

THE MAN-NATURE DIALOGUE IN THE POETRY
OF ROBERT FROST

APPROVED:

Lee W. Miller
Major Professor

Edis W. Hawley
Minor Professor

S. S. Clifton
Director of the Department of English

Robert B. Toulson
Dean of the Graduate School

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By

Edith Jackson Luke, B. A.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Although Robert Frost did not consider himself a "nature poet," did not like to be called one, and would point out the fact that all but a few of his poems have people in them, his feeling for nature was obviously a very close one. Many critics of Robert Frost's poems, however, have not understood his position. In 1938, Robert P. Tristram Coffin stated that Frost presents nature with people stuck into it where they belong¹ and that he treats of people in a state of only good nature,² views which now seem far from accurate, as most critics agree. Even as late as 1959, Robert Langbaum remarked that Frost makes man and nature intertwine so that they seem identical,³ an opinion that ignores the individuality of Frost's characters. And in his book, The Major Themes of Robert Frost (1963), Radcliff J. Squires asserted that Frost

¹Robert P. Tristram Coffin, New Poetry of New England: Frost and Robinson (Baltimore, 1938), p. 58.

²Ibid., p. 60.

³Robert Langbaum, "The New Nature Poetry," Robert Frost: An Introduction, edited by Robert A. Greenberg and James G. Hepburn (New York, 1961), p. 158.

would like nature to concur with human intuition more than it is willing to do and that he is successful only in seeing nature as a friendly mirror in poems that merely record.⁴

Most modern critics of Frost, however, seem more accurately to have apprehended the poet's intention. One early critic and friend, Lawrance Thompson, stated that Frost's primary concern is with the inner strength and worth of the individual.⁵ In 1958, Reginald Cook asserted the opinion that Frost illustrates the effect of man on his environment and the environment's effect on man.⁶ The present decade has brought forth perceptive comments by such critics as John F. Lynen, John Robert Doyle, Jr., and Robert Francis. Lynen observes that Frost's view of nature is a fresh approach to reality.⁷ Doyle sees the poet unobtrusively uniting the vegetable world and the human world,⁸ and Francis points out that man's plight and what he does about it is of major importance to Frost.⁹

⁴Radcliff J. Squires, The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor, 1963), p. 22.

⁵Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost (New York, 1942), p. 214.

⁶Reginald L. Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York, 1958), p. 161.

⁷John F. Lynen, "Frost as a Modern Poet," Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by James M. Cox (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1962), p. 188.

⁸John Robert Doyle, Jr., The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis (New York, 1962), pp. 6-7.

⁹Robert Francis, Charles W. Cole, Reginald L. Cook, "On Robert Frost," The Massachusetts Review, IV (Winter, 1963), 246.

In general, modern critics agree that Robert Frost is neither a mere "nature poet" nor a realist, per se. Though some still accept merely surface meanings which ignore the possibility that the localized subjects may have a broader application than is apparent at first reading, others see much symbolism in his poems. The consensus among critics is that Robert Frost does have a clear understanding of the life of nature and a special feeling of closeness to it. They agree, too, that he considers man's inner strength important in his perpetual struggle with his surroundings. There seems to be no doubt that Frost's characters, although identified as residents of a specific locale, are also representative of universal human nature.

Nature, however, is not the most important element in Frost's poems. He emphasizes human beings and their relation to their surroundings. People are the focal point in the poems that show them with nature as a background for their actions. Though it is true that in his lines the poet gives a great deal of attention to nature, it is merely attention to a background that has influence on his central figure. Human characters and their actions and reactions are the important elements in the poems.

There is a pronounced ambivalence in the view of nature Frost portrays in his poetry. In one poem he may present nature as actively hostile, in another as merely indifferent, and in a third as warmly benevolent. It is difficult to attribute reasons for these divergent views

of nature in particular poems. Frost did not date many of his works, and, from his letters, it is clear that he did not offer his verses to public view immediately after their composition; rather he tended to let them age before bringing them out for general appraisal. Thus it is not possible to attribute definitely any particular poem to any specific period of depression or of high spirits that was a part of his life. For example, the verse "Tree at My Window," expressing a feeling of kinship between the poet and nature, follows "Bereft," lines which starkly express the speaker's fear of nature in his time of bereavement. These two poems appear in West-Running Brook, a collection that also includes "Acceptance," which portrays the unquestioning acceptance that nature's creatures have for its ways. Although two poems may be placed side by side in a volume of Frost's poetry, there is no evidence that they were created together or in the order in which they appear.

Robert Frost sees human beings as belonging to two main categories with varying shades of characteristics in each. He portrays characters, either basically strong or basically weak, in relation to the several faces of nature they observe. Among the secure, he presents those who are self-sufficient and, though they do not need other people, enjoy healthy relationships with others. His weak characters, on the other hand, are torn by conflicts within themselves. They lack warm relationships with others, yet they cannot long survive without them.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine Frost's use in his poetry of ambivalent views of nature, of varieties of human character, and of interrelationships between man and nature. Some scholarly work has been done in this area, notably John Lynen's book The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (1960) and Lawrance Thompson's work Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost (1942), but there has been no detailed study made of the interrelationships of Frost's characters and their environment. In this thesis, the contention is that the view of nature presented in Frost's poems is often directly related to the character's subjective response to it. Thus, the indifference of nature is seen in a benevolent light by some of his characters, while the harsh neutrality, when observed by others, assumes fiercely hostile proportions. In the demonstration of this point, therefore, it will be necessary first to present reflections of nature as the poet describes it--benevolent, violent, indifferent; and next, to present his characters--the weak and the strong--with all the variations that make up the two main groups, for these basic characteristics determine the individual's response to his surroundings. After these two areas have been carefully defined, a presentation and discussion of the thesis contention follows.

Such a study of Frost's poetry should be of value to anyone interested in his works, for it presents a critical analysis of his characters, of his use of nature as a variable background, and of the interrelationship between man and nature.

The most useful primary sources for this thesis have been the editions of Robert Frost's poems published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, The Complete Works of Robert Frost (1949), and In the Clearing (1962). These two volumes contain all the published Frost poetry.

In addition to previously mentioned critical books, the most valuable secondary sources, all of which have provided explicit discussions of Frost's poetry, have been The Dimensions of Robert Frost (1958) by Reginald L. Cook; Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost (1960) by George W. Nitchie; A Swinger of Birches (1959) by Sidney Cox; and "On Robert Frost" in the Massachusetts Review, IV (Winter, 1963) by Robert Frances, Charles W. Cole, and Reginald L. Cook. Two biographies, The Trial by Existence by Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant and The Aim Was Song by Jean Gould, give detailed background views of the poet, his personality and life. The Aim Was Song, especially, has been of value because it calls attention to the parallels between events in Frost's life and those that appear in his poetry.

Three collections of Robert Frost's letters also have provided a clearer understanding of the man as well as the poet. These volumes are Selected Letters of Robert Frost (1964), edited by Lawrance Thompson, The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer (1963), edited by Louis Untermeyer; and the book by Margaret Bartlett Anderson, Robert Frost and John Bartlett: The Record of a Friendship (1963).

CHAPTER II

FROST'S AMBIVALENT VIEWS OF NATURE

The several opposing attitudes concerning man and nature expressed in the poetry of Robert Frost reflect apparent incongruities in his own life. Most readers and critics think of Frost as a poet of New England, the area he employs most often as a background for his verse. But Robert Frost was born and lived the first eleven years of his life, 1874-1885, in California, where his parents had settled soon after their marriage. His father, William Prescott Frost, Jr., a native of New England, was a political radical, and his mother, Belle Moodie Frost, was a Scottish refugee teacher. Because Robert had a tendency toward consumption, they did not send the frail young boy to school, but frail or not, he was a lover of the out-of-doors. With his father, with playmates, or alone he roamed the countryside around San Francisco, fascinated by the great forests, the mountains, the sea, and the cliffs. Several of his later poems are products of his imaginative interests at this early age along the California coast.

Frost's father died of tuberculosis in 1885, leaving impoverished his wife and two children, who were forced to return to his family in

New England. To support her young children, Mrs. Frost returned to the classroom as a teacher, and Robert entered a formal school for the first time at the age of twelve. Life in New England was difficult for the mother because money was hard to come by. Robert worked summers as a farm hand, thus acquiring through personal experience a lasting knowledge of the New England character and way of life. During his free time he roamed the countryside gaining first-hand familiarity with the fields, flowers, trees, and birds of the region, all of which he later transmuted into his poetry. After marrying his high school sweetheart, Elinor White, in 1893, and after giving up teaching school as a means to make a living, Frost settled his family on a small plot of land near West Derry, New Hampshire, where he took up farming, rather unsuccessfully.

A New Englander at heart and by ancestry, Robert Frost had a personal knowledge of the area, and he recognized that the historical background and climatic environment of the region had helped to shape the character of its people. New England had once been the center of great activity, but as the nation had expanded to the west, the area had gradually lost its importance. Many New Englanders had joined the westward movement, and the ones left are those who are either strong and determined enough to make a living in a rugged land or those too weak to attempt the move. The strong are stubborn or they would long ago have given up the struggle with the land and climate, and this

obstinate, perhaps proud, perhaps merely ornery, streak in the people keeps them on their land. The farmer's fortitude, endurance, and inner strength enable him to accomplish his daily tasks in spite of adversity in his isolation. For the hill farmers are often isolated. The New England winter guarantees that. Such periods of isolation as the farmers undergo tend to make them a reserved people, feeling no compulsion to speak unless they have something to say.

Through his poems, Robert Frost expresses well-defined views of nature and of the differing relationships between it and his human characters. He sees it generally as a non-reasoning, non-feeling entity, a reflexive cycle, and he expresses an objectively realistic view of nature as neutral and indifferent toward man. This is the basic aspect displayed in his poems. At times, however, he appears to portray ambivalent views of this basic concept. On the one hand, his characters may be influenced in their response to their surroundings by the romantic view which sees nature as a revelation of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. And under such influence they find what seems to be nature's benevolence toward man. In such poems there is no apparent conflict, and the atmosphere of peace, harmony, and man's kinship with the natural element is the source of the pleasure. On the other hand, the characters may respond more in the naturalistic sense which views the world of nature as a hostile, war-like environment within which there is a perpetual struggle.

The particular aspects of nature expressed in Frost's poems are often determined by the subjective responses of his characters to their surroundings. He shows people who are emotionally strong, either within themselves or through human ties, as feeling secure in their relationship with a benevolent nature because they are able to accept it and its movements without fear. They are able to cope with the violence that also seems a part of the natural world. Those, however, who are alone, weak, and fearful find in their environment a reason for anxiety, and it is in their eyes that nature assumes hostile and malevolent qualities.

Robert Frost's first-hand knowledge of the natural elements has been the chief source in his poems of that feeling of close relationship between his characters and their surroundings. Though his attitude at times borders on the romantic, it is without sentimentality; he seems simply to be aware that any appreciation of nature's beauty must, after all, be human. Therefore, in his poems he observes the rural scenes through the eyes of a normally strong individual who is able to see and to express the quintessence of his surroundings. The subjective emotional condition of the person is a major factor in determining what aspect of nature seems most apparent. Under certain conditions natural phenomena or events seem to evidence a benevolent interest on the part of a genial nature, whereas under others the violence of natural forces suggests an undercurrent of hostility and antipathy toward man. Of his

poems expressing this seeming benignity, one of the loveliest is Frost's "Rose Pogonias," which describes the sense of peace and pleasure felt by a couple who happen upon a small meadow smothered with spring flowers.

A saturated meadow,
 Sun-shaped and jewel-small,
 A circle scarcely wider
 Than the trees around were tall;
 Where winds were quite excluded,
 And the air was stifling sweet
 With the breath of many flowers, --
 A temple of the heat.

There we bowed us in the burning,
 As the sun's right worship is,
 To pick where none could miss them
 A thousand orchises;
 For though the grass was scattered,
 Yet every second spear
 Seemed tipped with wings of color,
 That tinged the atmosphere.

We raised a simple prayer
 Before we left the spot,
 That in the general mowing
 That place might be forgot;
 Or if not all so favored,
 Obtain such grace of hours,
 That none should mow the grass there
 While so confused with flowers.¹

The poem as a whole conveys a sense of nature's genial warmth.

The meadow itself is "sun-shaped," a "temple in the heat," and the sun

¹Robert Frost, "Rose Pogonias," Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York, 1962), p. 19. Subsequent references to Frost's poetry are taken from this edition unless otherwise indicated.

casts its rays directly on the backs of the flower pickers. But the sun's heat does not sear and hurt. Rather it is like the heaviness felt when one walks from the shade of trees into bright sunlight. The fragrance of the flowers in the spring sunlight is a heady perfume to the people stepping into the scene. Their senses are overwhelmed with the bloom of the small meadow. They feel the sun, inhale the "stifling sweetness," and see the loveliness of a sun-drenched meadow filled with flowers. The small patch is a "temple," a protected place where nothing disturbs the peacefulness, the quiet of beauty. Frost heightens the atmosphere of peace, holiness, and serenity through the use of such images as a "temple of the heat," where the humans "bowed" as if in "worship" of the sun and "raised a simple prayer." The object of their prayer is the "grace of hours" that the loveliness might be missed by the blades of the mowers. The subjective imagery of the sun-lit meadow in terms of temple, prayer, worship and grace reemphasizes the fact that Frost describes nature through the eyes and senses of his characters. The speaker recollecting the experience and describing the scene has a religious faith so deeply ingrained that he feels a spiritual relationship with nature, because, in his mind, it is associated with God and is expressive of his worship. As a result of this inner response, the natural world is to him a place of peace. But as a man familiar with the facts of farm life, he realizes that the mowers must soon come to this spot and destroy the present scene. The human response to the

loveliness of the flower-filled meadow is the desire that it be spared by the mowers until the blooms fade. It has been a source of peace and a symbol of the benevolence of its creator, and the speaker is reluctant to see it destroyed.

As in "Rose Pogonias" he evokes a sense of the peacefulness of the temple in the woods, in "Mowing" Frost recreates the mood of a man content with his work. Through a harmony of the senses, emotions, and intellect in the act of mowing hay, the farmer achieves a communion with nature. Yet he is aware of the latent evil underlying its beauty.

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
 And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
 What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
 Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
 Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound--
 And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
 It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
 Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
 Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
 To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
 Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
 (Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
 The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
 My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.²

Every action, thought, and sense of the farmer combine into the satisfaction derived from his immediate experience, through which he is aware of a feeling of kinship with his surroundings. Everything concerning his actions, the grass he is cutting, the trees in the nearby woods, the whisper of the scythe, the sunlight upon his back, the snake

²Frost, "Mowing," p. 25.

and the flowers at his feet--all combine to contribute to his pleasure. The farmer's delight does not have to depend on possible rewards for his labor; it comes from his immediate experience: "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." He enjoys the communion with nature that is the result of the blending of his senses, emotions, and intellect in his work. Yet there is a suggestion still of the ambivalence, the duality of nature, in the mention of the flower and the snake, the first symbolizing the good in nature and the second the evil. The man, through the harmony of his head and heart in an experience of the senses, effects a sense of communion with nature, of a reconciliation of its dual aspects, and of an over-all feeling of its benignity.

An appropriate poem to follow a discussion of "Mowing" is one that could be considered its companion, "The Tuft of Flowers," although Frost did not place them side by side in A Boy's Will, in which both appear. The first is concerned with the mower who enjoys both his work and his surroundings; he is the man making hay. "The Tuft of Flowers" speaks of the person who follows the mower after several hours to turn the cut grass so that it may dry more thoroughly. He finds the meadow deserted, although he looks and listens for his predecessor. He would like to have human companionship, but he must forego it and, instead, work physically alone. He accepts the fact that a man must depend upon himself whether he is alone or with others. But nature does not leave him to his solitude. A butterfly in search of a flower

directs his eye to a tuft of flowers the early morning scythe had spared, and Frost explains in the closing lines:

The mower in the dew had loved them thus,
By leaving them to flourish, not for us,

Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him,
But from sheer morning gladness at the brim.

The butterfly and I had lit upon,
Nevertheless, a message from the dawn,

That made me hear the wakening birds around,
And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground,

And feel a spirit kindred to my own;
So that henceforth I worked no more alone;

But glad with him, I worked as with his aid,
And weary, sought at noon with him the shade;

And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech
With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.

"Men work together," I told him from the heart,
"Whether they work together or apart."³

The raker recognizes in his fellow but absent worker a kindred spirit, one who also finds pleasure in the natural surroundings. He does not presume that the flowers were left for him, but he understands the gladness that prompted the act. He identifies himself more closely with nature by commenting that both he and the butterfly "had lit upon . . . a message from the dawn." Through such closeness he makes contact both with the companion worker and with nature. The kindred

³Frost, "The Tuft of Flowers," p. 32.

feeling removes him from his isolation and is the source of his understanding that "men work together . . . whether they work together or apart." His comprehension, however, hinges on his reactions to his surroundings. He is the man who, although lonely and seeking companionship, when he finds none, can accept his enforced isolation philosophically.

And I must be, as he had been, --alone,

"As all must be," I said within my heart,
"Whether they work together or apart."⁴

Because of his inner strength and self-sufficiency he can accept nature on its own terms as inherently friendly. Because of his perceptiveness, his attention is attracted to the butterfly, which in turn leads him to the tuft of flowers, to a realization, and to an inner communion with his fellow man and with nature. He has learned that distance does not necessarily separate companions.

"Men work together," I told him from the heart,
"Whether they work together or apart."⁵

As has been noted, in "The Tuft of Flowers" the broadening of the farmer's understanding is initiated by the chance movement of the butterfly, drawing his attention to the flowers. Frost's effective use of the device in this poem--man's understanding hinging upon a chance event within nature--suggests a similar device in "Dust of Snow":

⁴Ibid., p. 31.

⁵Ibid., p. 32.

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.⁶

Frost ascribes a kindly, benevolent influence to a seemingly ordinary event within a snow-covered countryside. By accident the crow is the cause of snow falling upon the speaker's head. There is no logical reason why snow sifting onto his head should effect a change of heart. He has been depressed, perhaps because of disappointments with other people, but there is no explanation given for his low spirits. What is important is that he is touched by his environment and by that contact his spirits are uplifted. A seemingly benevolent event occurs, and the man views it as an intended kindness. There is no purposed good will in the deed, for the movement is in the nature of an accident. The crow happens to light upon one of the branches of the hemlock, a Christmas-type tree, or, already there, restively alters his position; the lightly heaped snow on the tree scatters to the ground except for the handful that settles on the poet's head as he happens to pass at that moment. Even such a brief contact with nature, its smallest movement in his direction, cheers him. His spirits are uplifted. The poet's

⁶Frost, "Dust of Snow," p. 270.

subjective response to the crow's accidental movement is evidently the source of any benevolence that he ascribes to nature.

→ Along with the poems that portray a sense of friendliness on nature's part, Robert Frost also presents the natural world as harsh, hostile, and often violent. He finds the most obvious examples of this aspect in the severe New England winter, when the wind beats against anything in its way, shrieking an almost animal-like wail, and the snow buries all that cannot dig out from under it. Frost notes its fearful beauty, and he takes advantage of the beauty, power, and treachery of the winter to provide a background for his characters and their responses. In two such poems he portrays the fierceness of nature and the reactions to it of two different men. In the first, "Willful Homing," the protagonist seems a strong, self-confident man:

He peers out shrewdly into the thick and swift.

Since he means to come to a door he will come to a door⁷

He describes in the second, "Storm Fear," a man who is not so sure of himself.

And my heart owns a doubt
Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
And save ourselves unaided.⁸

⁷Frost, "Willful Homing," p. 456.

⁸Frost, "Storm Fear," p. 13.

To these two individuals, the cold of a winter night means different things. Again, it is the human reaction to acts of nature that conveys to the reader the poet's impression of nature. No matter what aspect of its several faces Frost chooses to present, the element of human response is the determining factor for identifying the particular countenance.

Despite the viciousness of winter's force depicted in "Willful Homing," the man survives. His obstinacy, strength, and endurance determine his success.

It is getting dark and time he drew to a house,
 But the blizzard blinds him to any house ahead.
 The storm gets down his neck in an icy souse
 That sucks his breath like a wicked cat in bed.

The snow blows on him and off him, exerting force
 Downward to make him sit astride a drift,
 Imprint a saddle and calmly consider a course.
 He peers out shrewdly into the thick and swift.

Since he means to come to a door he will come to a door,
 Although so compromised of aim and rate
 He may fumble wide of the knob a yard or more,
 And to those concerned he may seem a little late.⁹

There is a suggestion of active antagonism, that the storm intends to destroy the lone human being who dares the icy expanse. The blizzard has an animal-like quality; it is "like a wicked cat." But the protagonist is not one to be overcome, and the fact that he can "sit astride a drift, / Imprint a saddle and calmly consider a course," softens the sense of fierceness that could be expressed in a description of such a storm.

⁹Frost, "Willful Homing," p. 456.

Because he is not intimidated by the blizzard, he does not find its violence overpowering.

Although the weather in "Willful Homing" is described as bestial and violent, it does not produce such a feeling of horror as does the more stealthy, hostile cold of the winter storm in "Storm Fear":

When the wind works against us in the dark,
 And pelts with snow
 The lower chamber window on the east,
 And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
 The beast,
 "Come out! Come out!"--
 It costs no inward struggle not to go,
 Ah, no!
 I count our strength,
 Two and a child,
 Those of us not asleep subdued to mark
 How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length, --
 How drifts are piled,
 Dooryard and road ungraded,
 Till even the comforting barn grows far away,
 And my heart owns a doubt
 Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
 And save ourselves unaided.¹⁰

Here, as in the previous poem, Frost notes the blizzard's beast-like qualities as it attempts to subdue the isolated farm family. The animal aspects of the elements, however, are more heavily emphasized: the wind "whispers with a sort of stifled bark, / The beast," and the cold "creeps as the fire dies at length." In both verses the wind and snow fiercely pelt the humans, but this time they are protected by the shelter of their home. In these lines the threat takes on a more malevolent tone

¹⁰Frost, "Storm Fear," p. 13.

because there is a suggestion that the family might not be able to survive without outside help. The storm isolates the house, cuts it off from even the comfort of the warm, domestic animals in the barn a short distance away. The two adults have not the strength to marshal their courage. Instead of looking within themselves for sustenance as the lone man does in "Willful Homing," they depend upon contact with civilization. Their weakness lends force to the storm, and the observer senses the danger in its malevolence.

Both poems, "Storm Fear" and "Willful Homing," portray nature as a bestial, violent element, but one contains a sense of terror because of the weakness in the humans' reactions to the natural world, whereas the other imparts the sense of calm resistance to a storm that is intense but not overly worrisome to the man, solitary but strong within himself, who must face it, does, and survives. Frost thus intimates that nature itself is neither good, bad, terrifying, nor fierce but that it is the individual's reaction to it that makes it appear so.

Robert Frost portrays the seeming malevolence of man's surroundings in poems with backgrounds other than a violent blizzard. He imparts an illusion of malignancy within a basically calm autumn scene in "Bereft."

Where had I heard this wind before
 Change like this to a deeper roar?
 What would it take my standing there for,
 Holding open a restive door,

Looking down hill to a frothy shore?
 Summer was past and day was past.
 Somber clouds in the west were massed.
 Out in the porch's sagging floor,
 Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
 Blindly struck at my knee and missed.
 Something sinister in the tone
 Told me my secret must be known:
 Word I was in the house alone
 Somehow must have gotten abroad,
 Word I was in my life alone,
 Word I had no one left but God. ¹¹

The gusting wind takes on a sinister tone and the darkening sky is ominous to the man who is alone possibly for the first time in such a complete way. There is an impression given that he has recently lost a loved one, probably his wife, and he cannot adjust to his aloneness. His isolation weakens him emotionally, and he fears even the ordinary movements of nature. The house, a shore dwelling, is probably the family summer home. Now the lonely survivor has returned to the scene of earlier happiness, but in his aloneness and weakness, he reads sinister overtones into nature's ordinary autumnal movements. He sees it as an aggressive, evil force, the "deepening roar" of the wind assuming a bestial tone to his ear. The leaves stirred by the gusty wind assume serpent-like form, hiss and strike at him but miss. He sees himself surrounded by the evil and violence in nature. But, although depressed and lonely, the man does not despair; he is inwardly strong. According to John Lynen in The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost, the fact

¹¹Frost, "Bereft," p. 317.

that the speaker can mirror in the landscape the full extent of his loneliness attests to his capacity for courage.¹² Once the raw wounds of his loss have healed over, he will be able to face life and nature without the fearfulness of which he is now the victim. The hint of this hope is in the last line, "Word I had no one left but God." God does not seem to give much comfort at this point, but the fact that the lonely, sorrowing man even remembers Him indicates that the help will eventually reach him. Once the initial shock of his solitariness wears away, the lone man will no longer see nature in its present threatening light.

Many of Frost's poems thus show that the ambivalence of nature lies in the subjective views of human observers. Some feel a sense of friendliness with their surroundings and are able to meet with courage and fortitude the occasional harshness and violence found therein. Most others, however, find that nature is neutral and indifferent toward them. The extent of Frost's consuming interest in the interrelationship of man and nature is reflected in the fact that the majority of his poems portray people, some strong and some weak, in an immediate relationship with the surroundings upon which their existence depends.

Frost had often witnessed the dynamic forces of nature at work in his New England where, as families moved away, the wild-flowers,

¹²John Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven, 1960), p. 153.

woods, and vines repossessed the fields and yards. Perhaps "Ghost House" is such an abandoned farm. The poet's memories still dwell in the house he knows well, although nothing but the cellar walls remain. In the first four verses he shows that nature cannot completely reclaim the dwelling as long as it exists in a man's memory, but it has physically covered over the traces of human existence. He suggests the oncoming encroachment of nature in his description, in the fourth verse, of the forewarning the whippoorwill gives of his arrival.

I dwell in a lonely house I know
 That vanished many a summer ago,
 And left no trace but the cellar walls,
 And a cellar in which the daylight falls,
 And the purple-stemmed wild raspberries grow.

O'er ruined fences the grapevines shield
 The woods come back to the mowing field;
 The orchard tree has grown one copse
 Of new wood and old where the woodpecker chops;
 The footpath down to the well is healed.

I dwell with a strangely aching heart
 In that vanished abode there far apart
 On that disused and forgotten road
 That has no dust-bath now for the toad.
 Night comes; the black bats tumble and dart;

The whippoorwill is coming to shout
 And hush and cluck and flutter about:
 I hear him begin far enough away
 Full many a time to say his say
 Before he arrives to say it out.¹³

¹³Frost, "Ghost House," p. 6.

The poet experiences a feeling of sorrow that the couple who worked out their lives on this farm have had the evidences of their labor covered so quickly. In the closing lines of the poem, he mourns that there is so little left to tell of the close life the farm couple had, their companionship continuing even into the grave. Nature is insensitive to the love, joy, and sorrow that went into the making of this home, and, once the family is buried and unable to halt its daily inroads, nature quickly retakes its own. The ravages of time topple the house, leaving but an open cellar which the wild vines soon cover. The road, no longer used, is overgrown by the grass, flowers, and trees. The irresistible forces of nature reabsorb what man had cleared and heal over all his traces. Everything the couple toiled so long and hard to produce is fallen into decay, reabsorbed, and transmuted.

In a variation of the theme, Frost shows the creatures of the wild to be as indifferent to human failures and grief as are the inanimate surroundings. As the underbrush and the elements indifferently overrun and obliterate the deserted farmhouse in "Ghost House," so also the birds and vegetation in "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" take over the abandoned barn with no concern for the loss and tragedy of the people who had constructed it. Fire had destroyed the house, leaving only the chimney standing. A wind shift had saved the barn from the same fate, and it was left to decay.

The birds that came to it through the air
 At broken windows flew out and in,
 Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh
 From too much dwelling on what has been.

Yet for them the lilac renewed its leaf,
 And the aged elm, though touched with fire;
 And the dry pump flung up an awkward arm;
 And the fence post carried a strand of wire.

For them there was really nothing sad.
 But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,
 One had to be versed in country things
 Not to believe the phoebes wept.¹⁴

The poet sees the farm abandoned after a fire, deserted by a family not strong enough to reopen the battle with their surroundings. All that remained of their toil and hopes, they had left to inevitable decay. The elm tree, however, "though touched with fire," grows again each spring as the lilac blooms. The birds accept the empty barn for their own. The inexorable cycle of the wilderness continues, ignoring the vestiges of human, thinking life. The lilac and the elm, drawn into the domestic circle through the family's enjoyment of their beauty, continue to quicken each spring with no thought for the absent people. The poet expresses wryly what he knows from experience--that nature does not weep for man's failures. Only people who have lived in the country can understand.

In portraying the indifference and lack of response of the natural world toward mankind, Frost may use either a narrow farmland scene or the expanses of the universe. The universe is incapable of concern,

¹⁴Frost, "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," p. 300.

understanding, or sympathy for humanity. The brief poem, "Stars," thus describes the stars clustering far above the earth as though they have an interest in man's welfare; but well does Frost realize that the stars are blind to the fate of humanity.

How countlessly they congregate
 O'er our tumultuous snow,
 Which flows in shapes as tall as trees
 When wintry winds do blow! --

As if with keenness for our fate,
 Our faltering few steps on
 To white rest, and a place of rest
 Invisible at dawn, --

And yet with neither love nor hate,
 Those stars like some snow-white
 Minerva's snow-white marble eyes
 Without the gift of sight.¹⁵

Frost describes the stars hovering over the earth as though, interested in human fate, like Minerva, protectress of civilized life, they want to provide guidance in the struggle against the violence of a "tumultuous" snow storm that threatens engulfment. Seemingly they watch over the few steps the individual takes across the snow-covered ground toward his home and nightly rest. But, on a higher plane, they also seem to observe the "faltering" steps of humanity as it treads its way from birth to death, the white rest. The speaker, however, knows the truth and accepts it; the stars are like a snow-white stone Minerva whose sightless marble eyes look on with "neither love nor hate."

¹⁵Frost, "Stars," p. 12.

They are neutral in that the outcome of the struggle has no meaning to them. No plight of man can evoke their sympathy.

In "Come In," another poem with a woodland background, Frost again portrays nature's disinterest in man. He describes the thrush's song and the seeming invitation it carries upon the still air.

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

But no, I was out for stars:
I would not come in.
I meant not even if asked,
And I hadn't been.¹⁶

As in "Stars," the poet indicates that nature's attitude, at first, seems almost to be one of interest in human experience. But in both poems he consciously stops himself short of the romantic view of nature. In "Come In" he describes the call of the bird as emitting from a "pillared dark," a place for lament. The gloominess of the woods makes it easier for him to overcome the temptation to enter the forest; he does not intend to change his route which leads to enjoyment of light and space, but no invitation has been given. He accepts what there is to accept and does not pretend to see what is not there.

In an extension of this view, not only does nature seem not to reach out to humans, but it definitely ignores one who attempts to make it take

¹⁶Frost, "Come In," p. 446.

notice of him. This aspect of its "active" indifference Frost expresses well in "On Going Unnoticed":

As vain to raise a voice as a sigh
 In the tumult of free leaves on high.
 What are you in the shadow of trees
 Engaged up there with the light and breeze?

Less than the coral-root you know
 That is content with the daylight low,
 And has no leaves at all of its own;
 Whose spotted flowers hang meanly down.

You grasp the bark by a rugged pleat,
 And look up small from the forest's feet.
 The only leaf it drops goes wide,
 Your name not written on either side.

You linger your little hour and are gone,
 And still the woods sweep leafily on,
 Not even missing the coral-root flower
 You took as a trophy of the hour.¹⁷

Of just what concern, he asks, does a man think that he, a lowly earth-bound creature, is to a tall, kingly tree whose leaves are so high above the earth? He is of no more value than the mean coral-root flower, and he is no more missed when he leaves than is the small flower he takes with him. The woods do not need him; they are self-sufficient, and in their stately independence they ignore the insignificant human who pulls at their trunks. Each generation of man lingers its "little hour" and passes from this life. The woods remain, unconcerned.

¹⁷Frost, "On Going Unnoticed," p. 309.

Though man may be forever unnoticed by nature, he continues to crave a response whether from nature or other humans. If without human companionship, he attempts to evoke the response from his environment, but the surroundings have no interest in man's need, as Frost demonstrates in "The Most of It":

He thought he kept the universe alone;
 For all the voice in answer he could wake
 Was but the mocking echo of his own
 From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.
 Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
 He would cry out on life, that what it wants
 Is not its own love back in copy speech,
 But counter-love, original response.
 And nothing ever came of what he cried
 Unless it was the embodiment that crashed
 In the cliff's talus on the other side,
 And then in the far distant water splashed.
 But after a time allowed for it to swim,
 Instead of proving human when it neared
 And someone else additional to him,
 As a great buck it powerfully appeared,
 Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,
 And landed pouring like a waterfall,
 And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
 And forced the underbrush--and that was all.¹⁸

The lone man's cry brings forth no direct reply from nature. It does not comprehend his need, for it cannot. There is no reaction on its part. Only his own voice carries across the lake and reverberates from the cliff. At the sound of the splash in the water in the distance, he waits expectantly, only to have his hopes dashed when a great buck steps ashore rather than the human he had hoped for. The solitary man

¹⁸Frost, "The Most of It," p. 451.

has not even the comfort of a realistic echo of his own voice, but he finds it necessary to struggle for an original response from somewhere, because as an emotional-rational being he needs an acknowledgement of his existence.

Nature's indifference is experienced not only by human beings, according to Frost, but by the creatures of the wild as well. Struggles between various creations no more evoke a response from those not directly involved than do struggles between humans, and results which on a human scale would be tragic are ignored on the natural scale. He presents a rather stark picture in "Range-Finding":

The battle rent a cobweb diamond-strung
 And cut a flower beside a ground bird's nest
 Before it stained a single human breast.
 The stricken flower bent double and so hung.
 And still the bird revisited her young.
 A butterfly its fall had dispossessed
 A moment sought in air his flower of rest,
 Then lightly stooped to it and fluttering clung.
 On the bare upland pasture there had spread
 O'ernight 'twixt mullein stalks a wheel of thread
 And straining cables wet with silver dew.
 A sudden passing bullet shook it dry.
 The indwelling spider ran to greet the fly,
 But finding nothing, sullenly withdrew.¹⁹

Subtly satirical of human civilization in comparison with the natural state, Frost combines in this poem the ambivalent elements of nature--beauty, violence, and indifference. There is, of course, the man-made violence, the bullet that tore the cobweb and injured the flower;

¹⁹Frost, "Range-Finding," p. 159.

but offsetting the violence there are expressed the beauty of the flower, the poise and balance of the butterfly, and the care of the mother bird for her young. On the other hand, there is the potential violence of the spider running to "greet the fly." Encompassing the attributes of violence and beauty, however, is the overriding sense of organic indifference. The torn cobweb, the result of the spider's toil, and the broken flower, both tragic in their implications if viewed with a sympathetic human heart, are not mourned for within nature. The bird, so instinctively careful for her little ones, is indifferent to the ills of her fellow creations. The butterfly, who was in such close contact with the flower at the time it was stricken, does not flutter back to it to offer comfort; it stoops to it to resume its place of rest. It is insensitive to the hurt done to the bloom. The rage of the battle arouses the spider, who emerges to take its enemy but, finding nothing of interest to him, "sullenly" withdraws. The main characteristics of these elements of nature are an instinctive response to what concerns their own individual existence and a complete indifference toward all that goes on around them, yet does not pertain to them. This indifference on such a small scale can take on gigantic proportions when turned toward man who, for the most part, feels the need of a response of some sort.

Because nature's creatures are governed by instinct, they do not struggle to rearrange their environment nor worry about the future as humans do. Frost understands this instinctive acceptance of whatever

comes their way as an element of that general indifference man recognizes in them. Because of this disinterested acceptance, the bird, spider, and butterfly of "Range-Finding" continue to live without any emotional reaction to the tragedies that occur around them. They accept the inevitable as do the birds Frost describes in "Acceptance":

When the spent sun throws up its rays on cloud
 And goes down burning into the gulf below,
 No voice in nature is heard to cry aloud
 At what has happened. Birds, at least, must know
 It is the change to darkness in the sky.
 Murmuring something quiet in her breast,
 One bird begins to close a faded eye;
 Or overtaken too far from his nest,
 Hurrying low above the grove, some waif
 Swoops just in time to his remembered tree.
 At most he thinks or twitters softly, "Safe!
 Now let the night be dark for all of me.
 Let the night be too dark for me to see
 Into the future. Let what will be, be."²⁰

Robert Frost's closeness to nature and his love and understanding of it form the underlying elements of his descriptions of settings. Whether he portrays the sympathetic benignity, the antipathetic violence, or the passive indifference of the nature he knows, his words give proof of the genuine respect he bears for it. He feels keenly that men may know a sure, steady contentment through activities which place them in immediate contact with their environment, if they are strong enough to accept also the harshness that is an inherent part of it. The seeming malevolence, or violence, found in the nature of every region, Frost also

²⁰Frost, "Acceptance," p. 313.

respects. But here, too, the person's attitude, his reaction, determines his reward in the experience. Frost's view is that, for the most part, it is up to man to make the relationship assume the direction he prefers. For the strong there is benevolence in the association, and the violence of nature does not overwhelm. For the weak, however, there is no sympathy or understanding, and the natural forces become destructive. Man is the determining factor in the relationship. He is the central and primary element in Robert Frost's poetry.

CHAPTER III

FROST'S CHARACTERS--TWO TYPES

The several faces of nature that form the background for Robert Frost's rural poetry play a definite part in the lives of the people he is concerned with. The harsh violence, the neutral indifference, and the seeming benignancy are intertwined with the responses of the characters which form the focal point of his verses. The people he places in his rugged country settings are stubborn or they would not remain to struggle for survival on this land, and they are reserved as a result of enduring periods of enforced isolation because of climatic conditions. Most of all, they are individuals who act as their consciences dictate and who hold their own opinions. They are a hardy people who are not afraid of work. When hired for a job, they do it right and quickly. In some a tendency toward insanity is brought to the surface by the prolonged periods of isolation and the hardships of New England hill-country life. All of these traits enter somewhat into the make-up of Robert Frost's characters. He understood them because he had lived among them and was one of them. His personal knowledge, combined with his poetic skill, produced pictures of such people within their natural environment that are unequalled in sharpness and clarity. His characters are real to the reader because they were true to the experience of Robert Frost.

In most of his poems, Frost portrays either of two polar types, the strong and the weak, although there are varying shades within each category. Among the strong are those who are secure because of their close relationships with their fellow beings. Within their circle of fellowship there is security and strength. But Frost recognizes even more the mettle of those who do not need the support of human friendships to face life successfully. Such are sufficient unto themselves. Fewer than the first, the second group of people Frost portrays are the weak. They have neither the courage nor the strength to face life (i. e. nature) alone, but, for many reasons, they are unable to reach out to their fellows for the understanding and help that they so desperately need. Compassion and aid through human relationships could possibly save them, but their inability to communicate with and respond to others binds them to their fate.

These are the two major types of people Robert Frost places in various relationships with the ambivalent aspects of nature. The strong face the indifference of their surroundings and endure; they confront the apparently hostile violence, and it loses some of its malevolence when met straightforwardly. When the weak encounter the cold indifference, they break; some quickly, some in an agonizingly slow process, but inevitably they break. The seemingly deliberate antagonism of their surroundings is the source of untold terrors; but it is the never-ending indifference that brings about their defeat. It is pertinent to note,

however, that Frost speaks far more often of the strong than he does of the weak. He once commented that man has only a slight advantage over nature--odds of fifty and one tenth to forty-nine and nine tenths.¹ But in his poems he speaks of man's triumph over or truce with his surroundings many more times than of man's failure, which suggests his belief that man's intellect, courage, endurance, and inner strength make the difference.

Close human relationships are an essential element in the make-up of many of Frost's characters who are at peace within themselves. He portrays this closeness between unmarried couples as well as married. And, in some cases, the bond is between people who do not even know each other or see each other but who sense the presence of another and derive security from that nearness. It is possible to draw upon examples of such relationships from the entire range of his poems, beginning with his first collection, A Boy's Will. Many of his poems that concern the companionship of a man and a woman give the impression that here is an experience that Robert Frost knows first hand. One aware of the devotion between the poet and his wife is even more inclined to see personal experience and love reflected in the lines as well as the universal theme illustrated. "Flower-Gathering" is such a poem:

¹Reginald L. Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York, 1958), p. 144.

I left you in the morning,
 And in the morning glow,
 You walked a way beside me
 To make me sad to go.
 Do you know me in the gloaming,
 Gaunt and dusty gray with roaming?
 Are you dumb because you know me not,
 Or dumb because you know?

All for me? And not a question
 For the faded flowers gay
 That could take me from beside you
 For the ages of a day?
 They are yours, and be the measure
 Of their worth for you to treasure,
 The measure of the little while
 That I've been long away.²

Frost is concerned here, on the surface, with a brief separation of lovers for the young man to spend the day walking and gathering flowers. But in the eyes of the lovers, the comparatively brief separation constitutes a long break. That the man is "gaunt and dusty gray with roaming" indicates a far longer walk, in the narrator's mind, than the span of a day would allow, for the separation weakens the man and makes whatever he is doing seem harder and longer. He comments upon the day's time as "the ages of a day," and "the little while/That I've been long away," so that the actual time of absence is magnified by love and loneliness. Though the time the couple spends together flies, the periods of separation seem endless, for neither is whole while the other is away. But, because of their closeness, they endure separation and nature seems

²Robert Frost, "Flower-Gathering," Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York, 1962), p. 18. Subsequent references to Frost's poetry are taken from this edition unless otherwise indicated.

kindly still. The loveliness the man enjoys during his walk is brought back in the flowers he gives upon his return to his loved one as a symbol of the love which bound them together even while apart. And in their common bond they can enjoy the "faded flowers gay," which, though wilted, still hold their loveliness for the couple who share them.

The separation of lovers tends to affect their outlook on life. And, as a result, in their eyes, their surroundings are not always beautiful and yielding of many flowers. At times the separation adds gloom to an already dark countryside, as does the lonely walk in the autumn for the young man in "A Late Walk":

When I go up through the mowing field,
 The headless aftermath,
 Smooth-laid like thatch with the heavy dew,
 Half closes the garden path.

And when I come to the garden ground,
 The whir of sober birds
 Up from the tangle of withered weeds
 Is sadder than any words.

A tree beside the wall stands bare,
 But a leaf that lingered brown,
 Disturbed, I doubt not, by my thought,
 Comes softly rattling down.

I end not far from my going forth
 By picking the faded blue
 Of the last remaining aster flower
 To carry again to you.³

³Frost, "A Late Walk," p. 11.

Throughout these lines Frost employs the imagery of death, destruction, dry barrenness. He speaks of the "headless aftermath" in the mowing field, the sadness of the "tangle of withered weeds," the bareness of the tree that loses its last dried brown leaf that rattles as it falls. The man is alone, and the natural sadness of an autumn scene is intensified by his solitude. His emotions control the view he has of the autumn fields around him. He cannot face the barrenness alone; his thought returns to his loved one, and at this thought he is encouraged and picks the last summer flower, already somewhat faded, to carry again, as he probably carried the abundant blooms of the warm weather, to her. It is the touch of summer that the two together will carry through the coming winter. And together they will ultimately greet the spring.

Autumn in "Going for Water" is as dry and barren as it is in "A Late Walk," but although it is described so, there is not so great a sense of desolation and destruction in these lines because the scene is viewed through the eyes of companions. And this joy in being together erases any gloominess or fear of their surroundings that the individual might otherwise have. They are so caught up in each other that they have neither the time nor the inclination to find danger or indifference within their environment. Their love colors their view of nature. The two people must cross the fields near their home to reach the brook which will supply water now that their well is dry.

Not loth to have excuse to go,
 Because the autumn eve was fair
 (Though chill), because the fields were ours,
 And by the brook our woods were there.

We ran as if to meet the moon
 That slowly dawned behind the trees,
 The barren boughs without the leaves,
 Without the birds, without the breeze.⁴

The isolation of the area does not have a depressing effect upon the two; rather, their mood is almost exhilaratory. This is their land, their woods. They are alive in their union and can rush out to meet the world. Their isolation in a place with trees "without the leaves, without the birds, without the breeze," has an opposite effect on them from the one that the same situation has upon the lonely man in the previous poem; they are together, whereas he is alone, at the beginning of the lines. And this couple almost sing in the pleasure of solitude their togetherness brings.

But once within the wood, we paused
 Like gnomes that hid us from the moon,
 Ready to run to hiding new
 With laughter when she found us soon.

Each laid on other a staying hand
 To listen ere we dared to look,
 And in the hush we joined to make
 We heard, we knew we heard the brook.⁵

Going across several fields in order to find water is not in itself an exciting task; however this couple, in the joy of being together, do

⁴Frost, "Going For Water," p. 26.

⁵Ibid.

not find their surroundings intimidating, but rather a source of pleasure. Instead of allowing nature's indifference to their needs to discourage them, i. e., the drying up of the well, they accept what they must and search out another source of water. And it is this joy in their closeness and the courage each derives from the other that enable them to hear the brook's ordinary sound as

A note as from a single place,
A slender tinkling fall that made
Now drops that floated on the pool
Like pearls, and now a silver blade.⁶

Much later in his career, Robert Frost again chose a brook as the unifying element of a poem, "West-Running Brook." In this, the couple concerned are not-long married, and they are still discovering the things that make up a marriage, although they have a basic understanding of each other. Here they learn that contraries are a part of marriage as they are a part of nature.

"The brook runs west. "

"West-running Brook then call it. "

(West-running Brook men call it to this day.)

"What does it think it's doing running west
When all the other country brooks flow east
To reach the ocean? It must be the brook
Can trust itself to go by contraries
The way I can with you--and you with me--
Because we're--we're--I don't know what we are.
What are we? "

⁶ibid.

"Young or new?"

"We must be something."⁷

The husband explains the "wave" in the stream from the practical male view, while the young wife fancies, in the feminine way which personalizes every event, that the brook is waving to her.

"That wave's been standing off this jut of shore
Ever since rivers, I was going to say,
Were made in heaven. It wasn't waved to us."

"It wasn't, yet it was. If not to you
It was to me--in an annunciation."⁸

The couple, as individuals, see the result of a quirk within usually methodical nature from two different views. The husband has a realistic explanation of the unusual brook, while the wife's reasoning is more personal and romanticized. Their differing opinions point up the contrarities of nature. But their companionship makes it also seem pleasant and amusing to them, further emphasizing the point that the observer's response is the determining factor in the particular view of nature presented. John Lynen observes that the framework of the poem is the symbol of the central idea--the contrary brook and the contrary opinions of the husband and wife. The dispute is a way of love-making, and it is fundamental to their love.⁹ The understanding is there

⁷Frost, "West-Running Brook," p. 327.

⁸Ibid., p. 328.

⁹John Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven, 1960), p. 123.

binding the two together, and it enables them to look for meaning in an unusual occurrence.

"Today will be the day

You said so."

"No, today will be the day

You said the brook was called West-running Brook."

"Today will be the day of what we both said."¹⁰

The reader senses in these concluding statements the love that enables each to defer to the other's opinion, a love which is the basis for the strength of union that the two will develop as the years pass.

The deferring of one to another loved one's opinion, as do the young couple in "West-Running Brook," is developed even more fully in "In the Homestretch." Frost portrays an elderly couple who have moved to a farm for their retirement and are in the process of settling the clutter that comes with moving. Together they came because one had wanted to move and the other loved enough to understand the desire. This love of the wife and the husband's concern for her are the core of a strong union which has endured for many years and which Frost indicates will continue. The first three lines reflect the wife's feeling about the move, as she is first observed without her husband.

¹⁰Frost, "West-Running Brook," p. 329.

She stood against the kitchen sink, and looked
 Over the sink out through a dusty window
 At weeds the water from the sink made tall. ¹¹

The choice of a home for their last years was the husband's. But she loves him and can be happy as long as he is. She has an inherent sense of humor and shows concern for others. When the mover asks where he should put yet another item:

"Put it on top of something that's on top
 Of something else," she laughed. "Oh, put it where
 You can tonight, and go. It's almost dark;
 You must be getting started back to town." ¹²

The husband wants very much for her to like their new home, and he inquires again

"And yet you think you like it, dear?"

"That's what you're so concerned to know! You hope
 I like it. Bang goes something big away
 Off there upstairs. 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, . . ." ¹³

She gently teases him for his questions and deftly parries them. She is glad because he is happy, and together they will have contented years. There is understanding between the two. He senses that she is not as completely sure of the move as he thinks he is, and, because he loves

¹¹ Frost, "In the Homestretch," p. 139.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 140.

her and wants her to be happy, he calls her away from the window that looks out on "country darkness."

"Come from that window where you see too much,
And take a livelier view of things from here."¹⁴

And she responds to his love, moves, and notices the darkness as the mover lights his pipe.

"See how it makes his nose-side bright, a proof
How dark it's getting. Can you tell what time
It is by that? Or by the moon? The new moon!
What shoulder did I see her over? Neither.
A wire she is of silver, as new as we
To everything. Her light won't last us long.
It's something, though, to know we're going to have her
Night after night and stronger every night
To see us through our first two weeks. . . ."¹⁵

The wife considers the new moon feminine and comments that she will be getting stronger every night, as will the wife. The wife will thus have the help of a new friend--the moon. By the time the first two weeks are past, the wife will have conquered the uneasiness of her tentative fear of nature and the dark through mutual love and togetherness. Once she has her cupboards straight, her curtains hung, and her furniture arranged, she will be able to stand up straight beside her husband to face their new lives. For the time that it takes her to reach this point, she must have feminine help, and the new moon will provide that.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁵Ibid.

The movers, not liking the idea of farming for themselves and thinking that surely the couple have moved to the country only because they had to and not because they wanted to, offer condolences:

"It's not so bad in the country, settled down,
When people're getting on in life. You'll like it."¹⁶

But their reaction shakes the husband. For an instant he is no longer so sure of the wisdom of the move, and he worries that his wife might regret it. But she, knowing his need, reassures him. He says:

"Did they make something lonesome go through you?
It would take more than them to sicken you--
Us of our bargain. But they left us so
As to our fate, like fools past reasoning with.
They almost shook me."

"It's all so much

What we have always wanted, I confess
It's seeming bad for a moment makes it seem
Even worse still, and so on down, down, down.
It's nothing; it's their leaving us at dusk."¹⁷

The task of finding the items necessary for supper cheers him, and he returns to musing about the adventure and happiness ahead for them. But he still tries to reassure himself that the move was what she wanted too.

"It's all so much what I have always wanted,
I can't believe it's what you wanted, too."

"Shouldn't you like to know?"

¹⁶Ibid., p. 142.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 143.

"I'd like to know
If it is what you wanted, then how much
You wanted it for me. "

"A troubled conscience!
You don't want me to tell if I don't know. "¹⁸

Again she parries his questions. The reader is touched by the situation between the two, but not with pity, for their love and understanding will bear them through the coming years. Because they are together they will find peace within their rural surroundings, for each derives from the other the courage necessary to face life.

In "The Investment" Frost again portrays a couple who are not wealthy in material things; their land is poor and produces little. But within their close relationship they draw strength, each from the other, and face life defiantly.

Over back where they speak of life as staying
("You couldn't call it living, for it ain't"),
There was an old, old house renewed with paint,
And in it a piano loudly playing.

Out in the plowed ground in the cold a digger,
Among unearthed potatoes standing still,
Was counting winter dinners, one a hill,
With half an ear to the piano's vigor.

All that piano and new paint back there,
Was it some money suddenly come into?
Or some extravagance young love had been to?
Or old love on an impulse not to care--

¹⁸Ibid., p. 145.

Not to sink under being man and wife,
But get some color and music out of life?¹⁹

The poet emphasizes the drab life in this particular area of New England and speaks of the new paint and piano in contrast to the background. For those whose lives are merely "staying" on their land, whose work produces meager dinners, a piano and fresh new paint appear incongruous. The poet makes three suggestions as to the reason for the "life" of the piano and the paint, but the third is the answer to his riddle, for this is the one he emphasizes. They are the symbols of the mutual support of the husband and wife against drab lives and dreary surroundings. This man and woman are not content to merely exist; they have the courage and the strength to fight against their bleak, insensitive environment. They do not bewail their plight; they alter their lives, together.

Frost indicates that a sense of companionship does not necessarily demand that two persons be in actual communication. The briefest hint of human life can make a solitary person feel less alone. "Were I In Trouble" is an example of a feeling of companionship and the resultant flow of courage between an isolated person and a stranger who is not even aware of the existence of his observer.

Where I could think of no thoroughfare,
Away on the mountain up far too high,
A blinding headlight shifted glare
And began to bounce down a granite stair
Like a star fresh fallen out of the sky.

¹⁹Frost, "The Investment," p. 337.

And I away in my opposite wood
 Am touched by that unintimate light
 And made feel less alone than I rightly should,
 For traveler there could do me no good
 Were I in trouble with night tonight.²⁰

The observer realizes that his fellow human, so far away, could be of no real help should he need it at this time, but his very existence is consoling, because for a while the solitary man feels less alone. The "unintimate light" from the traveler's car is a sign of other human life, and merely the sign is enough to give additional courage. The poet says, "Were I in trouble with night tonight," but there is no prospect of trouble for this man, for he is one who can see an ordinary car light as "Like a star fresh fallen out of the sky." In his self-sufficiency he sees beauty within his environment and associates it with non-natural objects. He will not have real trouble, but he may grow somewhat lonely. And the evidence of fellow human life, which is fellowship enough to make him feel less alone, will strengthen him and enhance his further appreciation of his surroundings.

In another poem Frost wrote of a type of man similar to the one in "Were I In Trouble." He is the woodsman, in "The Vantage Point," who is content in his isolated natural surroundings:

If tired of trees I seek again mankind,
 Well I know where to hie me--in the dawn,
 To a slope where the cattle keep the lawn.

²⁰Frost, "Were I In Trouble," p. 530.

There amid lolling juniper reclined,
 Myself unseen, I see in white defined
 Far off the homes of men, and farther still,
 The graves of men on an opposing hill,
 Living or dead, whichever are to mind.

And if by noon I have too much of these,
 I have but to turn on my arm, and lo,
 The sun-burned hillside sets my face aglow,
 My breathing shakes the bluet like a breeze,
 I smell the earth, I smell the bruised plant,
 I look into the crater of the ant.²¹

In the first stanza, the isolated man considers mankind, which he isolates from nature, and in the second, nature without humans. In his descriptions of the two areas, Frost indicates a greater attraction for the latter with his brighter, livelier images. But although he separates the two—man and nature--he does not indicate that the man has to choose between the two. He suggests that the man's natural surroundings alone are not enough to completely satisfy his needs. The man does turn his face to places of human habitation, but he does not need much from his fellows because he is already content within his environment. He is an example of Frost's characters who are secure enough within themselves to face life, for the most part alone, with only the slightest contact with their fellow beings. He finds that the alternation, of a sort, between distant association with humanity and close association with nature is refreshing in the change each brings. The source of his strength is both nature and humanity.

²¹Frost, "The Vantage Point," p. 24.

In "The Figure in the Doorway," Frost portrays another man living alone in the forest who does not find it necessary to be in contact with other people. The poet had caught a fleeting glimpse of the figure in the doorway of the mountain cabin as his train gathered speed after climbing a grade, but the glimpse is sufficient to reveal the man's whole existence.

The grade surmounted, we were riding high
 Through level mountains nothing to the eye
 But scrub oak, scrub oak and the lack of earth
 That kept the oaks from getting any girth.
 But as through the monotony we ran,
 We came to where there was a living man.
 His great gaunt figure filled his cabin door,
 And had he fallen inward on the floor,
 He must have measured to the further wall.
 But we who passed were not to see him fall.
 The miles and miles he lived from anywhere
 Were evidently something he could bear.
 He stood unshaken, and if grim and gaunt,
 It was not necessarily from want.
 He had the oaks for heating and for light.
 He had a hen, he had a pig in sight.
 He had a well, he had the rain to catch.
 He had a ten-by-twenty garden patch.
 Nor did he lack for common entertainment.
 That I assume was what our passing train meant
 He could look at us in our diner eating,
 And if so moved uncurl a hand in greeting. ²²

The reader is immediately made aware of the isolation of the cabin. The train is the only source of entertainment and contact with people for the cabin's solitary inhabitant. But Frost indicates the man's contentment by describing him as a "living man," not just a man living in a cabin.

²²Frost, "The Figure in the Doorway," p. 378.

He has everything he needs for his existence--food, water, light, heat. And, for his entertainment, he has the regularly passing train. The picture Robert Frost draws is one of a "great gaunt figure," who is at home within the wilderness and does not feel the need for close union with his fellow beings. He is where he is and what he is because he wants to be, and he is strong enough to meet his fellow beings with a wave of greeting if he finds a need for any contact with humanity, or he can stand as he does, self-sufficient and poised.

In a more humorous vein in "Brown's Descent," Frost portrays strength in a man who does not struggle uselessly against nature but who waits until the opportunity is his and then picks himself up and goes on his way. Brown is an independent soul whose farm is on a lofty hill so far north that in winter he must work by lantern light after half-past three. One night he lost his footing on the icy ground and the suddenness of the gusty wind "blew him out on the icy crust/That cased the world, and he was gone!" There was nothing to stop his slide, for everything was buried by the snow and ice, and his efforts to "stove a hole somewhere with his heel" failed.

He reeled, he lurched, he bobbed, he checked;
 He fell and made the lantern rattle
 (But saved the light from going out.)
 So halfway down he fought the battle,

Incredulous of his own bad luck.
 And then becoming reconciled
 To everything, he gave it up
 And came down like a coasting child.

"Well--I--be--" that was all he said,
 As standing in the river road,
 He looked back up the slippery slope
 (Two miles it was) to his abode.²³

But Frost adds, Brown never gave up hope of getting home just because he was faced with the steep, slippery slope. Instead,

He bowed with grace to natural law,
 And then went round it on his feet,
 After the manner of our stock;

 But now he snapped his eyes three times;
 Then shook his lantern, saying, "He's
 'Bout out!" and took the long way home
 By road, a matter of several miles.²⁴

Farmer Brown is adaptable to any situation. He knows his capabilities, and the suddenness of nature's movements cannot completely overwhelm him. If he finds, after making an attempt, that he cannot win in a struggle with his surroundings, he ceases to struggle and rides with the force. When nature completes its thrust, he picks himself up and goes on about his business. He does not read hostility or antagonism into the wildness of the wind; he accepts it for what it is--a natural force. Thus his wild encounter does not discourage him. He is too prudent to fight when it will not help the situation; and in his prudence he displays his strength.

²³Frost, "Brown's Descent," p. 173.

²⁴Ibid., p. 175.

Through such individuals as Farmer Brown who are not overpowered by their environment, Robert Frost speaks in universal terms of the courage and abilities of ordinary men, thus expressing his confidence in humanity in its relations with the natural world. Human beings do not have to be overcome by their surroundings--a belief he expresses in "Riders":

The surest thing there is is we are riders,
And though none too successful at it, guiders,
Through everything presented, land and tide
And now the very air, of what we ride.

What is this talked-of mystery of birth
But being mounted bareback on the earth?
We can just see the infant up astride,
His small fist buried in the bushy hide.

There is our wildest mount--a headless horse.
But though it runs unbridled off its course,
And all our blandishments would seem defied,
We have ideas yet that we haven't tried.²⁵

Like riders, people go through life attempting to guide their mounts through their surroundings, although they are, as Frost says, none too successful at it. The wildest mount is nature, which man tries to harness to follow his desires, but it will not accept the bridle and goes along its own way. However, the poet does not see defeat for individuals, because man still has intellect which produces the "ideas yet that we haven't tried," to use in his struggle with his environment. As long as man makes use of his advantage, he will find life an adventure; he will not find his opponent indomitable.

²⁵Frost, "Riders," p. 345.

Robert Frost often asserts his view that man does not have to be subdued by nature as long as he is strong enough to know his own mind and to follow the dictates of his intellect, and in "Sand Dunes" he again emphasizes his faith in the human ability to live within an alien environment:

Sea waves are green and wet,
 But up from where they die,
 Rise others vaster yet,
 And those are brown and dry.

They are the sea made land
 To come at the fisher town,
 And bury in solid sand
 The men she could not drown.

She may know cove and cape,
 But she does not know mankind
 If by any change of shape,
 She hopes to cut off mind.

Men left her a ship to sink:
 They can leave her a hut as well;
 And be but more free to think
 For the one more cast-off shell.²⁶

Frost draws a clear picture of the incessancy of nature's encroachment upon man in a seeming attempt to rid itself of him. The sea overcomes those it can, and the sand tries to bury those who escape the water. But man will not allow himself to be overwhelmed so easily; his mind is his point of survival. His ability to reason is his fraction of an advantage over his adversary. Nature cannot intimidate the mind of strong men, for they realize the advantage they possess in their intellect.

²⁶Frost, "Sand Dunes," p. 330.

Although Robert Frost has confidence in man's ability to reach an armed truce with his environment and portrays most of his characters with this strength, he is well aware that not all individuals have the inner courage necessary to preserve a secure existence within nature. The most vivid of his examples of human weakness are his pictures of those women who cannot endure the all-enveloping loneliness of an isolated back-country farm. These women do not receive the understanding they so desperately need, and they lack the ability to communicate their plight to their husbands, who are the only ones who could possibly help them. As a result, small every-day fears grow until they pervade the lives of the women whose every thought is terror. They are helpless to help themselves.

Of such is the wife who has been broken by the drudgery of cooking meals and keeping house for her husband and his hired hands in "A Servant to Servants." Her tasks are those that never stay done and always need redoing. She sees that the toil will get them nowhere, but her ambitious husband continues to break her and himself by working unmercifully for a success that, if and when it comes, will be too late for her. Frost tells of her plight through her own words as she speaks to the stranger who has been camping on their land. She is happy to have even this superficial companionship, for although she is surrounded by her husband and his hired men, she is isolated in her loneliness. Her enforced isolation is breaking her, and she is losing contact

with reality. The stranger is a short respite from the monotony of her work-filled days, and she talks to him, expressing fears and feelings that she cannot convey to her husband. Through her words the reader is made aware of the condition of her mind.

I didn't make you know how glad I was
 To have you come and camp here on our land.
 I promised myself to get down some day
 And see the way you lived, but I don't know!
 With a houseful of hungry men to feed
 I guess you'd find. . . . It seems to me
 I can't express my feelings any more
 Than I can raise my voice or want to lift
 My hand (oh, I can lift it when I have to).
 Did you ever feel so? I hope you never.
 It's got so I don't even know for sure
 Whether I am glad, sorry, or anything.
 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.²⁷

The wife realizes that she is on the verge of insanity, and she knows what the problem is, but her husband, in his ambition, does not face the facts. She explains the situation:

We've a good piece of shore
 That ought to be worth something, and may yet.
 But I don't count on it as much as Len.
 He looks on the bright side of everything,
 Including me. He thinks I'll be all right
 With doctoring. But it's not medicine--
 Lowe is the only doctor's dared to say so--
 It's rest I want--there, I have said it out--
 From cooking meals for hungry hired men
 And washing dishes after them--from doing
 Things over and over that just won't stay done.

²⁷Frost, "A Servant to Servants," p. 82.

By good rights I ought not to have so much
 Put on me, but there seems no other way,
 Len says one steady pull more ought to do it.²⁸

Her husband works hard not only at his job on the land but also on many projects in town. Without intending to hurt his wife, he becomes more and more absorbed in his work and activities, leaves her more alone, and places additional work on her shoulders. The pressures of her duties, the surly indifference of the hired hands, who ignore her presence while they talk, and her husband's absorption in work wear down her courage and endurance. But she explains that her defence against their indifference is her oddness. She refers to the time she spent in the State Asylum and compares the treatment there with the home treatment in a wooden cage her uncle had received after he lapsed into madness. The barred room, the place of his imprisonment, remained long after he was gone. It and its implications remain to haunt her.

He was before my time--I never saw him;
 But the pen stayed exactly as it was
 There in the upper chamber in the ell,
 A sort of catch-all full of attic clutter.
 I often think of the smooth hickory bars.
 It got so I would say--you know, half fooling--
 "It's time I took my turn upstairs in jail"--
 Just as you will till it becomes a habit.
 No wonder I was glad to get away.²⁹

The move from the house of nightmares had brought hope for the wife; she had thought perhaps the change of scenery would help her, but

²⁸Ibid., p. 83.

²⁹Ibid., p. 86.

it did not help for long. The toil has overpowered her. Now she realizes that she is past help, that she will inevitably lose her mind, and she accepts her fate resignedly. She must, because she cannot overcome the inertia that controls her without the shared love, mutual support, and sympathetic understanding of her husband. She is too tired in mind and spirit to be revived by the beauty of her surroundings, the lake and its possibility for future economic gain. But the most tragic aspect of this woman's defeat is that no one around her recognizes what is happening to her; she sees it, and, through her eyes, the reader sees it, but those who might possibly at one time have helped her do not understand. Because she is inherently weak, she cannot reach out for human help; she cannot communicate her desperate need and thus receive understanding. The combination of loneliness and labor in their struggle with the land has overcome her. To her husband, however, it brings additional strength.

In the tale of another lonely woman in "The Hill Wife," Frost again portrays the struggle against the indifference of her surroundings. He constructs his illustration in a sequence of five poems, each of which contributes to a portrait of love, fear, and loneliness. In the first he establishes the fact that the young wife is lonely. She senses that something is wrong or missing in her relationship with her husband because she becomes overly sad when the birds leave for the winter.

One ought not to have to care
So much as you and I
Care when the birds come round the house
To seem to say good-by;³⁰

In the second scene, Frost shows how the feeling of loneliness has grown into a fear, and when the couple return home at night, they rattle the key and the lock to warn off any danger for them inside. In the first part, the sense of incompleteness was the wife's alone, but here both share the initial qualm. In the third short poem, Frost portrays the growth of apprehension and indicates that the wife looks for danger in even the most simple of events. She gives bread to a beggar, then finds lurking evil in his smile of thanks, and she worries through the evening that he is watching from the woods waiting his chance to rob them. But she expresses even a more unreasonable fear in the fourth scene. She develops a senseless terror of nature in the form of the pine tree that stands outside the bedroom window, and she imagines that it is trying to reach inside to do harm to the two in bed. The husband sleeps peacefully with no suspicion of her anxieties. Throughout these first four scenes or short poems, Robert Frost builds the heightening torment of fear within the weak young woman. She has the company of her husband with her on the isolated farm, but there is no communication between the two. She needs his help desperately, but he does not realize her need, for in his complete adjustment to his

³⁰Frost, "The Hill Wife," p. 160.

surroundings, he cannot see her weakness. There is an implicit appeal for help in her comment on loneliness with the birds away, in her spoken fear of the passing tramp, and in her "oft-repeated dream/Of what the tree might do." But the husband does not hear her plea, or if he hears, does not comprehend her meaning. The tension within the frightened woman builds to the climax and denouement of the fifth short poem.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sudden and swift and light as that
 The ties gave,

And he learned of finalities
Besides the grave.³¹

Whereas the farm wife in "A Servant to Servants" was overcome by a combination of loneliness and overwork, along with her inherent weakness of spirit, this young woman's defeat is the result of emotional weakness combined with loneliness and not enough to do to occupy her mind. She found her home too wild and too lonely. Frost implies that the husband is well adjusted to his work and environment, and, in his contentment, he cannot realize that his wife is not as secure as he is; therefore, he cannot answer her plea, and she is lost. The poet hints of her approaching break when he comments that in the field with her husband she sits "With a song only to herself/On her lips." And finally she runs from the isolation and lack of understanding. Lawrance Thompson feels that "the psychological analysis is developed entirely through implication, and hinges on the growing failure of the man to sympathize with the woman's accumulated psychosis."³² The husband makes no attempt to understand, for he apparently does not need the close relationship his wife craves. He can stand alone, but she cannot. Alienation, lack of communication, and her inherent weakness are the causes of defeat in her conflict with the loneliness of her environment.

³¹ Ibid., p. 162.

³² Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost (New York, 1942), p. 119.

Frost portrays in "Home Burial" the resultant defeat of another lonely woman who cannot accept the inevitabilities of nature. He relates the grief of a young farm wife at the loss of her first-born child and her resulting conflict with her husband who she feels does not understand her loss. He has been able to accept the child's death and has picked up the threads of everyday life, because he realizes that the world cannot halt for the loss of one life. But the wife cannot face reality, and she hugs her grief to herself and refuses to accept her husband's love because of his seeming insensitivity. Frost describes her "Looking back over her shoulder at some fear," when she passes the window that frames her view of the little graveyard where her child is buried. Because she refuses to accept her loss, the sight is a source of fear to her, for at the same time she treasures the memory of the child that was, she is also aware of the natural effects of the grave. Nature has robbed her of her child, and she cannot face what she knows must be. She cannot confide her fears to her husband because she feels he will not understand, but she really does not give him the opportunity. Instead of turning to him, she goes to comparative strangers, her neighbors, who console her in her grief. Without help she is unable to face reality as her husband is doing, so she turns from him and tells herself she is doing so because he cannot understand. In her blindness she is undermining the only source of help she has left to her--her relationship with her husband. She is not emotionally strong enough to accept the loss of her child, and yet she

closes off from herself the strength of her husband that could help her accept what she must if she is to retain her sanity. He pleads with her to turn to him with her sorrow:

"Don't--don't go.

Don't carry it to someone else this time.
 Tell me about it if it's something human.
 Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
 Unlike other folks as your standing there
 Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.
 I do think, though, you overdo it a little.
 What was it brought you up to think it the thing
 To take your mother-loss of a first child
 So inconsolably--in the face of love.
 You'd think his memory might be satisfied--"

"There you go sneering now!"

"I'm not, I'm not!

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."

"You can't because you don't know how to speak.
 If you had any feelings, you that dug
 With your own hand--how could you?--his little grave. . . .³³

The husband attempts to reason with her, to make her see that he knows her grief but that it is not natural and that he wants to help her if she will only turn to him instead of to strangers.

"There, you have said it all and you feel better.
 You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door.
 The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up.
 Amy! There's someone coming down the road!"

"You--oh, you think the talk is all. I must go--
 Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you--"

³³Frost, "Home Burial," p. 71.

"If--you--do!" She was opening the door wider.
 "Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.
 I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will!--"³⁴

But she will not accept his desire to help, for she cannot comprehend it. Her entire instinct is to run. However, she may not be doomed as is "The Hill Wife," because this husband has the beginning of a faint understanding of what is happening within his wife, and, realizing her weakness, will make every effort to save her. Reginald L. Cook in The Dimensions of Robert Frost suggests that the husband's masculine reasonableness will eventually exorcise his wife's seemingly inconsolable grief. His heart, generosity, and fearlessness of the fact is combined with common sense and sensitivity, and the latter enables him to have some slightest understanding of his wife's reactions. Cook goes further to assert that the husband's common sense will stanch his wife's grief and will restore her reasonableness.³⁵ But until she finally can accept the helping hand he reaches out to her, she will not be whole, because, in her weakness, she cannot face the reality of life and nature alone. She must have her husband's help to retain her sanity.

Occurring throughout Frost's poetry are examples of the two main types of his characters--the strong and the weak--in a close relationship with their environment--benevolent, violent, or indifferent. He does not

³⁴Ibid., pp. 72-73.

³⁵Reginald L. Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York, 1958), p. 130.

say, of course, that one particular person is strong and another is weak; he shows through their speech and action that his characters have personalities which are oriented toward either one or the other of the two poles. In general, however, he seems to indicate that the majority of his people have the inner strength of heart that will allow them to reach at least some degree of reconciliation with their surroundings, and that human love and companionship, sympathy and mutual support enable the isolated to resist, accept, and survive. He has a faith in the capacity of the human heart and intellect to endure when confronted by the blank indifference of nature. And he finds that the people who can come to terms with their environment find it a source of greater strength and of peace and enjoyment.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN-NATURE DIALOGUE

The relationship between Frost's strong characters and the ambivalent views of a basically indifferent nature becomes obvious if it is recognized that in his portrayal of human beings against a natural background, Robert Frost indicates in the majority of his people a deep inner strength that enables them to meet life and their environment on even terms and to derive from the struggle much additional strength, courage, and pleasure. The strong are those who realize that nature is not a reasoning creation, that it must move along preordained routes, and that it is thus not the overwhelming opponent that the weak at heart find it. It is the strong who are aware of their advantage, human intellect, in the sometimes violent conflict and make good use of it. The fact that they can face life without fear frees their minds for enjoyment of a seemingly benevolent nature. They find loveliness where the weak do not. The power at times displayed does not intimidate them, and the indifference of their surroundings does not discourage them. Alone or with others, idle or at work, they find their environment vital and alive, for their response to it is vivifying.

For many of Frost's characters, the pleasure derived from life is linked to the enjoyment of work within their surroundings. They are strong physically and sure of themselves emotionally, and their labor is a source of sensual and intellectual fulfillment. For them it is the link between themselves and nature, as it is for the field-worker of "Mowing" who derives contentment from his "scythe whispering to the ground," the "heat of the sun" upon his back, the "feeble-pointed spikes of flowers" falling beneath his blade, and the "bright green snake" frightened by his movements. The quiet peace he feels is spoken of by the "whispering scythe," the "lack of sound." He works with "the earnest love that laid the swale in rows." His work is his satisfaction and in that is his pleasure and contentment: "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows."¹

In the poem "The Pasture," used as an introduction to several of his collections of poetry, Frost offers to all his readers, through a farmer's words to a young woman, perhaps, an invitation to join him in the enjoyment of the beauty of the pasture and spring.

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

¹ Robert Frost, "Mowing," Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York, 1962), p. 19. Subsequent references to Frost's poetry are taken from this edition unless otherwise indicated.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
 That's standing by the mother. It's so young
 It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
 I sha'n't be gone long. -- You come too.²

The farmer is sensitive enough to see the clear beauty of his work and the pleasure that can come of it. He is content in his labor, and through his enjoyment he comes to see his surroundings through understanding eyes. He is aware of the loveliness of the spring, and his insight opens the way to a sharing of the fair charm of the country scene. He is the one who takes heed of the clarity of the spring water freed of autumn and winter leaves and the appealing helplessness of the new-born calf sheltered by its mother. In the pleasure his labor brings, his ordinary chores take on special meaning. His tasks are performed with confidence because he knows what must be done for the good of his farm as a whole, and he is not afraid to act as necessary. He is an active, happy partner in his relationship with nature.

The husband in "Putting in the Seed" is another person who finds work within his environment a source of pleasure:

You come to fetch me from my work tonight
 When supper's on the table, and we'll see
 If I can leave off burying the white
 Soft petals fallen from the apple tree
 (Soft petals, yes, but not so barren quite,
 Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea;)
 And go along with you ere you lose sight
 Of what you came for and become like me,

²Frost, "The Pasture," p. 1.

Slave to a springtime passion for the earth.
 How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed
 On through the watching for that early birth
 When, just as the soil tarnished with weed,
 The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
 Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.³

Within this poem Frost expresses the union of husband and wife and the love of the two for the wonders of nature. The love of the humans for each other is reflected in their mutual response to nature and to the planting of seeds and their subsequent growth. The man knows that he becomes so engrossed in his task that supper can be forgotten, but he also knows that his wife shares his "springtime passion for the earth," and that unless he responds quickly to her call for supper, she too will "lose sight/Of what [she] came for" The husband is matter-of-fact about his love of planting and growing things, and through his words, Frost suggests that the communion achieved with nature and the encouragement derived from that union are a reflection of the love that flows between the husband and his wife, that their response to their surroundings is enhanced by their love. In this poem as in "The Pasture," the man is in command of the circumstances, but only up to a point in this instance. He is the planter, burying the seeds as he desires, but from that point the rest is up to nature, for the production of this man's garden is a partnership. Man plants; nature gives growth. Together they produce a crop. Through this relationship between the man

³Frost, "Putting in the Seed," p. 155.

and his surrounding elements and between him and his wife he finds contentment, pleasure, and love.

A second relationship between the characters in Frost's poems and their environment is the love or close companionship of two people which brightens their outlook on life and allows them to see and meet nature as a friend. The companions in "Going for Water" exemplify such an empathy. They do not fear the barren woods of autumn nor the indifferent nature that dried their well. Rather, they accept the dry well as an excuse to frolic across the fields to seek water from a nearby brook. Together they see a fair autumn evening, and from their mutual happiness there is an almost singing quality in their response to "The barren boughs without leaves, / Without the birds, without the breeze." And, upon entering the woods, they play games with the moon, enjoying their closeness and fun.

But once within the wood, we paused
 Like gnomes that hid us from the moon,
 Ready to run to hiding new
 With laughter when she found us soon.⁴

Together, two people in love are strong and secure; and their surroundings do not frighten them. The two young people in "Going for Water" enjoy such a union, and its intensity colors everything they see and do. Because of their love for each other and their joy in being together, their response to the world around them is on the same level.

⁴Frost, "Going for Water," p. 26.

And in their eyes the natural world is a good place to be. The same can be said of the newly-married couple in "West-Running Brook." They too are secure in their union, and their environment holds no fear for them. Even the odd quirk of the "west-running brook" is looked on with awe and affection rather than with superstitious fear. Their mutual love and contentment reflect from and encompass their surroundings.

We've said we two. Let's change that to we three.
 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.⁵

They are at peace in their closeness and in their mutual security can see friendliness in the elements around them. In expanding their union to make a partner of the contrary brook that is a part of their land, they express acceptance and love on their part for everything that is connected in any way with their marriage. Their joy marks their attitude, and they derive pleasure from nature. Their wholeness is a part of their feeling for their environment.

Although there is no dialogue between the two, human understanding and love again form the bond between a couple and their brook in "Hyla Brook."

By June our brook's run out of song and speed
 Sought for much after that, it will be found
 Either to have gone groping underground

⁵Frost, "West-Running Brook," p. 327.

(And taken with it all the Hyla breed
 That shouted in the mist a month ago,
 Like ghost of sleigh-bells in a ghost of snow)--
 Or flourished and come up in jewel-weed,
 Weak foliage that is blown upon and bent
 Even against the way its waters went.
 Its bed is left a faded paper sheet
 Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat--
 A brook to none but who remember long.
 This as it will be seen is other far
 Than with brooks taken elsewhere in song.
 We love the things we love for what they are.⁶

In a soliloquy the narrator implies the bond between him and his wife. He is so attuned to the union between the two that he instinctively speaks of "we" instead of "I." He thinks in terms of "two" as "one," for he has the deep understanding that goes with love through the years--the knowledge that "We love the things we love for what they are," both human and otherwise. And within that love is a clear comprehension of the not-quite-so-pleasant along with the good. Thus the couple, in the union of "we," can remember the loveliness of the brook that shouted of the winter snow when there is no longer beauty in the dried-up creek-bed filled with "weak foliage" and the "faded paper sheet/Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat--." No, Hyla Brook in summer is not the kind that songs are sung of. To the casual observer it is one to be overlooked. But to the couple who remember the early loveliness and the place it has in their bond, it is worth the affection they have for it. They love it for what it was and will be as they love each other for what

⁶Frost, "Hyla Brook," p. 149.

each is. Their feeling for the creek is a reflection of their own human love.

The young man in "Waiting," who rests among the haycocks in the late evening to compose lines for his absent loved one, is enfolded by a sense of companionship as is the couple in "Hyla Brook" although he is physically alone.

I dream upon the opposing lights of the hour,
 Preventing shadow until the moon prevail;
 I dream upon the nighthawks peopling heaven,
 Each circling each with vague unearthly cry,
 Or plunging headlong with fierce twang afar;
 And on the bat's mute antics, who would seem
 Dimly to have made out my secret place,
 Only to lose it when he pirouettes,
 And seeks it endlessly with purblind haste;
 On the last swallow's sweep; and on the rasp
 In the abyss of odor and rustle at my back,
 That, silenced by my advent, finds once more,
 After an interval, his instrument,
 And tries once--twice--and thrice if I be there;
 And on the worn book of old-golden song
 I brought not here to read, it seems, but hold
 And freshen in this air of withering sweetness;
 But on the memory of one absent most,
 For whom these lines when they shall greet her eye.⁷

In the glow of human love, the resting lover observes his situation, and although the stubble and mown grass are withering, the hawks utter an "unearthly cry," plunging "headlong with fierce twang afar," and the usually repellent bats fly about, the man does not find gloom about him. Rather, the air is of "withering sweetness," and he "dreams upon the

⁷Frost, "Waiting," p. 20.

nighthawks peopling heaven" and observes the "pirouettes" of the bats. He has a sense of relationship with the creatures around him, for he supposes that the bat seeks out his hidden seat and that "the rasp/In the abyss of odor and rustle at [his] back," tries "his instrument" to see if the man is there. The natural light at that time of day--the glow of the setting sun--does not allow shadows to settle before the brightness of the moon prevails. The scene is set with glowing colors, and the man, solitary yet warmed by love, enjoys the elements of nature. The open air is uplifting for him; it even freshens the "old-golden songs" within his book. United in memory with his beloved, he is at peace, and the love he feels, like the setting sun's light, tints the overall view he has of his surroundings.

In poem after poem, Frost speaks of this feeling between humans that so encompasses them that it affects their response to the world around them. He expresses the epitome of such relationship within nature in "Two Look at Two," in which he describes the chance meeting of a human couple with an animal pair on a wooded mountainside. The young people, in their love for each other and their mutual enjoyment of the out-of-doors, are reluctant to quit their evening walk as darkness nears. But realizing the danger of the mountain at night, they halt at a "tumbled wall/With barbed-wire binding." And so they stand before this

barrier looking upward to "the way they must not go," in one attempt to steal the last bit of pleasure from their excursion.

"This is all," they sighed,
 "Good-night to woods." But not so; there was more.
 A doe from round a spruce stood looking at them
 Across the wall, as near the wall as they.
 She saw them in their field, they her in hers.
 The difficulty of seeing what stood still,
 Like some up-ended boulder split in two,
 Was in her clouded eyes: they saw no fear there.
 She seemed to think that two thus they were safe.
 Then, as if they were something that, though strange,
 She could not trouble her mind with too long,
 She sighed and passed unscared along the wall.
 "This, then, is all. What more is there to ask?"
 But no, not yet. A snort to bid them wait.
 A buck from round the spruce stood looking at them
 Across the wall as near the wall as they.
 This was an antlered buck of lusty nostril,
 Not the same doe come back into her place.
 He viewed them quizzically with jerks of head,
 As if to ask, "Why don't you make some motion?
 Or give some sign of life? Because you can't.
 I doubt if you're as living as you look."
 Thus till he had them almost feeling dared
 To stretch a proffering hand--and a spell-breaking.
 Then he too passed unscared along the wall.
 Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.
 "This must be all." It was all. . . .⁸

In their walk the couple have found the beauty they had anticipated; the appearance of the doe is an unexpected special "gift" from the wilderness, and they accept the presence of the animal with a thankful awe, thinking that they have seen all that the woods could offer them. But "this" is not all. The "antlered buck of lusty nostril" steps forward,

⁸Frost, "Two Look at Two," pp. 282-283.

and, as they stand speechless, the buck moves fearlessly away; the couple breathes "This must be all," and it is. They have seen the softness and the strength that are both a part of nature. The love between the two is such that they are secure in each other and are at peace with their environment. In the momentary breaking down of the invisible barrier that stands between human and animal life, the couple share a sense of real kinship with the animal element of the primitive setting they have experienced such a deep feeling for:

A great wave from it going over them,
As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
Had made them certain earth returned their love.⁹

Along with the poems that portray nature as a source of pleasure and contentment for the one who labors and for him who shares a close relationship, Robert Frost includes among his verses several which show that individual experience may also be a point of meeting between man and nature. The narrator of "Rose Pogonias," although viewing the lovely scene with a companion, seems to derive his pleasure through his own personality, and his personal experience is uppermost in his mind although he is enough aware of his friend to mention his presence. The speaker is overcome with a sense of the holiness of the scene he and his companion come upon: the sun-drenched meadow covered with fragrant flowers. They pause to "pick where none could miss them/

⁹Ibid., p. 283.

A thousand orchises"; and from the peaceful pleasure he derives, his thoughts are turned to the destruction which could be wreaked if the mowers should reach the spot before the blooms fade. His prayer is for "such grace of hours, / That none should mow the grass there / While so confused with flowers."¹⁰ To him, the loveliness of the small flower-filled spot is a source of peace, contentment, and pleasure, for he possesses the inner strength that frees him of needless fears and opens his eyes and emotions to the beauty and grace of his surroundings.

The youth who searches long for the special summer flowers in "The Quest of the Purple-Fringed" also becomes aware of the satisfaction that can be derived from nature. He knows that each summer a certain species of flower blooms in out-of-the-way places. So he sets out early in the "chill of the meadow," singing "snatches of verse and songs" of the country scenes. His search takes him miles through the alders as he hastens in his quest before the mowers pass. Finally he finds the fox's path:

Then at last and following him I found--
 In the very hour
 When the color flushed to the petals it must have been--
 The far-sought flower.

There stood the purple spires with no breath of air
 Nor headlong bee
 To disturb their perfect poise the livelong day
 'Neath the alder tree.

¹⁰Frost, "Rose Pogonias," p. 19.

I only knelt and putting the boughs aside
 Looked, or at most
 Counted them all to the buds in the copse's depth
 That were pale as a ghost.

Then I arose and silently wandered home,
 And I for one
 Said that the fall might come and whirl of leaves,
 For summer was done.¹¹

The young man's pleasure is not in possessing the flowers he searched so long for. His joy is in seeing them in their perfect beauty at the peak of their bloom. Once he has found them, seen them, admired them, he is content.

This human joy in the observation of natural loveliness is seen again in "A Young Birch," in which Frost portrays an object of nature as a source of pleasure to its observers and explains that the sole purpose of its existence is to be "a thing of beauty":

The birch begins to crack its outer sheath
 Of baby green and show the white beneath,
 As whosoever likes the young and slight
 May well have noticed. Soon entirely white
 To double day and cut in half the dark
 It will stand forth, entirely white in bark,
 And nothing but the top a leafy green--
 The only native tree that dares to lean,
 Relying on its beauty, to the air.
 (Less brave perhaps than trusting are the fair.)
 And someone reminiscent will recall
 How once in cutting brush along the wall
 He spared it from the number of the slain,
 At first to be no bigger than a cane,
 And then no bigger than a fishing pole,

¹¹Frost, "Quest of the Purple-Fringed," pp. 458-459.

But now at last so obvious a bole
 The most efficient help you ever hired
 Would know that it was there to be admired,
 And zeal would not be thanked that cut it down
 When you were reading books or out of town.
 It was a thing of beauty and was sent
 To live its life out as an ornament.¹²

The man, with an instinctive emotion like that displayed by the mower in "The Tuft of Flowers" elects to spare a sapling and leaves it to grow by the wall. At the time of its sparing, it is little more than "fishing pole" size, but, by virtue of its position near the cleared wall, it has the opportunity to grow into a lovely young tree, one that anyone could tell is meant to be enjoyed instead of to be cut away. Thus the sensitive person who spared the tree sees that his instinct was wise, for the implications of the possible symbolism are appropriately applicable to him. In its beauty the tree symbolizes the man's hope in the bark "of baby green" that opens into the white of understanding which will "double day and cut in half the dark." In its trust as the "only native tree that dares to lean, / . . . to the air" it typifies the faith that leads him to actions such as that which preserved the tree. And from its loveliness he derives a pleasure and satisfaction which grows as he has allowed the tree to grow.

At times Frost suggests a man-nature relationship that involves certain pixie-like qualities, one in which the individual deliberately plays

¹²Frost, "A Young Birch," p. 517.

games with the natural elements of his surroundings. "The Freedom of the Moon" is such a poem.

I've tried the new moon tilted in the air
 Above a hazy tree-and-farmhouse cluster
 As you might try a jewel in your hair.
 I've tried it fine with little breadth of luster,
 Alone, or in one ornament combining
 With one first-water star almost as shining.

I put it shining anywhere I please.
 By walking slowly on some evening later,
 I've pulled it from a crate of crooked trees,
 And brought it over glossy water, greater,
 And dropped it in, and seen the image wallow,
 The color run, all sorts of wonder follow.¹³

The narrator is self-possessed enough even to use the moon above him as a playfellow in his games. He has admired it singly above the landscape and in a group with neighboring stars; he has lifted it in his sight from the dark trees, and enjoyed its reflection in water, especially the running of the colors when the water is disturbed. He is filled with a friendly respect for his environment and can derive full enjoyment in his association with it. He has no fear of the natural elements that make up his world, and they do not hold him in undue awe of their vastness. The moon and the woods are not sources of fearful superstition; rather they are a source of pleasure from which his creative mind enables him to derive enjoyment.

¹³Frost, "The Freedom of the Moon," p. 304.

A feeling of confidence in one's relation to nature, similar to that seen in "The Freedom of the Moon," is apparent in "To the Thawing Wind." The narrator speaks as though the natural element, in this case the southwest wind, is a long-time friend and yet a superior.

Come with rain, O loud Southwester!
 Bring the singer, bring the nester;
 Give the buried flower a dream;
 Make the settled snowbank steam;
 Find the brown beneath the white;
 But whate'er you do tonight,
 Bathe my window, make it flow,
 Melt it as the ice will go;
 Melt the glass and leave the sticks
 Like a hermit's crucifix;
 Burst into my narrow stall;
 Swing the picture on the wall;
 Run the rattling pages o'er;
 Scatter poems on the floor;
 Turn the poet out of door.¹⁴

Weary of winter's confinement, he is ready for the beginning of the spring, and he calls upon his friend to melt the snow and bring the birds. His hermit-like solitude has been a necessary part of his writing, but now he is eager to leave his "narrow stall" and go into the woods and countryside. In the wind the poems may scatter to the floor, but no sense of loss is felt; rather, perhaps, new poems will evolve as a result of the poet's being turned "out of door," for apparently his relationship with his environment is a necessary part of his creativity. His response to his surroundings brings them into a sort of partnership in the making of verse.

¹⁴Frost, "To the Thawing Wind," p. 16.

Within several of his poems Robert Frost portrays, in terms of peaceful loveliness, an individual experience that is not the result of an intentional search. In each case the person seems only to look up from his ordinary pursuits to experience an uplifting moment of union with his environment. And the moment is exalting because the person is then most sensitive to the beauty about him. Two such poems are "Moon Compasses" and "Evening in a Sugar Orchard." Within his solitary experience, the young man in "Moon Compasses" finds loveliness and a symbol of love within his picture of moonlight and a mountain.

I stole forth dimly in the dripping pause
 Between two downpours to see what there was,
 And a masked moon had spread down compass rays
 To a cone mountain in the midnight haze,
 As if the final estimate were hers,
 And as it measured in her calipers,
 The mountain stood exalted in its place.
 So love will take between the hands a face. . . .¹⁵

The "dripping pause" between two rain showers, the moon masked by clouds, and a solitary mountain placed solidly within the scene could be the basis for a gloomy, sad poem. But, instead, the atmosphere is of peacefulness, for in the aftermath of a shower, the narrator steps out to observe the land and mountain that he loves. In his appreciation of his surroundings, he knows peace of heart, for he sees the "masked moon" encompassing the mountain with its rays, and to him the almost caress of the moonlight upon the mountain reflects human love which

¹⁵Frost, "Moon Compasses," p. 393.

gently "take[s] between the hands a face." The scene would not reflect humanity if the speaker did not know that love and the contentment it brings.

The quiet loveliness of the mountain surrounded by moonlight in "Moon Compasses" is found in the sparks that "figure in the trees/As Leo, Orion, and the Pleiades," in "Evening in a Sugar Orchard," and the speaker here finds a similar feeling of peace within his surroundings.

From where I lingered in a lull in March
 Outside the sugar-house one night for choice,
 I called the fireman with a careful voice
 And bade him leave the pan and stoke the arch:
 "O fireman, give the fire another stoke,
 And send more sparks up chimney with the smoke."
 I thought a few might tangle, as they did,
 Among bare maple boughs, and in the rare
 Hill atmosphere not cease to glow,
 And so be added to the moon up there.
 The moon, though slight, was moon enough to show
 On every tree a bucket with a lid,
 And on black ground a bear-skin rug of snow.
 The sparks made no attempt to be the moon.
 They were content to figure in the trees
 As Leo, Orion, and the Pleiades.
 And that was what the boughs were full of soon.¹⁶

The sensitivity of the speaker is reflected in his appreciation of the surroundings. He remarks that he has lingered "for choice," and he does not invite the fireman out to enjoy the loveliness of a late evening in the sugar orchard. He does not desire human companionship at this point, for it would break the spell of closeness he feels with the natural

¹⁶Frost, "Evening in the Sugar Orchard," p. 289.

elements around him--the slight moon, the "bare maple boughs," the "rare/Hill atmosphere," and the "bear-skin rug of snow" on the "black ground." Instead, he calls to the fireman to "stoke the arch," for he wishes to see the sparks intermingle with the bare boughs, with the hope that the thin hill air might encourage them to glow like the moon. But instead of making many moons, he finds that the sparks among the trees are more like the stars that fill the night sky. And soon the boughs are full of the man-created stars. This man, who finds quiet contentment in the solitary pleasures of an evening in an orchard after a day of hard work, is content with the sparks that glow like stars instead of moons. He has the imagination to place the ordinary things of man within the vastness of the universe, but he does not ask for more than is given and takes pleasure in what is.

The great majority of Robert Frost's poems portray a strong human being, courageous and self-assured, alone or in union with another, but always in a friendly relationship with his environment, in spite of the potential dangers. Frost seems of the opinion that an individual who makes use of his intellect and does not allow himself to be overcome by fear can find beauty, contentment, and pleasure in his surroundings. He sees no defeat for either man or nature. In the last poem, untitled, of his final collection of verse, In the Clearing, Frost expresses succinctly his feeling about the relationship between man and nature, manifested

often throughout his volumes, --a friendly antagonism based on mutual respect.

In winter in the woods alone
Against the trees I go.
I mark a maple for my own
And lay the maple low.

At four o'clock I shoulder axe
And in the afterglow
I link a line of shadowy tracks
Across the tinted snow.

I see for nature no defeat
In one tree's overthrow
Or for myself in my retreat
For yet another blow.¹⁷

¹⁷Robert Frost, In the Clearing (New York, 1962), p. 101.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Robert Frost may not be one of the greatest poets of all times, but he has the ability to state certain things so well that it is difficult to imagine anyone else restating them more effectively. Such a talent is especially noticeable in his dialogue poems that portray husband and wife, and it is also apparent in his descriptions of certain rural or woodland scenes. It is likely that his personal experiences in the New England countryside combined with his perceptive mind-heart explain the latter descriptions, and it is even more probable that all references to peaceful, happy married life are based upon his own marriage, which from all indications was one of deep contentment in spite of the fact that it was marred by several personal tragedies. If the reader can accept the premise that Frost wrote mostly about what he knew from first-hand experience, it is easy to understand why so much of his poetry is meaningful to the many who enjoy it.

American culture is being based more upon urban living as the years pass and less upon the rural areas that were once predominant. In spite of this fact, Robert Frost, having written mostly of country

scenes and rural, back-country people of the New England area, has reached a high point in popularity among most poetry-reading people. It may seem strange that his localized subject matter received its first praise in England, but this fact indicates clearly that there is a universality about these poems that reaches far beyond the New England barriers. Although he places his characters in the hill country of a particular region, Frost is speaking ultimately of universal nature and of universal man. No matter in what part of the world, the natural elements present the same faces toward man. No matter what nationality is observed, human beings may be classified into the two general types, the strong, self-directed, and the weak, controlled by fears of external forces. It is of these universal elements that Robert Frost speaks when he portrays the farm-people of New England.

He recognizes, of course, that nature is a non-reasoning, insensitive creation that does not and cannot have any interest in mankind, but when observed subjectively by various people under differing circumstances, it can take on ambivalent characteristics. Some see their surroundings as a place of peace and pleasure, while others perceive a world of active antagonism. But the view that any one person has depends essentially upon his own subjective response to his environment.

Although Frost has stated that man has only a slight advantage over his environment, he portrays the success of his characters much more

often than he does their failures. Perhaps this is true because the poet has such confidence in the intellect that comprises the "slight" advantage. He sees man making good use of his sensitivity, his reasoning ability, in that he devises ways of converting his surroundings into the "home" he desires. Frost does not go so far as to sentimentalize the relationship between strong individuals and their environment, but he does display an honest belief in man's ability to face with courage whatever life might bring and generally to derive pleasure from the natural world through labor, through human love and companionship, and through individual experience.

This thesis has considered in detail the basic importance of the interrelationship between Frost's characters and their environment. It is the universality of this relationship in his poems that likely will be the factor which will keep them before the public in the future. And the study made here has added to the understanding of Frost's observation of the complex interdependence of man's view of nature and its effects on him.

Although several critics point out that Robert Frost's craftsmanship improves in his later poems, it is not probable that his verses on things other than the interrelationships between man and nature will ever retain the popularity enjoyed by "Home Burial" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," among many such works, for when he leaves the realm of the countryside and woods, as he does more often in his later volumes

than in his early and middle ones, he loses a quality that is difficult to define, a perfection in word choice and imagery. The reader's senses are not affected by the poems concerning politics or government, no matter how he may disguise the topic. But when he portrays a man's emotions or the natural background for human living, his descriptions, although not detailed in the sense that a photograph would be, make the reader sharply aware of the atmosphere and the human emotions and responses. They provide a clear mental picture of the physical setting. And it will be such poems that keep the works of Robert Frost before the public.

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