession as a woodsman, so he is consistently careful in the making of his children's education. In a note on this poem in a book belonging to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Frost wrote, "This is as near as I like to come to talking about art, in a work of art."<sup>17</sup> Apparently "making" poetry is analogous to physical labor in that it is literally productive and yields a result. The analogy of the ax-helve applies to the act of composing as well as the resultant instrument. A casual visit with an acquaintance

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence (New York: Holt, 1960), p. 213.

develops into a thoughtful philosophical discussion; two friends find a common ground where all that had appeared prior to the visit were differences. Baptiste does not "speak the literal" in securing his friend, but he uses an object lesson instead.

Frost has three dialogues in which friendships have already been established; the poems show the continued growth of that relationship. In "The Star-Splitter" Brad McLaughlin alienates himself from the Littleton townspeople. Only because one person, the narrator, decides that "to be social is to be forgiving" (p. 178) and remains Brad's friend do we learn the motivation for McLaughlin's drastic action.

Brad was constantly annoyed because his farm work kept him "busy outdoors by lantern-light with something" he realized he "should have done by daylight" (p. 176), so he tells his friend. Outside at night his thoughts are not bound to the work or the earth but enticed heavenward, limited though the view is by mere eyesight. Feeling a failure at "hugger-mugger farming," he burns his house down for the fire insurance money so that he can buy a telescope "to satisfy a life-long curiosity / About our place among the infinities" (p. 177).

We are told two times that his "reckless talk" and his "loose talk" around town made the fire no

surprise "when he did what he did" (p. 177). He could see no other solution since few farms "changed hands" at that time; so he went to drastic measures to fulfill his dream of having a telescope--"The best thing that we're put here for's to see" (p. 177). One cannot help but admire his goal; the method he used later causes "mean laughter" in the town (p. 177).

The sacrifice of the house means a loss to Brad; yet he feels it more important to feed his mind and spirit. He secures a job on the Concord railroad as "under-ticket-agent at a station" that gives him additional time for his love of scanning the sky. With the insurance money he buys the telescope in spite of earlier warnings from his narrator-friend. Brad's reply to his friend's question of "what do you want with one of those blame things?" expresses far more than the reason: "Don't call it blamed; there isn't anything / More blameless in the sense of being less / A weapon in our human fight" (p. 177). Brad's desire for knowledge and truth in order to make sense of his world is admirable.

The narrator rationalizes that if he "counted people out / For the least sin," there would soon be "no one left to live with." Comparing Brad to the thief who is not kept from coming to the church suppers, the narrator decides it "wouldn't do to be too hard



on Brad / About his telescope" (p. 178). This forgiving spirit causes Brad to invite the narrator over to have a look at the stars. So, while most of the earth-oriented townspeople mull over the incident and expend sympathy on the "good old-timer" (p. 178) of a house, the narrator-friend visits at the railroad station to view the universe through that new telescope. He enjoys talking to a man he cannot help but admire. The frequent visits make their friendship closer; on one all-night vigil the narrator remembers that they "said some of the best things we ever said" (p. 179)--although the reader is never told what those things are.

Looking "up the brass barrel, velvet black inside," Brad and his friend see evening stars that vary "in their hue from red to green" (p. 179). Because the instrument splits each star in "two or three," it is "christened the Star-splitter." It makes the faraway seem near and intriguing. The poem concludes by the narrator's practical questions of "where are we? / Do we know any better where we are" now than when Brad stood with his lantern on the rock-soiled farm to look at the sky without a telescope? Although the narrator obviously enjoys Brad's friendship and his interests, he is nagged by the impracticality of the telescope. "It's a star-splitter

if there ever was one / And ought to do some good if  
splitting stars / 'Sa thing to be compared with  
splitting wood" (p. 179). The implicit suggestion is  
that both activities are important and warrant time  
and energy. The fact that one does not find answers  
or make any more progress than he had without the  
telescope is irrelevant; it is the daring to stretch  
one's mind beyond what many would consider insurmount-  
able hindrances that is important.

The poem begins and ends with the "smoky lantern  
chimney," an obvious symbol for man's incomplete knowl-  
edge. As Lafe in "A Hundred Collars" enjoys viewing  
the countryside, Brad lives to satisfy a curiosity  
about the heavens. He gives up the lantern for a  
telescope; he prefers planets to plants. Echoing in  
practice the advice from the young man of the Stark  
clan in "The Generations of Men," Brad too believes  
that "what counts is the ideals" (p. 80). This vision-  
ary is undaunted by difficulties, unperturbed by public  
opinion, and undeterred from following his dream even  
if with an imperfect telescope that splits each star  
into two or three. Remaining loyal, his friend learns  
much about Brad.

This dialogue is an excellent example of Frost's  
ability to synthesize a variety of personal experiences  
to make art. During the poet's sophomore year at

Lawrence High School in 1889, he developed a close friendship with an older senior, Carl Burell. Reading Carl's book Our Place Among the Infinities by British astronomer Richard A. Proctor was only a beginning. Frost began a lifetime study of stars--names, positions, movements--and soon bought his own telescope.<sup>18</sup> Almost twenty years later during a six-weeks' stay for his health with the Lynch family during the early fall, 1907, he was told of a neighbor and relative of John Lynch who had actually burned down his hotel for the insurance money. In the incident the real man had no plan to use the money for a telescope. The actual hotel-burning occurred not far from the Lynch farm in Bethlehem;<sup>19</sup> the poem's setting is in an adjoining town called Littleton. Years later, writing the dialogue in 1920 or 1921,<sup>20</sup> Frost used his artistic skill to transmute the disassociated events of the past into a perfect whole for the poem.

A Jewish rabbi friend for whom Frost once "preached" in his synagogue at Cincinnati on October 10, 1946,

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), pp. 88-92.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, pp. 342-44.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Gould, Robert Frost: The Aim Was Song (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1964), p. 218.

wrote after the poet's death about the abundant imagery of stars in Frost's poems that often surprised astronomers in its preciseness.

Frost employed the star symbol to communicate the ideals of living in which he believed. . . . He believed that we should live with a certain height of aim, the calm of courage, the poise of a man who is self-possessed, who values the worth of incorruptibility. Frost sees in the stars the suggestion of the light of reason and common sense,<sup>21</sup> . . . as well as endurance and commitment.

All his life Frost knew darkness and sadness and was familiar with his own "desert places"; yet he turned away from despair and doom and toward affirmation and aspiration. It comes as no surprise when Reginald Cook informs the reader that two of Frost's favorite poems were Shakespeare's sonnet 116 with its "star to every wandering bark, / Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken" and Keats's "Bright Star!"<sup>22</sup>

The philosophy implied in the poem shows the influence of William James, who argued that man lives in a world of flux and paradox in which opposing

<sup>21</sup> Victor E. Reichert, "The Faith of Robert Frost," in Frost: Centennial Essays I, ed. Committee on Frost Centennial (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1974), p. 425.

<sup>22</sup> Reginald Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (1958; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), p. 198.

truths at various times hold true. Part of man's task must be his ability to assess his capacities and to recognize his limitations, one of which is his inability to attain absolute truth. This poem, Marjorie Cook points out, shows "an acceptance" of these limitations and the inherent necessity to fight on. Man "must struggle--decide on worthy goals, take the risks, resist destructive and opposing forces by trying to keep them in balance."<sup>23</sup> This poem generates admiration for the man who asks unanswerable questions, who seeks knowledge. The stars become the symbols of that knowledge. The dialogue also points out the friendship of two men whose ideas of attaining one's goals differ but who find the goal of looking at stars more compelling than their individual differences. The narrator's developing friendship with Brad, whom the townspeople ridicule for his actions, focuses on matters that supersede the earthy. Not only are these friends appreciative of the universe's mysteries, but they also understand each other--even speaking "the literal to inspire / The understanding of a friend" (p. 19).

<sup>23</sup> Marjorie Cook, "Acceptance in Frost's Poetry: Conflict as Play," in Frost: Centennial Essays II, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1976), pp. 224-26.

Another dialogue that shows two friends who have a growing, deepening relationship has the unusual title: "A Fountain, A Bottle, A Donkey's Ears, and Some Books." Two friends who enjoy hiking and mountain-climbing start out one day to see the "solid mica mountain" belonging to Old Davis. However, the narrator begs instead to find the "stone baptismal font outdoors" left on Kinsman where "the early Mormons made a settlement" before moving west (p. 212). The guide does not want to look for the fountain because he has forgotten where it is. Nevertheless, the two start out to make "a day of it out of the world. / Ascending to descend to reascend" (p. 214).

Instead of taking the narrator to a fountain, the guide takes him to the imprint of the famous bottle which is really a "cliff stained by vegetation from above, / A likeness to surprise the thrilly tourist" (p. 214). Unimpressed, the narrator notes that the bottle is empty; philosophically the guide, Old Davis, replies, "So's everything" (p. 214). The guide wants to go to the place where "two converging slides, the avalanches, / On Marshall, look like donkey's ears" (p. 214), but his friend is not interested. Insisting the fountain is what he wants, the narrator is accused of not liking nature: "All you like is

books" (p. 215). The guide decides, "Well, then, right here is where I show you books" (p. 215).

So down the mountain they come to a road the narrator welcomes, as he says, "for the chance to lave my shoes / In dust once more" (p. 215). At the end of a mile's hike is a deserted dwelling; like two curious schoolboys, they enter through a broken window. Then comes the introduction to Clara Robinson who used to live in the house; as a bedridden poetess, she "wrote her things in bed" and then had them published.

"Uncomfortably on crunching glass," they go to the attic to get her books. They find "Books, I should say!"--enough to "stock a village library" but all of one kind. "Boys and bad hunters" have shattered the glass inward but have missed doing damage to the books of poetry because they could not find out "what to do to hurt a poem" (p. 216). Here and there books lie scattered all over the room.

Each man picks a book "fresh / In virgin wrapper from deep in the box" and begins to read--"Both either looking for or finding something" (p. 217). Here again is epitomized the unique experience of friends with similar interests who do not need to resort to conversation. They are captivated by words of the poetess. The book of verses becomes symbolic for the

seekings of two poetically inclined friends as were the stars in "The Star-Splitter." Into this peaceful, quiet scene "the attic wasps" go "missing by like bullets"--one of Frost's most powerful lines. The analogy of wasps and bullets is an unusual one, although both are instruments of danger and potential pain. The intrusion of reality into aesthetic pre-occupation is not unusual. "Missing" suggests the wasps were more disturbed than angered to attack. At any rate, reality jars the men from their musings, and they head home.

The concluding meditation by the narrator emphasizes his pain that Clara's books were rejected. He assures himself that equal to his joy in having a copy of the poems is the joy of the poetess. By taking his copy he is accepting her offer to view the world as she once saw it. In his imagination he thinks she sighs and feels the tug of a fellow poet, a friend who will listen to her voice with appreciation. He will read and ponder, as did another about the ovenbird, "what to make of a diminished thing" (p. 120).

As with so many of his dialogues, this one is based on an actual friendship and series of mountain-climbing experiences Frost had beginning in the summer of 1915 in Franconia, New Hampshire, with a poet,



Raymond Holden. Holden had withdrawn from Princeton in disgust over required courses during his senior year; he became a regular visitor at the Frost farm and became well acquainted with the entire family at all their activities. In 1919 he returned with two additions: a wife and a substantial inheritance from his grandfather. Buying the "uphill half" of Frost's fifty-acre farm for \$2,500, more than double what Frost had paid, Holden built a house and became closer friends with the Frosts.<sup>24</sup>

Holden's "Reminiscences" includes an explanation of what formed the basis for this poem. On the walk through the "valleys of Grafton County and over its mountains" Holden and Frost talked of the legendary temple the Mormons had built in a forest somewhere in that state. "Robert and I never took a walk without the sometimes spoken and sometimes tacit understanding that we were looking for that altar. We never found it." Holden observes that the dialogue has the temple on Mount Kinsman, but he wrote,

I never heard Robert in conversation be as definite [on this point] as he is in the poem. In any case, neither we nor anyone else have [sic] ever found it.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, The Years of Triumph, pp. 137-39.

<sup>25</sup> Raymond Holden, "Reminiscences," as quoted in Thompson, The Years of Triumph, pp. 563-64.

Frost's agility is again evident in his incorporation of his own actual experiences into substantial poetic art. A genuine relationship with a poet-friend forms the foundation for a poetic friendship in a poem.

Success in having friends is partly the result of genuine interest in and attention to the cultivation of those friendships. One of Frost's long-time friends from early teaching days, Sidney Cox, thinks Frost understands people and is able to incorporate this understanding into his writing. This is possible

. . . because he has the sincerity and courage to know himself, because he likes people, and because he is a searcher after truths; by reason of those qualifications he can put himself almost completely into the emotional and moral vortices in the hollow of which even simple lives are swirled, and can therefore discern the relationships between overt motions and utterance, and inner desires, fears, thoughts, and purposes. Intense, imaginative sympathy suffuses the poems of people. He always cares.<sup>26</sup>

Frost once advised Burrhus Frederic Skinner about some stories: "I want you to care. I don't want you to be academic about it."<sup>27</sup> That young senior at Hamilton College in the Class of 1926 rejected both his literary

<sup>26</sup> Sidney Cox, "The Sincerity of Robert Frost," in Recognition, pp. 158-59.

<sup>27</sup> "To Mr. Skinner," 7 April 1926, Letter 257, Selected Letters of Robert Frost, pp. 326-27.

inclinations and Frost's advice. Instead he became a psychologist, a controversial behaviorist for whom the emotional concerns were irrelevant.

The dialogue showing the closest, deepest friendship between two friends involves a tragic accident. One has to read all of "The Self-Seeker" before he sees that the poem's title is a deliberate irony. Initially such a title suggests egotism and selfishness, but William R. Evans clarifies:

We must seek out our true selves before we can deal with others. The self-seeker is the self-reliant man willing to search himself out, even if his discoveries are unpleasant.<sup>28</sup>

This dialogue is the journey of a man into himself and the account of two loving friends who desire to help.

Willis, one friend who wants to help, visits his injured friend, called the "Broken One." An accident in the box factory has seriously injured the friend's legs and feet, but the doctor thinks the victim will eventually be able to "hobble." Lying in bed in Mrs. Corbin's boarding house, the Broken One explains to Willis that his coat caught in the shaft; it was as

<sup>28</sup> William R. Evans, "A Literary Friendship: Robert Frost and Carl Burrell," in Frost: Centennial Essays I, p. 516.

he "rode it out" that his "legs got their knocks against the ceiling" (p. 93) before the machine's belt could be stopped.

It is quickly clear that the Broken One, helpless in bed, is putting up a brave front in the conversation. Knowing that the factory continues busily without him, he is nervous as he waits for the company lawyer to visit for a settlement. The Broken One ignores Willis' protestations that he is about to "do something foolish" by accepting the mere five hundred dollars to pay the doctor's bill (p. 95). The only alternative the victim sees is to fight; he does not wish to fight but only to "get settled . . . and know the worst, / Or best" (p. 95). He will have a partial job since the firm has promised him all the shooks, units of wood used in assembling a box, he wants to nail at home. Willis reminds the Broken One how far-reaching will be the changes in his life because of his injury. Willis and the Broken One love botanizing; Willis knows his friend had dreams of writing a book on the "flora of the valley." The Broken One perceives his loss in terms of "the friends it [the book] might" have brought him (p. 95). The sound of the bell prepares the second scene.

Willis brings up the Boston lawyer to the Broken One's room as well as a "little barefoot girl" named

Anne, a shy child the victim has befriended and taken botanizing. Seeing Anne, the Broken One ignores the lawyer and seems pleased to have a distraction from the dreaded business. Anne hides two Ram's Horn orchids bashfully behind her dress and makes her injured friend guess what she has brought. The Broken One is deeply touched and pleased not only by what she has brought but also by what she left behind. From their conversation it is clear she has learned her lessons well from this older friend and left some flowers behind for next year as well as seed "for the backwoods woodchuck" (p. 97). Unable to go botanizing now, the Broken One declares, "She's going to do my scouting in the field . . . / And by a river bank for water flowers." His highest compliment to the shy child is his sensitive portrayal of her nature: "Anne has a way with flowers." Then he explains: "she goes down on one knee / And lifts their faces by the chin to hers / And says their names, and leaves them where they are" (p. 98). Here is a special friendship between a man and a child based on their common love for nature.

The lawyer has little time for this interruption of his busy schedule. Anne is ushered out, her flowers are placed in a pitcher, and the documents take center stage. Willis seats himself on the bed to read the

documents to his sick friend in order to keep him from signing them unread. So angered at the small compensation for the great loss, Willis crumples the documents and shouts:

The sin is  
Accepting anything before he knows  
Whether he's ever going to walk again,  
It smells to me like a dishonest trick.  
(p. 100)

Willis and the lawyer start to argue, but the Broken One refuses to have it: "Go outdoors if you want to fight. Spare me. / When you come back, I'll have the papers signed" (p. 100). Willis angrily leaves.

The quick conclusion is the Broken One's gentle handling of the antagonists. "Willis," he says, "bring Anne back with you when you come. Yes. Thanks for caring" (p. 100). To the lawyer he apologizes, "Don't mind Will: he's savage. / He thinks you ought to pay me for my flowers" (p. 100). Knowing the Boston lawyer does not understand, the Broken One sends him away to catch that train. Finally, alone, the sick man flings his arms around his face to block out the physical and emotional pain this tragedy has pressed upon him. Thus begins his journey to find himself, to see who he is, what his motivations are, and what is of supreme importance in life. Two friends wish to help, but it is a journey the Broken One must

take alone as he searches his soul for answers. Without agile feet a man's life is vastly curtailed. Earlier he observed that "Pressed into service means pressed out of shape" (p. 98); perhaps the accident has shown him things about himself heretofore unacknowledged. Now that he is unable to serve as a whole man in the work force, he has sufficient time to think about the things previously relegated only to spare hours. He may find a more satisfactory solution than the present moment offers. He is a man whose nature studies were self-generated works of love; he will find an alternative answer before he gives up his love of nature. Frost once wrote in a book of poems for John Doyle, "The best good is always self inspired."<sup>29</sup>

Two kinds of friends support the Broken One in his trauma that day. Willis worries over the practical realities of an injured man's future and the proper compensation for feet lost on the job. Willis thinks that the Broken One is not practical enough for his own good in taking a quick settlement because he does not enjoy business transactions. The lawyer certainly represents the heartless business society that Willis wishes to keep from his friend. Anne worries because her good friend is sick and unable to

<sup>29</sup> Doyle, p. 225.

go botanizing with her; so she brings him special flowers to show her love. Representing the Broken One's first love, these flowers interjected into a business scene are typical of Frost's juxtaposition of the ugly and the beautiful, the material and the spiritual, the real and the ideal. Such conflicting elements of life are all present in that room that day. Both Willis and Anne want to do something for the Broken One because he is their friend, and they want the best for him. Their presence and loving relationships will make his future choices easier. The Broken One knows they care enough to take the place of his mangled feet, yet he knows he must do for himself.

Once again Frost has stored up incidents, for seventeen years, from the past to shape into a work of art in this dialogue. It was during Frost's delayed honeymoon in the summer of 1896 that his friend Carl Burell taught Rob and Elinor their love of botanizing for orchids in the bogs.<sup>30</sup> It was during that vacation that a serious accident occurred much like the one described in the poem, an accident nearly costing Carl's life. Frost was a "witness to the scene in which Carl was paid a relatively small sum of money

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, pp. 216-19.



by an insurance representative" before anyone could really determine how badly injured Carl might be. Although amputation was not necessary and Carl regained some use of his feet, he was so badly crippled that he always limped thereafter.<sup>31</sup> Frost's own acute agony over the accident reveals itself in the poem. Although the poet incorporates a sardonic humor in lines such as the one in which the Broken One is described as selling his feet for "five hundred for the pair" (p. 93), the basic tone is sorrowful and deeply compassionate. The real-life friendship of a man such as Carl influenced Frost all his life.

Some observations about all six of these dialogues are in order. Four of them concern friendships between men. The two that incorporate feminine characters--"Snow" and "The Self-Seeker"--reveal more complex emotional aspects in the relationships of friends. All the dialogues relate to some specific incident that brings change, an altered view of life, a new approach to things. From the neighbor Helen and Fred Cole know merely from sight and gossip, there is a steady progression of friendships between men at work--"The Code" and "The Ax-Helve"--and friends whose relationships grow through incidents in "The Star-Splitter"

<sup>31</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 220.

and "A Fountain, A Bottle, A Donkey's Ears, and Some Books." The last dialogue shows the relationship of friends at its closest and deepest in the face of tragic circumstances. It is possible that the Broken One may need Frost's reminder in "Revelation" that "all who hide too well away / Must speak and tell us where they are" (p. 19).

From these six dialogues written over a period of twenty years there is evidence that Frost understood the subject of friendship. He was personally cautious and often suspicious of people. Before his fame in England he felt uncared for and unacknowledged, without friends. Those who did become close--Sidney Cox, John Bartlett, and later Edward Thomas and Louis Untermeyer--learned of Frost's whims, jealousies, and erratic moods. The coming of fame, however, so changed his own image and so enhanced his own personality that the public found it hard to believe Frost could have ever been anything less than the kind, genial New Englander he portrayed. Frost was aware of the importance of friends. Less than a month before his death he told Robert Peterson in an interview, "Money and fame don't impress me much. About all that impresses me is human kindness and warm relationships

with good friends."<sup>32</sup> He had learned his lessons through almost every tragedy that life can bring.

Learning to be a friend and acquiring friends are sometimes slow, circuitous processes. Frost understood this when he talked of people's inclinations to hide "behind light words that tease and flout" while all the time crying out for someone to "really find us out." If it is necessary to "speak the literal to inspire / The understanding of a friend" (p. 19), we usually comply because we are social beings who need someone with whom we can talk and share. This social aspect is developed early within the family structure. What a person learns from his relationship as a child growing up in a family usually directs his later life. Family relationships in Frost's dialogues will be examined in the next chapter.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Peterson, "It's Hard to Get into This World and Hard to Get Out of It," 10 Dec. 1962, in Interviews, p. 295.

## CHAPTER IV

### RELATIONSHIPS OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Frost's four dialogues showing the relationships of parents and children were written and published by 1923. Although other poems before and after that time show parents' concern or children's insight into adults' ways, Frost wrote less frequently about the parent-child relationship than those of strangers and friends, husbands and wives. The relationship of the child and parent experiences daily tensions within the home that can make that relationship either sweet or savage. Differences in viewpoint, jealousies of each other, and misunderstandings between family members make the responsibility of being a good parent and the learning to be a good child especially difficult tasks demanding emotional stability and great patience.

Two of these four dialogues relate fathers' relationships with children: "The Bonfire" of 1916 and "Maple" of 1923. As a father Frost felt keenly the responsibility of helping his children discover new experiences. On the Derry farm where three of them

had been born and where all four of them had learned to walk and talk, he gave them much of his time. In all seasons he spent time with them building snowmen and making a path for ice sliding in winter, botanizing and swimming in the spring and summer. He helped them learn the positions and names of stars, taught them the names of trees and flowers, and helped them learn to read the tracks of animals in the snow. Because he and Elinor had taught, they felt justified in keeping their young children out of public schools to be taught at home. Although this teaching was usually made into a game, Rob and Elinor tried to help the children understand the differences between right and wrong.<sup>1</sup>

One of their special games each spring was raking up dead leaves in the yard and gathering dead branches for burning. They always built their bonfire in the middle of the "nearer pasture"--so Thompson locates it--"across the road from the house." When the heap was higher than their heads, they were ready for father to put the match to dry grass in the bottom. It was slow to gather momentum through the wet branches, but when the flames started to climb, the roar of

<sup>1</sup> Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph 1915-1938 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), p. 497.

the fire was frightening. Frost explained this activity as necessary to help the children overcome their fear of fire.<sup>2</sup>

The spring bonfire of 1905 that got away furnished the basis for the later dialogue "The Bonfire." A breeze pushed the flame down to the long dead grass beside the road; almost immediately flames raced toward the house. The frightened children were sure only the heroic efforts of their father had saved the house and barn from destruction. He had used his old workcoat to beat out the fire while they had helped douse smoldering spots with pails of water from Hyla Brook. Never had they seen such a bonfire; they were awed that so much of the pasture was suddenly black. Thompson quotes the oldest Frost daughter, six-year-old Lesley, as writing in a little notebook that the experience was "ickstrodnerly icsiting."<sup>3</sup>

The dialogue itself, written ten or eleven years later, manifests the almost irresponsible, reckless tone of a father telling his children, "Let's go up the hill and scare ourselves / By setting fire to all the brush" they have piled. He is quite specific that

<sup>2</sup> Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 301.

<sup>3</sup> Lesley Frost, as quoted in Thompson, The Early Years, p. 301.

they should not wait for rain "to make it safe" but deliberately chooses to burn the pile so people will see it and talk (p. 129). It may be dangerous letting "wild fire loose," he carefully explains, for once set, the fire cannot be recalled. The children wonder if the fire will scare him. He acknowledges the fire will, but that cannot be helped. Describing for them the roar as it mixes "sparks with stars" and makes the trees "stand back in wider circle" (p. 130), he assures them he can usually control the flames. Then he relates to them another incident one April when a gust put the "flame tip-down and dabbed the grass / Of over-winter with the least tip-touch" so that it "blackened instantly." That color conjures two images for him: "But the black spread like death on the ground, / And I think the sky darkened with a cloud / Like winter and evening coming on together" (p. 131). The connotations of "black . . . like death" and of a "sky darkened . . . like winter and evening" are strong with both physical anguish and emotional dread.

Then the father reveals to the children his own fear on that other day when he told himself he could not stand the "heat so close in." But he remembers the woods on fire because of his match and remembers that people turned out to fight for him--"that held him" (p. 131). The victory caused two responses:

neighbors returning from town were amazed at so much space "spread coal-black" in the hour since they passed; he was in such a state of shock that he wondered how his weariness allowed him to walk "so light on air in heavy shoes" (p. 132). The children ask, "If it scares you, what will it do to us?" He answers tersely, candidly, "Scare you" (p. 132).

At this point the poem becomes a metaphor for more than a spring bonfire. "But if you shrink from being scared, / What would you say to war if it should come?" Naively they answer, "Oh, but war's not for children--it's for men." Then the father lectures them that "your mistake was ours" in such thinking. Angered about the zeppelin bombings in England, the poet allows the father to explain. The truth is that war has come "through clouds at night with droning speed / Further o'erhead than all but stars and angels" and has found out the children in ships and in the towns (p. 132). Sadly, the father declares, "War is for everyone, for children too. / I wasn't going to tell you and I mustn't." But, of course, he has; he concludes that "the best way is to come uphill with me / And have our fire and laugh and be afraid" (p. 133).

It is not difficult to see the poet's analogy of this bonfire and a nation that piles the brush of past



misunderstandings high and decides to burn it. The pride of one nation doing as it pleases--letting "wild fire loose" (p. 130)--regardless of damaging effects upon others is clear to "both the free and not so free" (p. 130). At the beginning, the fire can be stopped; if allowed to burn, it reaches into the heavens and sweeps round "with a flaming sword" to many places. If a small gust of enflamed emotions comes unexpectedly, the resulting destruction may be worse than the "black death." As in the actual fire where the brook barrier contains the flames, war spreads over land more quickly and unchecked unless someone is willing to sacrifice to stop its spread (p. 131). It takes only a small spark to ignite not only a bonfire but also a war among the dry grass of men's vanities and jealousies. The war leaves no one unscathed; children and adults suffer its aftermath.

The trusting relationship between the children and the father is the basis for the father's urging them uphill to have their bonfire, regardless of its results. Thus, through games and playacting they learn the broader lessons of life's realities. If they can experience fear of fire with the father's secure presence near, they will learn a valuable lesson for the future when he is unavailable. Frost

often relies on the benefits of playacting in his poetry to clarify one's real feelings. Frost's poem "Directive" suggests playacting as an avenue for discovery. There the narrator asserts that "if you're lost enough to find yourself," look in "the children's house of make-believe." It stands next to "a house in earnest," which is the real house mirrored in the playhouse (p. 378), but it is in the playhouse that the person is changed.<sup>4</sup> In this experience of playacting one learns best what may never be forgotten. So in lighting a bonfire, although recognizing the potential for destruction, one is helped to cope with fear by facing fear.

"The Bonfire" was first published in The Seven Arts of November, 1916, and then included in Frost's third book, Mountain Interval, the same year.<sup>5</sup> Both annoyed and angered by the war, Frost wrote to his good friend Sidney Cox the summer before Frost returned to America, "The war is an ill wind to me." He explained that if he

were younger now and not the father of four--  
well all I say is, American or no American,

<sup>4</sup> Stephen D. Warner, "The Control of Play and the Play of Control in Robert Frost's Poetry," in Frost: Centennial Essays II, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1976), p. 265.

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 557.

I might decide that I ought to fight the Germans simply because I know I should be afraid to.<sup>6</sup>

Returning to America early in 1915, Frost and his family experienced the fear of war as they sailed in convoy, guarded by British destroyers which combed the waters with searchlights for mines and submarines.<sup>7</sup> Yet this poem is one of Frost's very few that directly refer to the war.

The father and children's relationship in the poem is enhanced by their learning to face both facts and fears. He is a wise father who prepares his children for the realities of life. In another dialogue the father's relationship with his daughter starts out well, but his refusal to face the facts soon causes alienation. This dialogue is also intricately bound to the Frost family experiences. They moved rather frequently, but the move from Franconia, New Hampshire, to South Shaftsbury, near Amherst, in late 1920 was partly on account of their daughter, Lesley. She was sent to New York for the summer to work as a bookseller and be "away for her own safety," as Frost later told Thompson. Raymond Holden, although

<sup>6</sup> "To Sidney Cox," 20 August 1914, Letter 86, Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964) p. 131.

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, pp. 473-74.

married, had developed too great a fondness for Lesley; this fondness was causing estrangement from his wife. Upon Lesley's return that fall, the family moved to the Peleg Cole house away from Raymond Holden.<sup>8</sup>

One night Frost and Elinor were talking of their children's names and particularly the numerous times Carol's teachers asked if his name should not be Carl. Lesley, too, whose name came from Burns's "bonnie Lesley," was often assumed to be a boy.<sup>9</sup> Out of the evening's musings came the dialogue "Maple," a romantic story of a girl named after the maple tree by her dying mother.

The poem opens with a conflict between teacher and parent when the child comes home questioning if her name is Mabel or Maple: ". . . teacher told the school / There's no such name" as Maple (p. 179). With her father's explanation the child can rebuke her teacher the next day with emphatic assurances that "Teachers don't know as much / As fathers about children" (p. 180). Her mother named her Maple shortly after the baby had come "this way into life" as the mother went "the other out of life." Although he says, "I don't know what she wanted it to mean," the

<sup>8</sup> Thompson, The Years of Triumph, p. 145.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Gould, Robert Frost: The Aim Was Song (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1964), pp. 219-20.

father promises the child, "I will tell you all I know / About the different trees . . . and your mother" someday (p. 180). At the time he is aware that these two promises are "dangerous self-arousing words to sow"; he must remember to fulfill the promises. The poet's fondness for definitive statement appears when he forces two complete sentences into one line: "She would forget it. She all but forgot it" (p. 180). Frost's technique is supportive of meaning here in the slowing effect upon the reader.

Years later as a teenager Maple stares into a mirror and ponders the "strangeness" of her name-- "This difference from other names" that "made people notice it--and notice her." She considers other names such as Lesley, Carol, Irma, and Marjorie (the names of Frost's children) that "signified nothing" (p. 181). Because her father does not tell her its meaning, she begins to seek for answers by looking at her mother's picture and even finding a bookmark of a reddish maple leaf in the Bible. In her excitement after reading the marked pages about a "wave offering," she loses the place (p. 181). This bookmark is the first clue to her later discovery. Then she read but did not understand the Old Testament rules. Mosaic sacrificial offerings were made for communion with Jehovah and for propitiatory pardons from sins. The wave offerings

included both bloody and bloodless sacrifices and were so-called because of the manner of their presentation. Listed under purposes and kinds in this category were a private thank offering and a jealousy offering, based especially on Numbers 5:25.<sup>10</sup>

The New English Bible translates candidly both problem and solution in chapter 5. If a married woman is unfaithful to her husband, or only if "a fit of jealousy comes over a husband which causes him to suspect his wife, when she is not in fact defiled" (Numbers 5:15), in either case the husband brings the woman and a prescribed offering to the priest to "set her before the Lord" (Numbers 5:16). From the burned barley offering the priest makes a drink of truth water with the following effect. If she is guilty she will have a miscarriage or "untimely birth, and her name will become an example in adjuration among her kind" (Numbers 5:27). If she is pure, "then her innocence is established and she will bear her child" (Numbers 5:28).<sup>11</sup> If Maple's father had, indeed, in "a fit of jealousy" suspected his wife of unfaithfulness and then saw her bear the child, a sign of innocence, he would find it hard to admit to the daughter

<sup>10</sup> Merrill C. Unger, Unger's Bible Dictionary (Chicago: Moody, 1957), p. 950.

<sup>11</sup> The New English Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 151-52.

his error. The maple leaf that furnished the name was the tangible expression to the dying mother that her innocence had been established and vindicated according to the rules on the pages of that ancient law.

When Maple is a young woman, her search for self leads her to "city schooling" and secretarial skills that find her work for an executive in New York. In the middle of dictation one day, he interjects: "Do you know you remind me of a tree-- / A maple tree?" When he discovers her name is Maple, not Mabel as he thought, they are both shocked that "he should have divined / Without the name her personal mystery" (p. 182). Soon thereafter they are married.

Her quest for meaning sends the two of them seeking answers. Her husband's perceptiveness offers three explanations for their lack of success. First, he suggests that the mystery "may have been / Something between your father and your mother / Not meant for us at all." Second, it may have been "something a father couldn't tell a daughter / As well as could a mother." Finally, "it may have been their one lapse into fancy." Here he cautions her: "'Twould be too bad to make him sorry for / By bringing it up to him when he was too old," especially since they both feel the father holds them off "unnecessarily" (p. 183).

During several autumn vacations the couple observe maples, always the straight-standing trees, not the maples with buckets catching sap. They discover two maple trees of significance--one that an autumn fire had run through "and swept of leathern leaves, but left the bark / Unscorched, unblackened, even, by any smoke" (p. 184). The other is a maple in a glade "Standing alone with smooth arms lifted up, / And every leaf of foliage she'd worn / Laid scarlet and pale pink about her feet" (p. 184). The ability of the maple trees to survive clean and pure in spite of fire and weather is an apt analogy of the mother's purity and the "word she left" to bid the child "Be a good girl--be like a maple tree" (p. 180).

These clues reinforce the couple's feeling that they are near discovery, "but lacking faith in anything to mean / The same at different times to different people" (p. 184), they stop the search. Now twenty-five, Maple decides: "We would not see the secret if we could now: / We are not looking for it any more" (p. 185). The deliberate decision to look no more is made partly because Maple defers to her father and partly because she cannot bear to face the fact that her lovely mother, mostly idealized for her through a fading picture, could have ever been suspected



of infidelity. The one on trial is not the mother but the father.

The poet never reveals the meaning of the mother's whim in naming Maple. Gould relates that after the poem's publication in 1923 an order of nuns wrote Frost to ask if the girl was called Maple because she was so sweet.<sup>12</sup> The name and its secret meaning ultimately alienate the daughter and the father. The fact that he does not keep his promise of long ago to give her answers complicates the mystery further; the past becomes a burden that hinders good communication between them. Maple's husband saw three possibilities; they appear to merge into one and explain the father's silence.

The narrator's conclusion is solemn: "A name with meaning could bring up a child, / Taking the child out of the parents' hands." Then he issues his admonition: "Better a meaningless name, I should say / As leaving more to nature and happy chance" (p. 185). A name without meaning would be less likely to generate a crusade for discovery. He echoes the father's passionate cry: "Name children some names and see what you do" (p. 185). An innocent, but suspected, wife bears a child, vindicating her own character, but dies.

<sup>12</sup> Gould, p. 220.

Losing his wife in childbirth is a heavy burden for the father; he continues to live with the innocent child whose name symbolizes for him his own weakness and lack of trust in a pure wife. His broken promises result in a broken relationship with his daughter because the right words of explanation never come. Maple must forever feel it unfair to have "a name to carry for life and never know / The secret of" (p. 183). She probably interprets her father's not trusting her enough to tell her all as a lack of love; what could have been a warm and lovely relationship becomes strained and cool.

In Frost's dialogues fathers are not the only ones who succeed or fail in developing an affectionate, wholesome relationship with their children. Mothers, who usually are physically with the children more than the fathers are, have their own kinds of strengths and weaknesses that can greatly influence the family atmosphere. The other two dialogues showing parent-child relationships concentrate on mothers and the powerful results of their maternal roles.

When Frost first went to the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, to be Poet-in-Residence and Fellow in Creative Arts in the fall of 1921, he was accompanied by daughter Lesley. They stayed in a yellow frame house under many trees with a Mrs. d'Ooge, a widow.

Although he characteristically called himself "Michigan's Idle Fellow," Frost was very busy. Within the first three months there he had written one of his most dramatic pieces in blank verse, "The Witch of Coös."<sup>13</sup> This work would later be termed by Randall Jarrell the "finest poem of its kind since Chaucer."<sup>14</sup>

One of a pair called "Two Witches," the dialogue "The Witch of Coös" refers to a county in the White Mountains and, as Frost once related to Harriet Monroe, came out of some "scattered experiences" and "a dream" he had had.<sup>15</sup> The dialogue is all direct conversation between a mother and her son except for the narrator's seven lines. The three opening ones state that the narrator stayed the night for shelter at a farm with a mother and son identified as "two old-believers" who do all the talking.

The poem presents not only a ghastly story of horror but also the relationship between the mother and her simple son, eager to protect his mother's reputation by keeping the family secret. He wants

<sup>13</sup> Gould, p. 224.

<sup>14</sup> Randall Jarrell, "The Other Frost," in Poetry and the Age (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> "To Harriet Monroe," from Olivia Howard Dunbar, A House in Chicago (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1947), as quoted by Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence (New York: Holt, 1960) p. 246.

to show off her abilities--"Mother can make a common table rear / And kick with two legs like an army mule" (p. 202)--but she is weary of such tricks. Her musings about what the dead know foreshadow her weariness with life by the end of the poem. Sensing a receptive listener, the son tells about rattling bones nailed behind an attic door. The mother assures the son, "We'll never let them [return to the cellar], will we, son?" (p. 203). The son explains, "I was a baby" (p. 203) that time forty years ago when the skeleton "carried itself like a pile of dishes" upstairs; this is the clue for the mother to continue the story.

Asleep in a cold room after her husband has gone up to bed, she is shaken out of her chair by strange sounds on the cellar stairs. Frightened but curious, she opens the door to see the thing with a "tongue of fire" along his upper teeth and smoke in the eye sockets. "He" comes with outstretched hand--"the way he did in life once"--but she knocks the hand off. It falls brittle to the floor (p. 204). Although she yells for her husband Toffile, he will not stir until she tells him it is "the cellar bones--out of the grave" (p. 205). They trap the skeleton behind a door leading to the attic, nail the door shut, and push the headboard of the bed against it. All through

the years these bones have stood perplexed, "Brushing their chalky skull with chalky fingers / With sounds like the dry rattling of a shutter" (p. 206).

As if this story is not sufficient, the mother unfolds another in the last twenty lines. Although she and her loyal son have always told people, "We never could find out whose bones they were," she now declares, "Yes, we could too, son. Tell the truth for once" (p. 206). She confesses it was the man her husband killed instead of her, and admits that how she helped dig the grave is a story "son knows." She accepts her son's surprise that after all these years she has finally ended the lie they kept "ready for outsiders." On this night she sighs, "I don't care enough to lie" any more; in fact, she is not sure why she or Toffile "ever cared" (p. 207). After so many years it is suddenly no longer important to keep the secret.

The horrible story from the witch-woman's point of view makes it hard to determine what is fact and what is overworked imagination as the poem alternates between the real and the unreal. There are humor (Toffile's jumping out of bed so quickly) and pathos (her promise to a dead husband to be cruel to the bones "for helping them be cruel to him"). As "old-believers," mother and son are aware they are different

from folks in town. Her speech with its informal colloquialisms and even the sing-song "Button, button, / Who's got the button" (p. 202) make her seem more commonplace than preternatural. Her speech, with what Brower calls its "nervous jerky rhythm,"<sup>16</sup> controls her story and creates its effect. A conjurer or sorcerer, like all "witches," she is an entertaining storyteller. The fact that she sees what others do not places her automatically outside the commonplace. This position Patricia Wallace identifies as the "estranged point of view" because the witch occupies both the "literal and the symbolic position of an outsider."<sup>17</sup>

It is Frost's juxtaposition of the colloquial, informal setting with the witch's fantastic power as revealed in her story that makes the poem intriguing. One keeps wondering: did she summon the bones for their escapade, or did the bones perform without her power? The fact is that, although she discusses them calmly, those bones continue to trouble and agitate her guilt. Is her confession of adultery and murder autobiographical or fiction? Her voiced concern to her son to "tell the truth for once" (p. 206) suggests

<sup>16</sup> Reuben Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 166-67.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Wallace, "The Estranged Point of View: The Thematics of Imagination in Frost's Poetry," in Frost: Centennial Essays II, ed. Jac Tharpe, p. 183.

her confession to be autobiographical. What appeared a comic supernatural account now turns to shock with this "truth" of her violation of a moral code by adultery and murder.

Concomitantly the reader is aware of how the witch-woman has controlled and manipulated her son through the years: "Son looks surprised to see me end a lie / We'd kept up all these years between ourselves" (p. 207). Whether through her authority as a mother or through her power as a witch, she has controlled his life so that, like the woman in "A Servant to Servants," he seems well on the way to an insanity fostered by his environment. Sergeant's reminder that "The witch was no ghost herself"<sup>18</sup> emphasizes the witch's role as a woman, a mother with unusual powers. Whatever has or has not happened, she forces the simple son to believe. Such a relationship between a parent and a forty-plus-year-old son is less than wholesome. This relationship may be as ghastly as her story. The immorality of violating a child's integrity by rearing him as an appendage to support her own security, either as a witch or a mother, may not shock society as much as adultery and murder do, but it is wrong. The son's life has now been robbed

<sup>18</sup> Sergeant, p. 442.

of its borrowed meaning by her exposé. An already shallow life has been considerably diminished.

The poem's conclusion, four lines given to the narrator, continues the puzzling mixture of the commonplace and the unreal. Although Frost in his own reading of this poem on the Library of Congress record stops with the witch's confession,<sup>19</sup> the narrator's comments are significant. We are told two things. First, the woman is still looking for the finger-bone "among the buttons . . . in her lap" (p. 207), a mixture of real and unreal elements. Second, the narrator verifies the name on the mailbox as "Toffile Lajway" as he attempts to bring some coherence into his night's experience. The name "Toffile," the Canadian-French corruption of "Theophile," meaning "beloved of God," is more nearly "Teufel-devil," according to Brower.<sup>20</sup> When one recalls the dictionary definition of a witch as "a woman supposedly having supernatural power by a compact with the devil or evil spirits" and the fact that this woman was married to a man with such a suggestive name, the reader is still perplexed about what in the story is commonplace and what is fantastic. For a truth, all the narrator can be sure of is that he stayed the night in a home occupied by a strange mother and son.

<sup>19</sup> Gould, p. 224.

<sup>20</sup> Brower, p. 169.



This powerful dialogue received Poetry's Levinson Prize of two hundred dollars in the fall of 1922.<sup>21</sup> It was also part of the New Hampshire volume of 1923, the book for which Frost received his first Pulitzer Prize.<sup>22</sup> This dialogue highlights Frost's skill in fusing not only the ordinary, commonplace situations of life but also the legends and superstitions of a community. The intriguing result of being unsure which is which lies not only in the magic of his lines but also in the complex characterization of the witch-woman.

Of the four dialogues concentrating on the relationships of parents and children the earliest written was "The Housekeeper," a poem describing also the relationship of a common-law marriage. Although he wrote the poem late at night in 1905 on the Derry farm, Frost never sent it to a magazine until eight years later in England when Ezra Pound purchased the right to publish it in his magazine, The Egoist, on January 15, 1914.<sup>23</sup> Frost had once considered calling the

<sup>21</sup> Sergeant, p. 254.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis P. Simpson, Chronicle of Events, Profile of Robert Frost (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1971), p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 442.

poem "Slack Ties," but before its publication in North of Boston later that year shifted the emphasis of the title to a person.<sup>24</sup>

"The Housekeeper" is about Estelle who, although the central character, never appears in the long dialogue. Estelle has come to John Hall's to do the housekeeping for her board and that of her mother. For fifteen years she has kept house and served as his common-law woman; now she has left him--run off to marry someone else. A neighbor, come to see John, hears the account from Estelle's mother. Estelle "thinks if it was bad to live with him, / It must be right to leave him" (p. 83), according to the mother. The confusing moral issue is further complicated by John's rationalization to the mother through the years: "Better than married ought to be as good / As married --that's what he has always said" (p. 84).

As in novels like Lord Jim, the principal event is already a fact when the poem opens. The burden of the work is an investigation of "Why?" and "What really happened?" Quickly the neighbor decides his offered help is worthless in the irrevocable changes at this house.

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 433.

In discussing the daughter, the mother tells much about herself. The mother is convinced that Estelle will come back to get her when the new couple is settled. The mother does not always agree with Estelle's actions: "I'm her mother-- / I can't talk to her, and Lord, if I could!" (p. 82). The neighbor wonders if Estelle let the situation of living outside marriage "worry her," whereas he observes the mother "stood the strain" of the awkward arrangement rather well. But she explains: ". . . I didn't always. / I didn't relish it along at first. / But I got wanted to it" (p. 87). Since talking did not change the situation, the mother simply grew accustomed to it, dependent as her condition made her. Although no witch, this mother is freakishly large. She mentions several times that she is too big to get out of her chair to let people in or out. Her sense of humor about her obesity causes her to wonder if she will be able to go with Estelle later since, she says, "I've been built in here like a big church organ" (p. 82). She sits and sews beads on slippers for others' dancing daughters.

The mother sees John more at fault than Estelle, of course. At first she makes only dire, solemn predictions: he will "let things smash," she thinks, and "sort of swear the time away." Her foremost

complaint is that John is "like a child. / I blame his being brought up by his mother" (p. 83). Ignoring the fact that Estelle could not take a job without taking her mother along, that mother sees no similarities in Estelle's also being brought up by a mother. To the mother John is "awful" because he has "dropped everything." She insists, "I never saw a man let family troubles / Make so much difference in his man's affairs" (p. 83). This behavior she sees as childish.

Then follow five pages that recount John's rash acts, irresponsible bargains, and lack of sensitivity to Estelle's feelings. All of the accusations about John relate to his mother's spoiling him and letting him have his own way. If he is crossed, he shouts and throws things. One by one the neighbor's assumptions about John as a rational man are exploded. Estelle and her mother seem to agree in the way they handle John; the two women fill "the purse" and "let him have money," not the other way around (p. 84). A poor farmer, John needs Estelle for outside work, but she does not mind. John's first love is his prize-winning hens for whom all three make allowances. He never sells any of the hens, but the women consider them "all expense," especially the fifty-dollar cock imported from London and paid for with money from the

mother's bead work. The mother often asks John to marry Estelle, but he refuses since their arrangement is fine; he thinks the mother is "too old to have grandchildren" anyway (p. 87).

The neighbor himself sees John's irresponsible actions as John returns, drops the reins, and turns "Doll out to pasture, rig and all" (p. 88) while he shouts in at the door for the neighbor to come out. Man to man, he asks naively, "What are they trying to do to me, these two?" (p. 89). The poem's last line expresses the ultimate in the mother's contempt for this insensitive man: "Who wants to hear your news, you--dreadful fool?" (p. 89). What she had been trying to tell him over fifteen years is now the news he is finally facing--that he has been rejected.

The mother believes that Estelle has run away because "the strain's been too much for her all these years" (p. 84). Recognizing the simple fact that "it's different with a man" (p. 84), the mother sees John's mistake in giving Estelle "time to think of something else" (p. 84). The two women have done things John's way, such as the precise way to carry the hens, because both were unsure of what "childishness he would . . . give way to" (p. 86). Because "he's boss," things go his way until this incident. Estelle may have simply reached the limit of enduring

his ways, whereas her mother, old and dependent, can more easily adjust to less than ideal conditions. Estelle has refused to acquiesce any longer. Psychologically, Estelle has suffered a loss of self-image. John's refusal to consider her important enough to marry, to be given his name and the security of marriage, has caused her to feel keenly the opinions of others who looked upon such an arrangement as living in sin. Although the mother explains that they have a few friends, those are not the same as New England community acceptance. When Estelle finds a man "who'd marry her straight out of such a mess" (p. 88), she leaves John for someone who wants her instead of merely her work. She also wants this man who offers her the security of his name. Her desire to have "nice things" and for those things "to be the best there are" (p. 85) explains another frustration of the fifteen years with John. Estelle may also be leaving her mother because she is weary of the burden of seeking her approval and feeling guilty when the approval is withheld.

The rotund, garrulous mother explains several times that John does not meet her ideals of how a man ought to act. Coddled by his mother, John is satisfied with the fifteen-year arrangement because he has no pressure or responsibility; he can do as he

pleases and still be cared for by two surrogate mothers. No doubt, the mother has often prevailed on Estelle to plead with John to marry her; then, even the mother asked him. Such a confused situation can come to no good. It is little wonder, then, that Estelle leaves at the first opportunity to escape pressures exerted by both John and her mother. The resulting alienation could have been expected, for a mother who seeks to direct the life of a grown daughter is in for deserved heartache.

This poem is one of the many Frost wrote about his neighbors in New Hampshire. Frost met John Hall at a poultry show in Amesburg, Massachusetts, in December, 1899; when he learned Hall lived not far from him, he arranged a visit. His surprise at the small, run-down farm as well as the common-law status of John's wife is reproduced almost identically in this dialogue. Thompson believes the poem contains a "relatively accurate characterization of John Hall."<sup>25</sup> This poem is one of the few in which Frost actually refers to a friend by his real name.<sup>26</sup>

It seems significant that three of the four dialogues about parent-children relationships recount unhappy, alienated situations. Very few of Frost's

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 553.

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, pp. 282-83.

other poems about children offer much evidence of warm, growing relationships. His writing on this subject reflects his own inadequacy to understand children and their needs. As a former teacher of psychology, he felt he had unintentionally failed his own children, of whom he often felt jealous. He was to suffer in later years from seeing one daughter become insane, one daughter die in childbirth, and his son commit suicide. The crushing tragedy to this father was to hear his one remaining child, Lesley, accuse him vehemently of causing the death of the mother and ruining the family. It was Lesley who resurrected his nagging doubt of many years that an artist ought never to marry and have a family.<sup>27</sup> Although she was later to praise Frost as a true artist and genius in the Foreword to the Family Letters of Robert and Elinor Frost, her personal relationship with her father was tense and strained.<sup>28</sup>

Fathers and mothers exert tremendous influence in the home. Their love, their standards, and their example help mold children's attitudes and lives. The potential for explosive situations exists daily

<sup>27</sup> Thompson, The Years of Triumph, pp. 496-97.

<sup>28</sup> Lesley Frost, Foreword, Family Letters of Robert and Elinor Frost, ed. Arnold Grade (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1972), p. x.



in the normal tension of several people living together in one household. Parental behavior toward children is often directly related to the quality of relationship between the husband and wife. It is this last, important relationship that we now turn to--lovers joined in marriage to face life together.

## CHAPTER V

### RELATIONSHIPS OF HUSBANDS AND WIVES

The most famous and most memorable of Frost's dialogues are those treating the complex relationships of husbands and wives: family units, as George Nitchie notes, "without dependent relatives or grown children."<sup>1</sup> Reuben Brower praises Frost for taking "the considerable risk of writing about the relation least easy to treat in poetry without sentimentality or irony"<sup>2</sup> and for succeeding so admirably with his married lovers. A major reason is that the lovers in his dialogues live in the same world of reality as do the readers. Richard Poirier thinks Frost "a great poet of marriage, maybe the greatest since Milton, and of the sexuality that goes with it."<sup>3</sup> To Frost love was passionate and private. On a walk with Sidney Cox in 1911 he remarked

<sup>1</sup> George W. Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1960), p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> Reuben A. Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 182.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Poirier, Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 22.

that Shakespeare could teach more about love than all the lecturers; even the bawdy passages help. "Love," he told Cox, "is an irresistible desire to be irresistibly desired."<sup>4</sup> Believing in the durability of both love and marriage, Frost believed the latter was to be with one person for a lifetime. The adventure of discovering who another is, how that one thinks, feels, and behaves, is a lifetime journey, "even to the edge of doom,"<sup>5</sup> as Shakespeare insisted in sonnet 116, Frost's favorite statement on marriage.

Each of the seven dialogues between husbands and wives studies a different moment in domestic life. Yet all concentrate on a common theme that Robert H. Sweenes calls "the need for visible love and effective communication between individuals who wish to bind their lives together."<sup>6</sup> This theme projects itself through portraits of couples who share love and understanding as well as through couples drifted apart and filled with anger and confusion. These seven dialogues

<sup>4</sup> Sidney Cox, A Swinger of Birches: A Portrait of Robert Frost (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1957), p. 143.

<sup>5</sup> William Shakespeare, Shakespeare: Major Plays and the Sonnets, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), p. 1056.

<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Sweenes, "Man and Wife: The Dialogues of Contraries in Robert Frost's Poetry," American Literature, 42 (1970), 364.

include both extremes revealed in three basic situations that husbands and wives encounter at some time in their marriage. How they are able to meet death, both within and outside the family, explains much about their individual characters as well as about their united stance as couples. Change, the vicissitudes that life brings to all people, places unusual tension upon the individual consciousness and great pressure upon the couple as a unit. As striking as these two sets of circumstances are, it is the third that shows the truest character of the husband and the wife, their depth of commitment, the strength of their love. If they can, in the day-by-day routine of life, enjoy being together and can communicate effectively to keep their love alive and growing, they stand as Frost's highest affirmation of Shakespeare's marriage of "true minds."

"Home Burial" is a tense dialogue that reveals how a husband and wife in love are pulled apart by grief over the death of their young son. Their true relationship spills out as they confront each other on the stairs. By the end of the dramatic scene, which Frost leaves in mid-sentence, both husband and wife are nearly inarticulate in their irritation at the mistakes of the other. The dialogue's title may also refer to the burial of their once loving relationship.

The poem reveals three stages of their relationship. The tense, awkward beginning of the poem is evidence that two lovers are at odds, that a wedge has been driven between them. Both husband, unnamed, and wife, Amy, are painfully aware that there is no common ground on what Elizabeth Sergeant calls "a stark peak of mutual loss."<sup>7</sup> The dialogue both begins and ends with the husband's trying to find that common ground. He is the one who sees her, starting down the stairs and looking back "at some fear" (p. 51), who begs her to talk to him, and who pleads to know "What is it you see?" (p. 51, l. 10). Richard Poirier argues convincingly against E. C. Lathem's emendations in the punctuation here. He insists that Frost's punctuation of a comma in line 10, instead of Lathem's more forceful question mark, shows the husband's gentle effort, but shows too that he is used to not getting answers to questions he asks.<sup>8</sup> Her response is to sink and cower on the stairs, as he comes up, and by her silence to refuse him any help, "sure that he wouldn't see, / Blind creature" (p. 51). When he finally sees that it

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence (New York: Holt, 1960), p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> Poirier, pp. 124-27. He uses the 1949 edition of Complete Poems of Robert Frost, editorially supervised by the author himself. Lathem's 1969 edition makes certain emendations.

is the grave she looks at in their yard, his relief causes him to say too much for her disturbed state. He first sees it as "the little graveyard where my people are!" and his possessiveness widens the gap; then his comment reduces the scope of the scene: "So small the window frames the whole of it. / Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?" (p. 51). She refuses to permit the loss to be reduced or made so ordinary. Unaware of his words' damage, he lists facts about the graves. His mention of the "child's mound," however, elicits from his wife cries of "Don't, don't, don't, don't" (p. 52). Then she slides downstairs, turns on him, and the argument begins.

His gentle pleading and listening are clear indications of his deep love for her. He wants to be let inside her grief; he wants her to share with him--not someone else. Sensitive enough to perceive his "words are nearly always an offense" to her, he pleads for her to teach him. He even offers to "keep hands off" (p. 52) topics she does not want to discuss, even though it is against his idea of what love means. Repeatedly he begs for his chance; by line 61 she is probably about to yield to his tenderness.

In his eagerness to close the gap between them, he overplays his role by his admirable but ill-timed honesty in line 62: "I do think, though, you overdo

it a little" (p. 53). The second aspect of their relationship involves the hidden, buried feelings that surface at inappropriate times. From this moment to the end of the poem things grow worse, even to the point of violence. Amy wants pity and sympathy; judgmental accusations, though gently and rationally expressed, only raise the barrier between them. His slight change of tone and emphasis from pleading for himself to accusing her is all it takes to shock her onto the defensive. She refuses to be consoled and blames him for "sneering" at her (p. 53). He is infuriated at her rebuff: "You make me angry. I'll come down to you. / God, what a woman! And it's come to this, / A man can't speak of his own child that's dead" (p. 53). Her bitter reply reveals their inability to communicate.

Amy thinks he does not "know how to speak" (p. 53) about their son's death. Day after day as she has looked through the narrow upstairs window at the family plot, she has relived the horror of seeing him make "the gravel leap and leap in air, / Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly" (p. 53) as he dug the grave. Of the infinite details, she remembers his "rumbling voice" (p. 53) talking to visitors about "everyday concerns" (p. 54). Dumbfounded that she could blame him for his act of love, he shouts, "I'm cursed. God, if

I don't believe I'm cursed" (p. 54). She is cursing him as she repeats his very words and accuses him of not caring about her or their dead son: "You couldn't care!" (p. 54). She is so alienated from him and has moved so deeply into herself and her own grief she sinks into what Frank Lentricchia calls "masochistic aloneness as some kind of compensation for the child's death."<sup>9</sup> She resents her husband's ability to survive and interprets his actions of love as callousness. She thinks that if he were really as affected as she, he would act differently. She talks of friends, but she obviously includes him and his attitude:

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.  
 But the world's evil. I won't have grief so  
 If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't! (p. 54)

Unable to understand grief, she buries herself in her sorrow and, as if smothered, she says, "I must get air" (p. 52). She threatens to leave the house as he begs her to close the door and not let someone coming down the road see her crying. Her opening the door wider causes him, in a mixed threat and plea, to declare he

<sup>9</sup> Frank Lentricchia, Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1975), p. 64.



will follow and bring her back: "I will!!--" (p. 55). It is a powerful in medias res ending.

The third aspect of their relationship--their basic differences--shows in the argument. The core of the argument is not really the dead son; it is the difference in their perception of how to accept death. Whereas she refuses to accept grief, he faces the reality that grief is inescapable, that a man should take what is coming without succumbing. John Doyle notes that their conflict is not of "petty differences leading to a divorce court; their clash is deep, pervasive, and irreconcilable."<sup>10</sup> Although they are in love, their totally different approaches to life permit no common ground on which to reconcile their differences. In this violent clash the husband and the wife are not acting on the basis of the immediate situation; they are following their inner natures, attitudes established before they married. Too, the poem is partially a clash between masculine and feminine natures. The husband feels that differences in sexes inevitably provide conflicts but that couples can overcome these conflicts. Early he says, "A man must partly give up being a man / With womenfolk" (p.52).

<sup>10</sup> John Robert Doyle, Jr., The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand Univ. Press, 1962), p. 38.

In this situation each fails to understand the other because the enigma of death cannot be approached simply as a male or female concern. Ironically, her accusation--"you think the talk is all" (p. 54)--is an accurate description of their dilemma. Yet she fails to understand the purpose of dialogue: to expose the hidden, to provide understanding and reconciliation, and to offer new direction for two, not the lonely walk of one.

This poem represents an imaginative handling of composite raw materials. Frost insisted repeatedly that the inspiration for the poem was the crucial marital estrangement which overtook Nathaniel and Leona Harvey after their firstborn child died in Epping, New Hampshire, in 1895.<sup>11</sup> He told several persons, including Elizabeth Sergeant, that it was written in Derry during 1905-06.<sup>12</sup> Yet he told Lawrence Thompson on another occasion that it was written in England in 1912-13 in "not over two hours. It stands in print as it was in the first draft."<sup>13</sup> At whatever time, it could not have been entirely

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 597. Leona Harvey was the sister of Elinor Frost.

<sup>12</sup> Sergeant, p. 428.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 594.

separated from the personal grief shared by Frost and Elinor following the death of their firstborn, Elliott, in 1900. The poem seems to have some thematic bearing on Elinor's difficulty in surviving that grief. Frost told Thompson that Elinor repeatedly said after that loss: "The world's evil."<sup>14</sup>

Frost's "Good Relief," not published in any of his own volumes, explains his idea of grief: "No state has found a perfect cure for grief / In law, in gospel, or in root or herb."<sup>15</sup> Frost's own dictum was "Grief without grievance." The similarity between the poem's wife and Frost's sister Jeanie deserves comment. Frost wrote of Jeanie to his friend, Louis Untermeyer, that she was unable to accept the "coarseness and brutality" of existence; in particular she found the facts of birth, love, and death revolting. Her ideal world could never be reconciled with the actual world of daily life, and World War I unsettled her fragile mind permanently.<sup>16</sup> The symptoms, however, had been apparent for many years. During a visit in 1907 Jeanie

<sup>14</sup> As quoted in Thompson, The Early Years, p. 258.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Frost, Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose, ed. Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), pp. 362-63.

<sup>16</sup> "To Louis Untermeyer," 12 April 1920, The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), pp. 102-03.

had run screaming into the yard after an argument with Frost; he threatened her so sternly she came in, packed, and left.<sup>17</sup>

These biographical facts are not intended to prove ties between his life and the poem but to show that when painting the painful portrait of inconsolability, Frost knew whereof he wrote. He had been able to transmute and transmit numerous experiences and ideas to make an artistic whole. The poem portrays one of his strongest beliefs, voiced later in a letter to Wilbert Snow, an English professor at Wesleyan University, in 1933:

My mind goes back to how true Turgeneff holds the balance between protagonists and antagonists in the death of Bayarov in Fathers and Sons. He is perfect in his non-partizanship. I never quite like to hear a wife turned on against her husband or vice versa. They know too much about each other and they are not disinterested. They lack, what they should lack, detachment. Maybe it bothers me as a breach of manners.<sup>18</sup>

Because the poem treated death so intimately, Frost never read this dialogue in his hundreds of public and

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 340.

<sup>18</sup> "To Wilbert Snow," c. 16 May 1933, Letter 303, Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), p. 393.

private readings; he told Thompson it was "too sad" to read aloud.<sup>19</sup>

In "Home Burial" the death of a son reveals latent friction, alienation, and misunderstanding in the relationship of the husband and the wife. In "The Death of the Hired Man" the husband and wife are shown achieving a new dimension of an already loving relationship through the death of someone outside their immediate family. The hired man never appears in the poem, and we know from the title he will die. The dialogue centers, then, on the new relationship between Warren and Mary that comes through their creative conversation about what they should do with old Silas.

Frost told Elizabeth Sergeant that "The Death of the Hired Man" was one of three poems--along with "Home Burial" and "The Housekeeper"--written in 1905 that "dug deep into the mature human fate."<sup>20</sup> All three concentrate on feelings of husbands and wives at crucial times. Although the poem was rejected for magazine publication in England early in 1914,<sup>21</sup> after its inclusion in North of Boston later that year, it became a favorite. Edward Thomas's review of the book

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, pp. 597-98.

<sup>20</sup> Sergeant, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 437.

made special mention of "The Death of the Hired Man" as a "masterpiece of deep and mysterious tenderness."<sup>22</sup> After its American publication in New Republic (February 6, 1915),<sup>23</sup> it became popular enough to be presented by the American Drama Society with Frost in the audience in Boston, November, 1915.<sup>24</sup> Today it is the one Frost poem many people remember having met in high school.

What is the "mature human fate" Frost alleges to be in this most famous of the dramatic narratives? Because human relationships are often inhibited or prohibited by considerations of social class, economic status, or personal behavior, Warren's and Mary's responses to the death of their hired man are particularly significant. This poem treats the problem of how a loving couple responds to a fellow human being, the hired man, in his time of greatest need. The fact is that Silas has a brother--"A somebody--director in the bank" (p. 39)--only thirteen miles away; yet in his sickness and loneliness Silas cannot

<sup>22</sup> Edward Thomas, rev. of North of Boston, by Robert Frost, August, 1914, in Recognition of Robert Frost: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, ed. Richard Thornton (New York: Holt, 1937), p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph 1915-1938 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 60.

bear to be made ashamed or humiliated by asking favors of a brother who apparently "can't abide" him or his shiftless ways. So he comes to a farmer for whom he has worked, and whom he has left in the busy haying season, with the pretense that he can work again and pay for his independent ways. Old, sick, and near death, Silas provides the opportunity for Warren and Mary to show concern for the misfortunes of another. Neither is under any obligation to Silas; indeed, Warren feels he would be justified in turning Silas out. The dialogue becomes what Doyle calls a "modern Good Samaritan story"<sup>25</sup> of what one human will do for another in need. Thus a specific and universal problem is established.

Of greater significance, however, is the conversation of Warren and Mary, their discussion of how to solve the problem. Here is the full revelation of the differences in their attitudes, of their love for each other, and of the resultant benefits when two people earnestly seek to find answers for an incapable problem. The poem presents the final day of their relationship with Silas, but through flashbacks the reader understands the past. This makes the dialogue a rather quiet episode which "unfolds itself in

<sup>25</sup> Doyle, p. 215.

undertones, a poem heard--or overheard--in whispers," as Louis Untermeyer describes it.<sup>26</sup> Thus the emphasis is not on a climax but on the developing relationship of two people specifically concerned with the existing problem: what to do with Silas?

The couple's different attitudes are predominant at the beginning. Mary stops Warren on the porch so that she can prepare him for the news of Silas's return; she pleads "Be kind" (p. 34). Her quiet tone does not prevent his loud retort and emphatic decision that he is "done" with the undependable hired man. Her attempts to quiet Warren are futile; he wants Silas to hear. Mary turns the conversation back to Silas's condition: "he's worn out" (p. 35). Then she tells of finding him asleep by the barn door, dragging him to the house, and trying to get him to talk. Feeling he needed the cathartic effect of talking to someone who would listen and sympathize, she becomes frightened when he is unable to talk much. Later she tells Warren, Silas "hurt my heart" (p. 39) because he insisted on sitting up by the fire and refused to be put to bed.

This keen hurt motivates her to defend the defenseless hired man to her husband. Warren remembers

<sup>26</sup> Louis Untermeyer, *Introd., The Road Not Taken*, by Robert Frost (New York: Holt, 1951), p. 147.



his own repeated kindnesses of the past and Silas's irresponsible behavior. Warren has done all he can, more than he should; he does not intend to help Silas again. Mary justifies her pity because of Silas's rambling speech and his physical condition; to her, he is the "poor old man" who needs some "humble way to save his self-respect" (p. 36). The words man and self-respect attract Warren, trigger his memories of haying days when the man Silas tried, between arguments about education, to teach a young boy how to be proud of building a load of hay. Mary remembers Silas as "concerned for other folk" (p. 37) and shifts the emphasis to Silas as a warm, human being instead of an undependable hired man. Mary's calling their house the "home" where Silas has come to die generates Warren's resentment and his mocking definition: "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in" (p. 38). The harshness of two haves reflects his bitterness about taking in Silas and letting the house become Silas's "home." Warren's defensive argument may be more with his own pride and convenience than with a desperate man's need.

Mary's softer definition of home--"I should have called it / Something you somehow haven't to deserve" (p. 38)--directs Warren's conversation to the nearby brother who "ought of right" to make a home for Silas.

Perceptive Mary recognizes the impossibility of Silas's living with the brother because she feels Silas, "worthless though he is," needs to keep his self-respect. Warren is moved more by Silas's alienation from his kin and his attempts to keep from being "beholden" to anyone than by Silas's present plight. He finally acknowledges there is a great deal to admire in a man like Silas who never "hurt anyone" (p. 39). Mary has already given some indication of their basic behavior toward lost, helpless things that seek homes: "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" (p. 38). If they were kind to a hurt dog, how can they be less to a human? She begs Warren, "Have some pity on Silas" (p. 39).

Mary's quiet but forceful pleading has a decided effect upon Warren's attitude. Brower notes that Warren's earlier, abrupt speeches with "many stops and few connectives, full of imperatives and wilful declarations" are less distinctly clipped near the end of the poem.<sup>27</sup> Because of her concern, Mary takes Silas's point of view in her conversation with Warren. She knows Warren is a good businessman, a man of truth and principle. These very qualities that cause Mary

<sup>27</sup> Brower, p. 158.

to love and respect Warren appear as barriers in this situation.

Mary knows that Silas has not treated Warren fairly by leaving in the middle of haying season; yet in the present situation she is more interested in mercy than justice. She understands Silas's situation because she remembers hurts of her own: "I know just how it feels / To think of the right thing to say too late" (p. 37). It is her shrewd analysis of why a rich brother wants nothing to do with Silas that wins Warren. She thinks Silas does not know "why he isn't quite as good / As anybody" else (p. 39); yet she appreciates this worthless man's trying to keep his self-respect by working instead of begging. Warren can admire that trait, even in Silas. The trait becomes more significant than Silas's repeated failures. Warren goes inside to see Silas and say the "right thing" before it is too late, but it is too late for talk--Silas is dead. Warren finds consolation, however, because he had already moved from anger to concern--the changed attitude that Silas had counted on when he came "home."

The differences between Warren and Mary are apparent, but no more so than their love. Warren's final gesture shows the full implication of that love. When Warren returns to the porch, slips to her side,

and takes her hand wordlessly, he expresses a volume of love in that simple gesture. It speaks of his concern for her feelings when she hears his sorrowful news; it speaks of his pride in her willingness to drag Silas home, feed, and comfort him to die warm and welcome. It implies Warren's tremendous respect for her mind, her view, that, although different from his, sympathetically concentrated on the more significant issue, the need of one human for another, not just the demands of a bothersome hired man. The gesture implies a peaceful acceptance that she was right where he had been wrong; only a deeply loving man of strong character could admit and accept gracefully such a fact.

Several benefits result from this loving relationship. It is a tribute to both Warren and Mary that an unexpected problem does not cause them to seek escape or immaturely assess blame. Their mature approach to the unpleasant situation is the result of much experience; each not only loves but also respects the other's view. Each is comfortable enough to open his heart freely and discuss motives, the sign of a healthy, growing relationship. Warren does not feel he has been tricked or misled. He can accept differences in Mary's view and still respect and love her. He would have had a difficult time living with himself if he

had held on to his first position and had gone in without mercy to throw Silas out. The poem justly deserves Edward Garnett's praise for its "exquisite precision of psychological insight."<sup>28</sup>

Part of Robert P. Coffin's reason for calling this poem the "tenderest and most moving of modern tragedies"<sup>29</sup> is the subtle influence nature exerts upon the couple. Only a few lines set the atmosphere, but they are sufficient to reveal the strong, silent impact of the natural world. The moon pours light into Mary's apron and highlights her hands:

Among the harplike morning-glory strings,  
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,  
As if she played unheard some tenderness  
That wrought on him beside her in the night.  
(p. 38)

The loveliness of moonlight and flowers helps create a romantic mood; however, this couple's love is so powerful their hearts would respond to each other even without nature's subtle influence. It is the situation more than the atmosphere that has made their love stronger. Sharing this problem, they have forged a

<sup>28</sup> Edward Garnett, "Some Remarks on American and English Fiction," Atlantic, 114 (1914), 747-56, as quoted in Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 52.

<sup>29</sup> Robert P. Coffin, New Poetry of New England: Frost and Robinson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1938), p. 69.

deeper love by working to a solution and a broader love that encompasses a needy outsider into their comfortable, ordered world for two. They will not see home as one or the other of their definitions; the two definitions will merge. Silas died content that he was "at home" and thereby made of their home a more sacred place. When an outsider recognized qualities in Warren's and Mary's relationship that called him back to die in their loving care, he testified that they loved each other enough safely to include outsiders.

Meeting death may be more traumatic, but accepting change is another difficulty husbands and wives must face. The changes may create tension that one or both of the couple are unable to assimilate into their marriage. War is a universal disrupter of lovers. The imaginative war poem entitled "Not to Keep" is the expression of a woman's pang when given her husband-soldier for one brief week. Saying goodbye becomes more difficult each time; it is almost inhuman of the military to give him back to her for only a week and then wrench him away. This short dialogue shows several things about the husband and wife's relationship.

The letter announcing his return makes her fear that there is "hidden ill / Under the formal writing"

(p. 230). But he arrives almost at once, and her fears are assuaged by her looking at him and proving he is not visibly disfigured. What she cannot see, she asks about. Their loving relationship is evident in her sensitive realization that the "disfigurement" of greatest importance could be on the inside; so she begs him to talk, to explain "What was it, dear?" (p. 230).

Manfully he answers, "Enough, / Yet not enough" (p. 230); he has suffered, but he has also lived to tell of the pain from the bullet "high in the breast" (p. 230). Seeking to allay her fears, he assures her that getting rest, medicine, and being with her a week can cure him. So the precious minutes become more significant because each knows these may be the last shared together. Yet looming over each hour is the realization of the "Grim giving to do over for them both" (p. 231) at the end of the allotted time. Their relationship is so strong, their empathy for each other so complete that each avoids making the other articulate how awful the next parting will be. For the third time, she reminds herself in the concluding statement that "They had given him back to her, but not to keep" (p. 231). The final phrase, stressing the title, emphasizes the pathos of the entire twenty-two-line dialogue.

Printed in the Yale Review for January, 1917, the poem might have been based on the experience of Frost's close friend Edward Thomas.<sup>30</sup> In December, 1916, Thomas was writing Frost of volunteering to go to France with the next draft. Happily relating to Frost his joy at seeing eight of his own poems in print, Thomas wrote that his new book about to be published was dedicated to Frost. Home for Christmas with his wife and children, Thomas could have inspired the poem he apparently never knew about.<sup>31</sup> Frost sent a copy of "Not to Keep" to the front but never knew or heard if Thomas received it before his death on Easter Monday, April 9, 1917.<sup>32</sup>

Accepting change does not have to involve the drastic and sometimes final change that war brings to couples. Less significant events, such as a move from the city to the country, may often be emotionally unsettling to harmonious relations. How two people are able to meet change and absorb the varied experiences of the new situation depends largely upon their characters and their love for each other. If their love is sufficiently strong, it acts as a

<sup>30</sup> Sergeant, p. 207.

<sup>31</sup> Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 90.

<sup>32</sup> Jean Gould, Robert Frost: The Aim Was Song (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1964), p. 195.



cohesive bond to help the couple take the shock of transition. Change almost always precipitates questions: is it necessary? is it the right thing to do? will it be advantageous or disastrous? This tension acts as an explosive awaiting detonation at the proper moment of frustration.

"In the Home Stretch" is a seven-page dialogue between an older couple and the movers who, late in the afternoon, have literally piled and dumped furniture in an old farmhouse. Frost's own experience certainly supplied the story's basic subject matter, but Louis Mertins is inaccurate in stating that Robert and Elinor's conversations about moving from Lawrence to Derry in 1900 are "reproduced" in this poem.<sup>33</sup> The circumstance that caused the Derry move for young Elinor and Rob was his suspected tuberculosis. The discouraged Frost also deeply resented the fact that Grandfather Frost had bought the farm and set Rob up. Frost felt it was his grandfather's way of saying:

Go on out and die. Good riddance to you.  
You've been nothing except a bother to me,

<sup>33</sup> Louis Mertins, Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 68.

for years, and you're not worth anything except as a disappointment.<sup>34</sup>

The true situation and that prompting the poem's conversations are vastly different. Written in Derry, "probably prior to 1909," the poem was not published until July, 1916.<sup>35</sup> Frost also included it in Mountain Interval later that fall and sent a copy of his third book to E. A. Robinson. In a letter to Frost Robinson acknowledged the book and specifically pointed out "In the Home Stretch" as having "added something permanent to the world--that seems to me to stand out from the rest."<sup>36</sup>

What "stands out" in this dialogue of a couple on moving day? In the poem's opening lines the unnamed wife is shown still wearing her cape and holding her hat while the movers and her husband Joe charge in and out with furniture. Without offering them any instructions, she stands at the kitchen sink and looks

<sup>34</sup> As told to Thompson, The Early Years, p. 261. In a later note Thompson adds, "From circumstantial evidence, however, it seems impossible that William Prescott Frost either said or implied any such thing; that Robert Frost merely imagined this meaning (and these statements) as ways of justifying his irrational and unjust hatred of his grandfather" (p. 547).

<sup>35</sup> Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 541.

<sup>36</sup> E. A. Robinson to Robert Frost, 2 Feb. 1917, Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: Macmillan, 1940), pp. 99-100.

out the dusty window. When asked by a mover, "Where will I put this walnut bureau, lady?" (p. 110), she answers without turning, "Put it on top of something that's on top / Of something else" (p. 111). When questioned by her affectionate husband Joe about what she sees outside, she answers in playful repartee that shows their loving concern for each other. After being asked three times what she sees out the window, she answers in a realistic, practical fashion surprising in one who stands in the pose of a dreamer. For herself, she sees "rank weeds that love the water from the dishpan"; for Joe, she sees a "little stretch of mowing field . . . scarce enough to call / A view" (p. 111). Then follows his question on which the entire poem hinges: "And yet you think you like it, dear?" She replies, "You hope / I like it" (p. 111).

This question is never directly answered; yet it is talked out during the evening. As the confusion of heavy footsteps continues, she grows somber and doubtful because of the "latter years" they will spend here since they "are not young now" (p. 112). Suddenly she remembers their need to have the stove set up. The men come quickly and do that job with such success these movers label it "good luck." One mover even notes the couple's apprehension and says reassuringly, "It's not so bad in the country, settled down, / When

people're getting on in life. You'll like it" (p. 113). When Joe suggests the moving men ought to try the farm, they are aghast and leave at once for the city.

Their decided response unnerves Joe; he is even more fearful and wonders if he has done the right thing. He cannot forget the movers' response: "But they left us so / As to our fate, like fools past reasoning with. / They almost shook me" (p. 114). She is wise enough to perceive the two of them need food instead of more anxiety; soon they eat bread and butter in front of the fire. Wearily they try to convince themselves "It's all so much / What we have always wanted" (p. 115) to be "Dumped down in paradise . . . and happy" (p. 116). Joe wonders who had the idea of moving from the city; is this the beginning, the middle, the end? She reminds him, "Ends and beginnings--there are no such things. / There are only middles" (p. 116). She explains that although the house itself is "new" by its unfamiliarity to them, their own familiar furniture is here--as well as the two of them. Therefore, she disdains the idea of newness: "New is a word for fools in town who think / Style upon style in dress and thought at last / Must get somewhere" (p. 117). It is almost as if they have retreated from the "lighted city streets" to "country

darkness" (p. 112) in order to sort out the essentials of life, as Thoreau had earlier done.

Their loving relationship is stable enough to bear the change of location, friends, and life. Joe is convinced that she is basically at peace about their decision, although she voices fears about the dark similar to those of the woman in "The Hill Wife." Joe's concern for her is clear when he wants to dash out in the dark to look at their farm by starlight but decides that the sightseeing should wait until morning when they are rested.

The warmth of the fire, the food, and their reassurances in the middle of jumbled furnishings emphasize their loving relationship. She knows he is exhausted, too, and insists, "I'm going to put you in your bed, if first / I have to make you build it" (p. 117). The day's work of emptying one house and filling another fifteen miles away has been hard on them, but their move will not be disastrous. These two are deeply committed to each other regardless of where they are. As long as they are together and continue to talk about all their fears, doubts, and hopes, they can make "paradise."

Their loving concern for each other also includes the house that Frank Lentricchia calls a "distinctive feature of Frost's landscape" because it "controls"

this poem.<sup>37</sup> The house is the focus of their move, their attention, their hopes for the future. She contrasts the behavior of the noisy movers with how she and Joe will act in their house:

The very tread of men  
As great as those is shattering to the frame  
Of such a little house. Once left alone,  
You and I, dear, will go with softer steps  
Up and down stairs and through the rooms, and none  
But sudden winds that snatch them from our hands  
Will ever slam the doors. (pp. 111-12)

The peacefulness is already present in the kitchen that night after they leave for bed: "The fire got out through crannies in the stove / And danced in yellow wrigglers on the ceiling, / As much at home as if they'd always danced there" (p. 117). The physical warmth of the fire reflects the spiritual warmth of the couple who has come to occupy this house and make it a home. It is no wonder the invading, noisy movers are described as having "smudged, infernal faces" (p. 110); they do not belong in a quiet, peaceful house far from town. This couple has gambled that common purposes rise from shared desires to make the move; the poem reflects this unity in the risk. This idea of risk is one Frost often spoke of. Walking up a dusty road with Sidney Cox one night he

<sup>37</sup> Lentricchia, p. 84.

commented that if he asked someone to go for a walk and the other assented, he would assume the other came because he wanted to. But he had to gamble; he could be mistaken.<sup>38</sup> Joe has gambled that his move is what he and his wife want, that she wished to move as much as he did.

Of all the experiences that come to a husband and wife, it is the daily experience of ordinary routine that ultimately shows their true characters, their depth of commitment to each other, and the strength of their love. Being apart during the day can be a difficult experience, as "The Telephone" shows. Although written during the Derry days between 1900 and 1910,<sup>39</sup> the brief dialogue was not published until 1916 in the October 9 edition of The Independent, a month before its inclusion in Mountain Interval.<sup>40</sup> All nineteen lines are direct conversation between a husband and wife. This poem differs from the majority of Frost's other basically blank verse dialogues in having a monometer line and six dimeter lines. These varied lengths suggest the clipped manner a person employs when using a telephone and being unable to see the one to whom he is talking.

<sup>38</sup> Sidney Cox, A Swinger, p. 153.

<sup>39</sup> Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 541.

<sup>40</sup> Mertins, p. 151.

The husband explains how, far from the farmhouse that day during his routine work, he listened to a flower and heard his wife speaking to him "from that flower on the window sill" (p. 118). She asks him to tell her "What it was you thought you heard." He explains how he drove a bee away so that he could lean his head close to the flower's stalk and listen. He even thinks she called him by name, but he is more positive that "Someone said 'Come'" as he bowed over the flower. She replies, "I may have thought as much, but not aloud" (p. 118). This couple are so attuned to each other's feelings that even apart they can understand the vibrations of the heart--evidence of a loving relationship that persists in the daily routine of life. Work and the responsibilities of life do not crowd out their love; being together and sharing one mind enhance even routine. His final reply, "Well, so I came" (p. 118), shows not only his desire to be with her but also his willingness to tell her what happened while they were apart.

This playful description of communication by means of a flower on a window sill is closely akin to Frost's approach in another poem called "Wind and Window Flower" in A Boy's Will. The poem's opening lines advise: "Lovers, forget your love, / And list to the love of these" (p. 10). The lovers are "she



a window flower, / And he a winter breeze" (p. 10). Although the breeze seeks to entice the window flower to go with him, she ignores his pleas--"And morning found the breeze / A hundred miles away" (p. 11). The window flower rebuffs the enticements of adventure in order to remain where it is warm, light, and secure. In "The Telephone" Frost uses the same imagery of the window sill flower that remains constant and calls to her lover via the flower telephone; two lovers seek to be together to share love within the security of home. A sense of stability and contentment is uppermost in this relationship.

A couple's being together enhances their relationship, especially if they find joy in doing things together. The dialogue "Blueberries" is stylistically different from Frost's usual blank verse conversations. His skill in creating the casual conversation of a husband and wife in riming couplets is hardly apparent because of the ease and unpoetic sound of their talk. Published in North of Boston, this poem treats two families' practice of picking blueberries--from someone else's pasture. Although father Loren and his family are described, the poem reveals more about the loving, happy relationship of a husband and wife, never named.

This woman tells her husband about "Blueberries as big as the end of your thumb" (p. 59) which she saw in Patterson's pasture on her way to the village. Discussing Patterson the owner, they characterize him as one who may and may not care and simply "leave the chewink / To gather them [berries] for him" (p. 60). The chewink, a kind of finch, has a great appetite for blueberries. Patterson, they decide, is the neighborly sort who "won't make the fact that they're rightfully his / An excuse for keeping us other folk out" (p. 60). This mention of "other folk" directs the dialogue to Loren.

The wife tells her husband she saw Loren "the fatherly" out for a drive "with a democrat-load / Of all the young chattering Lorens alive" (p. 60). The "democrat-load" is not a political term, so Louis Untermeyer explains to non-New Englanders, but a "light wagon with two removable seats."<sup>41</sup> Loren nods and passes, but she perceives he thinks he has "left those there berries . . . / To ripen too long" (p. 60). The couple's discussion of Loren and his family is filled with gossip ("He has brought them all up on wild berries, they say"), admiration ("He's a thriftier person than some I could name"), and respect ("I wish

<sup>41</sup> Untermeyer, p. 7.

I knew half what the flock of them know / Of where all the berries and other things grow"). The husband responds: "Who cares what they say? It's a nice way to live, / Just taking what Nature is willing to give, / Not forcing her hand with harrow and plow" (p. 61). The husband recognizes that Loren and his family are poachers; yet he is also easily drawn to their view. Instead of judging the morality of Loren's actions in taking berries belonging to someone else, the husband assesses the act as natural, as a "nice way to live."

The fact that the two families are competitors does not keep the husband and wife from admiring the other family. Neither does it keep them from trying to beat Loren to the berries. The husband decides the two of them will pick in Patterson's pasture this year for those "sky-blue" berries (p. 59); she agrees but predicts the other family will

be there tomorrow, or even tonight,  
They won't be too friendly--they may be polite--  
To people they look on as having no right  
To pick where they're picking. (p. 62)

Her earlier comment explains her greater concern: "We shan't have the place to ourselves to enjoy" (p. 62).

Here is the center of their relationship: they enjoy being together and doing things together. He remembers other times they picked berries and names

two specific incidents that show their pleasure in each other. Once they "sank out of sight like trolls underground" (p. 62) and in their picking did not see or hear each other until one discovered they were keeping a bird away from its nest. Their playful banter indicates their enjoyment of each other. Another time he feared he had lost her, that she had wandered away; his loud shout caused her to stand up-- beside him. They still laugh over his surprise that day.

Not only do they enjoy a love for and loyalty to each other, but they also both enjoy and appreciate nature. Whenever either talks, it is with a comfortable wonder at nature's beauties and products. Early, when she tells him twice "You ought to have seen!" (p. 59), she knows he would also have been impressed with plump berries "as big as the end of your thumb" (p. 59). It is the preciseness of the relationship between berries and thumbs that Isadore Traschen praises Frost in restoring "things to most modern, abstract ways of seeing objects."<sup>42</sup> The picture of hands holding large berries allows for no confusion. The couple's discussion about the berries, however, includes more than size. As acute observers of nature

<sup>42</sup> Isadore Traschen, "Robert Frost: Some Divisions in a Whole Man," Yale Review, Oct. 1965, p. 69.

they remember the fire two years ago and the bushes' recovery and growth. That fire explains the taste: "I taste in them sometimes the flavor of soot" (p. 59), but the color occupies much of their talk:

And after all, really they're ebony skinned;  
The blue's but a mist from the breath of the wind,  
A tarnish that goes at a touch of the hand,  
And less than the tan with which pickers are tanned.  
(p. 60)

Their appreciation extends to noticing the flowers they have seen the Patterson children stick into buckets of berries. Deciding "we won't complain" about Loren's intrusion, they believe the joy of being in Patterson's pasture far outweighs the irritation of Loren and his family: "You ought to have seen how it looked in the rain, / The fruit mixed with water in layers of leaves, / Like two kinds of jewels, a vision for thieves" (p. 62). The use of the last word is their humorous recognition that they are also poachers just like Loren, but with nature producing such a show, the temptation is overwhelming. So they ignore the immorality of their stealing berries from Patterson's pasture.

This tacit approval of violating private property may have been influenced in part by a series of unpleasant events that occurred while the Frost family lived in England near Lascelles Abercrombie on Lord Beauchamp's land in 1914. Used to roaming at will to

pick berries, the family discovered the gamekeeper would not allow such intrusion. Frost later related to his biographer the "nasty row" with the gamekeeper who patrolled the nearby preserve with "shotgun in hand" and who took pleasure in "tipping the contents of the children's baskets on the ground and rubbing them into the dirt with his boot."<sup>43</sup> Frost often noted the difference between the life of the country laborer in England and that of the New Hampshire hill folk he wrote about. He insisted to Jean Gould that the latter had the "unquestioned right . . . to gather wild blueberries on a first-come, first-served basis, no matter who owned the land."<sup>44</sup> The courtesies that grew out of custom were not known or practiced in England. These differences may account for his presentation of people in this dialogue who feel free to pick berries that do not belong to them.

Patterson the owner may have been a man who figured the poor needed his berries more than he needed the money; so he ignored their presence in his pasture. "Blueberries" certainly shows Frost's pleasure in such a system, but more than that it shows the loving relationship of a husband and wife who enjoy being together, particularly in the out-of-doors, and doing

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, pp. 459-68.

<sup>44</sup> Gould, p. 109.

things together. The casual, routine activities of life achieve a glow of excitement when two lovers perform these activities chiefly because they want to do them together. Their love for each other, their common interests, their appreciation of nature and their "love of living," as Sidney Cox says, continually enhance their relationship.<sup>45</sup>

The last of Frost's dialogues dealing specifically with human relationships is the title poem of his 1928 publication West-Running Brook. Its message of love and unity between husband and wife is the culmination of much experience for Frost, over thirty years of marriage, and of a pair of circumstances that both saddened and pleased Frost. Starting the poem in the spring of 1920, he completed it during a summer vacation in the mountains in 1926. Two circumstances nudged his thinking, the first of which was the sad news of the divorce of his young friends Louis and Jean Untermyer.<sup>46</sup> Frost held the view that marriage is a long-time, lasting bond and "something," he told Elizabeth Sergeant, "to be perpetually believed into existence."<sup>47</sup> During this same three-month span in 1926 his daughter

<sup>45</sup> Sidney Cox, A Swinger, p. 124.

<sup>46</sup> Thompson, Years of Triumph, pp. 298-301.

<sup>47</sup> Sergeant, p. 301.

Irma was concluding preparations to marry John Cone on October 15, 1926. In the midst of his revising and finishing "West-Running Brook," he wrote as a present for the bride and groom a poem called "The Master Speed" that complements the theme of the brook poem.<sup>48</sup> In the sonnet the two lovers cannot be parted or swept away from each other, now that they are "agreed" concerning the oneness achieved through their marriage. This unity makes marriage "only life forevermore / Together wing to wing and oar to oar" (p. 300). Frost was pleased that Irma would have someone to love her and to share her life. It is this unity that is also reflected in "West-Running Brook."

"West-Running Brook" is a dialogue between Fred and his young bride as they stroll together over their farm, noting particularly the unique brook that runs west when "all the other country brooks flow east" (p. 258). This casual comment by the young woman propels them into a deeply philosophical discussion that passes the bounds of space and time and eventually returns to the brook itself.

Three facets of their relationship as husband and wife emerge from their conversation. The first is their opposing points of view. She quickly draws

<sup>48</sup> Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 304. Unfortunately, the two were later divorced, p. 626.



the analogy that the brook "can trust itself to go by contraries / The way I can with you--and you with me--" (p. 258). Thus the contrary flowing of the brook becomes a figure for the loving trust of husband and wife in the other's difference, what Brower calls "the expected and desired contraries that make a marriage."<sup>49</sup> Within the brook itself, however, is the wave that enlarges their discussion of "contraries." She sees the brook as "waving to us with a wave / To let us know it hears me." He sees the wave as purely natural and logical: "It wasn't waved to us" (p. 258). She is not to be deterred, as she answers in contradiction: "It wasn't, yet it was. If not you, / It was to me-- in an annunciation" (p. 258). Fred rejects her insistence on this feminine possessiveness of nature, not only because he is of a logical mind but also because if he allows her to "take it off to lady-land" (p. 258), he cannot, and no man can, follow such intuitive paths. Quite emphatically he insists, "I have no more to say" (p. 259). She is sensitive enough to recognize that this statement means just the opposite-- there is, indeed, a great deal more to say. And so she pleads: "Go on. You thought of something" (p. 259). Her insistence that he talk out the disagreement is a

<sup>49</sup> Brower, p. 189.

clue to their love and respect for each other even when they see things differently.

A second facet of their relationship is that both Fred and his wife have an affinity for nature. It is she that decides their own marriage will be strengthened if the two of them "marry the brook":

As you and I are married to each other,  
We'll both be married to the brook. We'll build  
Our bridge across it, and the bridge shall be  
Our arm thrown over it asleep beside it. (p. 258)

The brook will serve as a tangible reminder to them of their contrary natures yet of their deliberate choice to be one. Their bridge of recognition, acceptance, and communication will help maintain the unity when the stresses of contrary ideas pull and strain to separate them. Then focusing on the wave, Fred sees the white wave "flung backward," riding "the black forever, / Not gaining but not losing" like the bird's struggle. Ironically, it is their love for nature that now pulls them apart in argument. He sees that the brook "in that white wave runs counter to itself. / It is from that in water we were from / Long, long before we were from any creature" (p. 259). In raising the issue of man's origins Fred is stating some of the French philosopher Henri Bergson's images and ideas that Frost found in reading Creative Evolution (1911). Lawrence Thompson feels that

Frost particularly liked Bergson's gathering metaphors: the flowing stream of matter moves ever downward, but the life force resists and tries always to climb back upward, through matter, toward the Source.<sup>50</sup>

Frost thought this resistance by the life force in man admirable and essential.

Fred sees the dark stream of existence flowing through the Lucretian void into nothingness:

It seriously, sadly, runs away  
 To fill the abyss's void with emptiness.  
 It flows beside us in this water brook,  
 But it flows over us. It flows between us  
 To separate us for a panic moment.  
 It flows between us, over us, and with us.  
 (p. 259)

Because "it is time, strength, tone, light, life, and love-- / And even substance lapsing unsubstantial" (p. 259), he panics. Fred sees separation and loneliness because "the universal cataract of death / That spends to nothingness" is unavoidable. Yet the wave is there as a kind of resistance, "Not just a swerving, but a throwing back, / As if regret were in it and were sacred" (p. 259). This contrary motion in nature Fred sees as a life force, the resistance humans make against death. Fred explains this resistance in a series of images that "send up": "The brook runs down in sending up our life. / The sun runs down in sending

<sup>50</sup> Thompson, The Early Years, p. 381.

up the brook. / And there is something sending up the sun" (p. 260). It is Fred's concluding statement that endows the poem with what Thompson calls "religious overtones which are contrary to a purely scientific interpretation of evolutionary theories":<sup>51</sup>

It is this backward motion toward the source,  
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,  
The tribute of the current to the source.  
It is from this in nature we are from.  
It is most us. (p. 260)

Fred's explanation to his wife becomes significant in their relationship. He has not chosen the

side of scientific logic, which, however,  
he does not attempt to refute. Science he  
queries back to its origins, back up the  
evolutionary ladder till it reaches God,

so Joseph Kau argues.<sup>52</sup> To Fred, man's inborn spirit of resistance, his desire to live, provides sufficient reason for his contrary position. God as creator placed this spirit in man.

The wife apparently has already reconciled herself to the prospect of "the universal cataract of death." The wave's message to her seems to be that

<sup>51</sup> Thompson, The Years of Triumph, p. 303.

<sup>52</sup> Joseph Kau, "'Trust . . . to go by contraries': Incarnation and the Paradox of Belief in the Poetry of Frost," in Frost: Centennial Essays II, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1976), p. 106.

they are one with the stream, that life must be accepted, but that love strong as theirs can "bridge across" or transcend the stream of life: "As you and I are married to each other, / We'll both be married to the brook" (p. 258). Her intuitive process makes it easy for her to accept the paradoxical nature of existence just as she accepts the contrary direction of the stream's flow: "It must be the brook / Can trust itself to go by contraries / The way I can with you--and you with me--" (p. 258). The wave's announcement to her ("in an annunciation") suggests her perception of the Source of nature and humanity. Fred expands on the principle and arrives at his acceptance through a philosophical discussion. She accepts the explanation of his hope and insists: "Today will be the day / You said so" (p. 260). Both have affirmed a belief in man's divine origins and a hope for his destiny in a return to the divine, although their routes of knowledge are different. The poem concludes on a unity.

The third aspect of their relationship is this unity, often symbolized by the use of plural pronouns ("we," "us," "our") instead of the predominant singular ("I," "you") used in "Home Burial." The disagreement between Fred and his wife is resolved, and their relation is strengthened. She sees the day as important

because of what he said; he insists it is important because of what she said. The unifying conclusion is "Today will be the day of what we both said" (p. 260). Part of the unity comes from the care each exercises in recognizing the mutual boundaries of their relationship and keeping that common boundary in good order. Another basis for unity is that they actively seek for accurate communication. Both of them take pains to express their feelings in terms which the other understands. Neither tries to hide feelings as do the couples in "Home Burial" and "The Hill Wife."

A final cause of their unity is their relationship to nature. Just as the two of them talk to each other, so each of them talks to nature in their discussion of the wave, just as the couple talked through the flowers in "The Telephone." Fred and his wife support the principle that man and nature are bound together; the wave tossed back against the current becomes a symbol of the principle they live by, the "reconciliation of contraries." Sweenes contends that by an act of the imagination the couple link their own lives to that of the brook. Thus,

By identifying the brook as a symbol for their own successful marriage they affirm their own reality--though not to merge into a single identity. The joy of love is in the mutual recognition of each other's virtues--the

reconciliation of the sexes, not their erasure.<sup>53</sup>

Frost had explained this reconciliation many years before in a poem "Meeting and Passing." The joy of love is in "our being less than two / But more than one as yet" (p. 119). There can be no doubt that the couple in "West-Running Brook" stands united as two thinking, but loving, individuals.

This dialogue, called Frost's "most intellectual" by Sergeant,<sup>54</sup> exemplifies the marriage of "true minds" that Frost so admired in Shakespeare's poetry. Nitchie praises the poem as providing values and showing the "modus vivendi with the natural or supernatural world" with which man is to live.<sup>55</sup> Even though this poem presented such a strong element of his thinking, Frost seldom read the poem to the public. However, at an intimate gathering in Amherst of professors and poets to celebrate his eightieth birthday he decided to read it as his "first choice."<sup>56</sup>

These seven dialogues between husbands and wives show pain and joy, love and hate, understanding and cruelty, the trivial and the serious. They concern real people in real-life struggles trying to find

<sup>53</sup> Sweenes, p. 372.

<sup>54</sup> Sergeant, p. 301.

<sup>55</sup> Nitchie, p. 50.

<sup>56</sup> Sergeant, p. 399.

answers to problems posed by the "contraries" confronting two persons committed to one way of life. They point clearly to the importance of dialogue-- accurate, sensitive, patient talk between two people keeping in sharp focus both the issues and their feelings about the issues. Those who succeed provide hope to others; those who fail exemplify the defects of selfish, insensitive egotists. The "talk" disdained by Amy in "Home Burial" is not "all" there is, but any day that a couple can see as a "day of what we both said" will be one more day of building a loving, solid relationship.



## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed twenty-two dialogues in which Robert Frost has talked through his characters about people and about life. The following conclusions can be drawn from his sagacious observations. First, Robert Frost believed in the individual worth and ability of man. Probably the best evidence is in the "book of people," as he called North of Boston, but this basic tenet is clear also in his next three books containing dialogues. Every person, no matter how ordinary or of what profession, is of value as a human being. Man has the ability, no matter what the circumstances or how difficult the problem, to surmount tragedy and hardship; part of man's worth asserts itself in survival. Accepting the human condition and its limitations allows man to realize his full potential. Much of Frost's poetry is about this acceptance by his characters in such a way that, according to Robert M. Rechnittz, "life is seen as a daily repetition of minor acts of courage deemed heroic by the very manner of their finitude, and death is accepted as

inevitable."<sup>1</sup> Frost's characters do not always comprehend this inevitability, but they are enriched by their struggles.

Secondly, other people, Frost felt, offer the best, truest study of what it means to be human. Frost was intrigued with people, human beings going about the business of being human, because of his own sympathetic understanding of the intimacies of living and because of his own deep involvement in what Reginald Cook identifies as "conflicts that torment the human heart."<sup>2</sup> What Frost learned from his own experience provided a clear insight into the problems of universal human relationships. His dialogues deal intimately with the human, with what Cornelius Weygandt calls "something reaching down deep into human experience . . . the drama of human document."<sup>3</sup> This human drama Frost explained quite precisely to Paul Waitt after being told that some people saw him only as a nature poet:

<sup>1</sup> Robert M. Rechnitz, "The Tragic Vision of Robert Frost," in Frost: Centennial Essays I, ed. Committee on Frost Centennial (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1974), p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> Reginald Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (1958; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), p. 211.

<sup>3</sup> Cornelius Weygandt, "New Hampshire," in Recognition of Robert Frost: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, ed. Richard Thornton (New York: Holt, 1937), p. 67.

There are beautiful stage settings in the theater, but few people would go to see them if there were no actors or actresses. I am convinced that we must put people in the foreground.<sup>4</sup>

Frost consciously sought to follow that advice in his dramatic dialogues knowing that "Everything written is as good as it is dramatic," so the preface to his one-act play A Way Out declared.<sup>5</sup>

A third conclusion based on these dialogues is that Frost felt the revelation of emotions to be the most significant factor of one's humanity. Feeling, he felt, is behind everything that counts in a man's life. While in England he wrote Sidney Cox that "arguments don't matter. The only thing that counts is what you can't help feeling."<sup>6</sup> James Dickey singles out the "emotions of pain, fear, and confusion" as the "roots of Frost's poetry."<sup>7</sup> C. P. Snow writes of attending a special Frost showing and poetry reading

<sup>4</sup> Paul Waitt, "A Visit in South Shaftsbury, Vt.," in Interviews with Robert Frost, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> As quoted in Thomas Vander Ven, "Robert Frost's Dramatic Principle of 'Oversound,'" American Literature, 45 (1973), 240.

<sup>6</sup> "To Sidney Cox," 17 September 1914, Letter 88, Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), p. 135.

<sup>7</sup> James Dickey, "Robert Frost, Man and Myth," The Atlantic Monthly, Nov. 1966, p. 56.

in Moscow shortly after the poet's death and observing the audience visibly moved to tears. A Russian explained that Frost's poetry "sprang from profound experience, from the deepest feeling for life." Snow's own assessment of Frost was that he was one of the

deepest-natured of men. He had lived a life of passionate experience right up to the end. He had been through great suffering. Emotionally he had known everything.<sup>8</sup>

Frost's great concern to portray people's emotions was based on the belief that nothing was an unpoetical subject "if only the poet knows how to treat it aright."<sup>9</sup> Lawrance Thompson praises the poet for presenting "thoughts and emotions . . . embodied in a context of words which suggest not only a physical setting . . . but also a psychological setting."<sup>10</sup> A minority view may be represented by Radcliffe Squires' observation: "Frost tends in his narratives to present a waxworks allegory. There they are: jelled, posed, frozen."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> C. P. Snow, Variety of Men (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), pp. 174-75.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), p. 68.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost (1942; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> Radcliffe Squires, The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 80.

An analytical study of these dialogues refutes such criticism. One knows Lafe, Fred and Helen Cole, Baptiste the Frenchman, Brad the star-splitter, Amy, Warren and Mary, and other, unnamed characters as well-developed human beings because of Frost's physical and psychological presentation of individuals with strong emotions. Some critics, such as Isidor Schneider, argue that Frost was neither a true philosopher or a true psychologist in these presentations.<sup>12</sup> Whatever the critics' opinions of Frost's ability in these areas, however, almost all agree with William Rose Benét that Frost himself was a "significant human being."<sup>13</sup> This study of human relationships has shown that the dialogues portray the experiences of life, not as derived from any formal study of philosophy by the poet but from life itself. Frost's belief that "all truth is dialogue"<sup>14</sup> emerges in these dramas of people talking in a variety of emotional situations, seeking solutions to problems, and seeking better understanding of themselves and others.

<sup>12</sup> Isidor Schneider, "Robert Frost," Nation, 132 (1931), 102.

<sup>13</sup> William Rose Benét, "On A Further Range," in Robert Frost: An Introduction, ed. Robert A. Greenberg and James G. Hepburn (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1961), p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> Rosemary F. Deen, "The Voices of Robert Frost," The Commonweal, 69 (1959), 543.

A fourth conclusion is that Frost both believed and practiced that people reveal their characters through their talk, their conversation. James Dickey, among others, praises Frost:

He, as much as any American poet, brought convincingness of tone into poetry and made of it a gauge against which all poetry would inevitably have to be tried.

He continues, "One believes the Frost voice. That itself is a technical triumph, and of the highest kind."<sup>15</sup> Many attest to the poet's unique achievement--creating a particular kind of speaking voice in poetry. Frost said often, "All poetry is to me first a matter of sound; I hear my things spoken."<sup>16</sup> The reader hears the sound of people talking and determines much about what those people believe and what they profess. Brower goes so far as to declare that there is "no poet of whose voice we are surer than Frost's, no poet whom we hear more distinctly as we read."<sup>17</sup>

Frost attributed much of his interest in voice sounds to William Dean Howells. Asked to participate

<sup>15</sup> Dickey, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted in Thompson, The Years of Triumph, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Reuben A. Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 3.

in a memorial service for Howells on March 1, 1921, Frost was ill and unable to attend but sent this letter of praise:

I learned from him a long time ago that the loveliest theme of poetry was the voices of people. No one ever had a more observing ear or clearer imagination for the tones of those voices. No one ever brought them more freshly to book. He recorded them equally with actions, indeed as if they were actions (and I think they are).<sup>18</sup>

Following Howells' prose technique and Shakespeare's dramatic technique for conversations, Frost formed people for his dialogues that become so memorable the reader cannot forget them. Reginald Cook asserts repeatedly that Frost's was a "living voice" both in his poems and in his own conversation.

Frost was . . . one of the great talkers of his time. So in possession was he of the necessary gifts of an easy conversationalist --ideas, words, manners, and the ability to keep the talk in circulation--he belongs in the company of other great talkers time out of mind, like Dr. Johnson and Coleridge, Carlyle and Wilde.<sup>19</sup>

Not merely a one-way talker, Frost was also an interested inquirer and a patient listener.

<sup>18</sup> "To Hamlin Garland," 4 February 1921, Letter 211, in Selected Letters of Robert Frost, p. 265.

<sup>19</sup> Reginald Cook, Robert Frost: A Living Voice (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1974), p. 208.

The dialogues of this study have reiterated these four basic conclusions in a variety of ways; yet each dialogue has incorporated all four. The dialogues are analogous to Claude Monet's habit of repeatedly painting the same water lilies and the same haystacks. Yet to look at his paintings is to see that the subject matter may be the same, but the treatment in each painting--color, light, time--is vastly different.<sup>20</sup> In these twenty-two dialogues are ordinary people, men and women who may seem as unfit for great poetry as mere haystacks for painting. Yet each dialogue reveals a different element of human nature which becomes significant and unforgettable. The characters are so clearly drawn that they become real people one knows intimately. These little dramas shock us into realizing that something of importance is taking place. The drama may be in the situation--such as the misunderstandings which isolate human beings in "A Hundred Collars"--or in some action--such as "Home Burial"--but every detail of the poem contributes to fulfilling the event.

For nearly the first quarter of the twentieth century Frost was a poet who chose to explain ideas in dialogues rather than in meditative lyrics. A fifth

<sup>20</sup> William Fleming, Art, Music, and Ideas (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), p. 323.



conclusion suggested by this study is that one can find a gradual shift in Frost's thinking that moves away from humans as subject matter to more philosophical discussions of ideas. The majority of the ten dialogues in North of Boston (1914) treat taut emotions in tragic or difficult confrontations; the five in Mountain Interval (1916) are considerably less intense and treat more pleasant times. Of the six in New Hampshire (1923) at least half rely heavily upon philosophical cogitations or discussions between the characters, and the one in West-Running Brook (1928) is almost entirely philosophical. One might conclude from this marked decrease of human-focused encounters over a fourteen-year period that Frost's fame, his new image of himself, and his busy lecturing schedule affected his writing of dialogues. Too, the decline in his use of this form of poetry may reflect a slackened interest in presenting the patient interactions of humans through conversations; increasingly, his lyrics dealing with the intrigue of philosophical problems wrestled with alone are presented to the world as full-blown statements.

This study was conducted on the belief that Frost's experiences and his keen understanding of human nature helped shape most of the dramatic dialogues. Chapter two shows Frost's perception and

understanding of how strangers react to each other. Ample proof from his own experiences and his excellent presentations in six dialogues of the variety of reactions to strangers, young and old, convince the reader that Frost both understood and could skillfully present the tension, suspicion, curiosity, and fear often generated in such encounters. Chapter three shows the relationships of friends on a continuum from the casual to the close. Although Frost in his early years had few friends, he slowly came to appreciate them and take the risk of acquiring others, independent and private as he was. His six dialogues show distinctly these degrees of friendship from the deep chasm between casual acquaintances occasionally encountered to the warm, loving concern for another one loves almost as dearly as himself.

Chapter five shows Frost at his best in dialogue writing--treating married lovers, usually without children or others to interrupt or interfere. He posits these lovers in situations that reveal their depth of commitment to each other in death, in change, and in ordinary routine. Chapter four, however, reveals that Frost's poetic treatment of parents and children shows a lack of communication. Perhaps Frost did not fully understand such relationships. Perhaps this lack of understanding explains the fact that only

four dialogues discuss this relationship; three of the four show alienated, unhappy situations. One concludes, therefore, that either because of his own unhappy experiences as a child or because of his own feelings of failure as a father, he was unable to portray the parent-child relationship with the same skill, poignancy, variety, and meaning that he showed toward the other human relationships.

This last conclusion is also reflected in Frost's use of talk. All the dialogues except the ones dealing with parents and children discuss "talk" or "talking" with a general feeling that it is good. In the parent-child dialogues there is either no talk, no explanation, or talking as a lecture, not conversation between characters. In the deep rift between the characters in "Home Burial," Amy says accusingly to her husband, "You think the talk is all" (p. 54), without realizing that articulation is the secret to a growing, healthy relationship between people. It is as though Frost put into poetic form through his dialogues what his wife, Elinor, had spoken of in her valedictory entitled "Conversation as a Force in Life."<sup>21</sup> His dialogues that show the interaction of people talking are the best. Even those treating failed communication in

<sup>21</sup> Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 129.

parent-child situations illustrate negatively that talk is essential to human relationships.

Frost's own observations and experiences through many lonely years before his fame came in 1914 supplied the ground for a poetic genius to blossom. Biographically and psychologically he had been prepared to write of what he called the "mature human fate"<sup>22</sup> that faces all people. That he was successful as an adult poet cannot be denied. A man of deep understanding and experience, he touched the hearts of other adults, young and old, who faced similar reality. He can be called a true poet of humanity because of his concentration on people and their relationships during the first quarter of this century, even ignoring his turning later to politics and philosophy for his world view. Although he continued to write powerful poetry up to his death in 1963, the heart of his work and his poetic beliefs is in the dialogues. They provide for countless humans an identification with characters who dramatize the importance of life and the worthy goal of improving human relationships through accurate, patient, productive conversation.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence (New York: Holt, 1960), p. 68.

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