HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN THE POETRY
OF ROBERT FROST

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HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN THE POETRY
OF ROBERT FROST

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The name of Robert Frost is as familiar to the American people as that of any other modern poet. His poetry has been anthologized in American schoolbooks for decades. Others know him as the poet who was chosen to read at John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961. He was, in fact, President Kennedy's favorite poet.

Frost wrote his poems over a long span of America's history. His first book, *A Boy's Will*, was published in 1913 in England, where he was living at the time, and his last book, *In The Clearing*, was issued in 1962. He was honored during his lifetime as much as any other American poet has ever been. He received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry four times; he was given more than a score of honorary degrees at such prestigious universities as Harvard and Princeton; he was praised by such diverse critics as Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, and Randall Jarrell.

In spite of his great popularity, however, Robert Frost has until recently received very little serious consideration from professional critics and very little real understanding from his readers. Elizabeth Isaacs observes that critics
have tended to dismiss him as "a happy farmer," a "bucolic sage," or a "platitudinous philosopher."\(^1\) Randall Jarrell has written that the ordinary reader likes Frost because he thinks he is easy, while the intellectual dismisses him "as something inconsequently good that he knew about all along."\(^2\)

James Cox points out that the divergence between Frost and the intellectual disciples of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot in the years before World War II "resulted not so much in harsh criticism of Frost's work as in complete absence of criticism. He was simply ignored or dismissed as being unworthy of serious consideration."\(^3\)

This absence of criticism is found not so much in periodical articles as in full-length studies. Many articles have been written, beginning with the appearance of *A Boy's Will* and first collected in Richard Thornton's *Recognition of Robert Frost*, published in 1937. With the exception of Lawrance Thompson's *Fire and Ice*, a critical study published in 1942, very few notable book length critical studies were published until the sixties, the decade of Frost's death.

In recent years appraisals of Frost as a poet rather than merely as an American legend have begun to be made.

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Critics are at last evaluating Frost in the context of his significance as a modern poet. Of George Nitchie's book, *Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost*, in which his criticism of Frost is coherent and largely unfavorable, James Cox wrote: "The very seriousness of Nitchie's effort to define Frost's limitations is a greater recognition of and compliment to Frost's poetic stature than many a perfunctory hymn of praise."\(^4\)

In his book Nitchie painstakingly sets out to prove that Frost's simplified rural world results in an ultimate reduction of human values in poetry. Nitchie contends that Frost does write of human relationships, but ultimately of the relationship of individual to individual or of the individual to himself, not to society. According to Nitchie the people in Frost's poems make lonely choices.

Yvor Winters is perhaps Frost's most hostile critic. He objects to Frost's essentially uncommitted philosophy, which he labels "spiritual drifting." To Winters, Frost's refusal to take a stand has caused him to be morally irresponsible.\(^5\)

Malcolm Cowley has been critical of Frost's political and psychological conservatism, which, he maintains, prevented Frost from reaching out toward society or in toward self-understanding. Cowley contends that Frost's cautious poetic

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\(^4\) Ibid.

policy, his willingness to remain safely at the edge of the woods, prevented him from becoming a truly major poet.  

John F. Lynen, in The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost, argues that Frost's poetry has a coherent myth expressed against a pastoral New England background, which is evoked through the speech and actions of its people. Reuben Brower, who also admires Frost, comments: "The surprise of his poetry . . . is that Frost found in country knowledge the intellectual sophistication, the 'new terms of worth' he was looking for, which we now recognize as 'twentieth century,' or 'modern.'"

The most widely held misconception about Frost may be the tendency to regard him as a nature poet exclusively. A slightly more enlightened view regards him as a poet of regionalism alone, who has written only of New England's countryside and its rather eccentric inhabitants. These views have been fostered by the extensive anthologizing of such poems as "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "The Pasture," "The Road Not Taken," and "The Death of the Hired Man."

Frost is more universal and, as Brower has suggested, more contemporary in theme and subject matter than even some

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students of American literature may have discovered. He was particularly perceptive when writing about human relationships. His second book, *North of Boston*, is prefaced: "a book about people." In it there are several dramatic narratives and dramatic monologues that probe the depths of human nature. Louise Bogan comments that "in *North of Boston* Frost briefly possessed himself of a humane realism and insight which he was never quite able to repeat." Speaking also of *North of Boston*, Mildred Hartsock has written:

... the portraits here are not of moribund New England types but of modern man: alien, lost, physically tortured, fear obsessed, separate. In truth, the theme of the volume is separateness; and Frost's evident cry is for community, for understanding... These so-called New England poems picture the typical problems of twentieth century man as pointedly as do the novels of William Faulkner or the plays of Eugene O'Neill.

John Farrar wrote: "His *North of Boston* is a series of dramatic portraits of New England farm folk; but it is more than that: it is an epic of the lives of isolated and lonely people, wherever in the world they may be." Speaking of Frost's characters Alfred Kazin comments:

"Frost writes about situations which threaten the moral

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balance of the passerby who has fallen into the situation.

Frost's poetry is about the strength needed in living one's life . . . . Frost's poems are directly about struggle."12

Alienation, fear, isolation, strength, and struggle—these are universal experiences of mankind. But not all of Frost's people are lonely or pathetic types; indeed, one of Frost's hallmarks is the sense of humor with which he presents recognizable situations. The poet W. H. Auden comments:

Although he writes of the deranged, the unsuccessful, those who do not live by ordinary material profit . . . it is noteworthy, however, that he never draws a universal moral from these. He never says, "It is better to be mad, or unsuccessful" or "No one should bother about money." He merely says, "There are such people and they manage to live and you must take account of them. The values of civilization are never complete."13

Significantly, Babette Deutsch, the poet and critic, has pointed out:

Frost has about as much to say of happy wooings and matings, of friendly encounters and generous neighborliness, as of the bleaker aspects of farm life . . . . Frost's poems repeatedly remind us that the central fact in nature for himself and his kind is human nature. . . . However interestingly he may observe such impersonal things as storms and stars, he is apt to relate his observations to some insight into humanity.14

14Quoted in Jennings, p. 108.
Miss Deutsch has pointed out a significant aspect of Frost's poetry: even his many poems about nature--the dark woods, the snow, the stars, the simple countryside--ultimately relate to human nature. John Lynen has come to the same conclusion: "For Frost, nature is really an image of the whole world of circumstances within which man finds himself. It represents what one might call 'the human situation.'"¹⁵

Since the beginnings of recorded literature, authors have been most interested in the human situation, the relationships of mankind: man's struggle to accept himself and his life situation, to achieve harmony with his fellow man, to realize happiness with one of the opposite sex, and to seek answers to his relationship with his Creator. This thesis attempts to illustrate that Robert Frost was among those who found these the most significant themes for poetic expression.

Robert Frost understood that, in a world peopled by billions, man is curiously by himself. He must learn to live with himself, and this is not always an easy task. There are idiosyncracies about oneself that have to be understood; there are inevitabilities that have to be accepted; there are insurmountable problems that have to be surmounted. Sometimes man wants to run away from outside and inside pressures, and to do this, he has invented numerous escape devices. But he can never escape from himself.

Frost enjoyed being alone with himself. Though he liked people, he often felt the lure of the "dark woods," a symbol in his poetry of a mysterious existence of loveliness. And he respected individualism. His poetry speaks of the resourcefulness of the individual. Two of his favorite books were Walden and Robinson Crusoe. He admired the men in these books because they combined resourcefulness with a love of doing.

Of these men Frost said:

Robinson Crusoe is never quite out of my mind. I never tire of being shown how the limited can make snug in the limitless. Walden has
something of the same fascination. Crusoe was cast away; Thoreau was self-cast away. Both found themselves sufficient.

Frost admired anyone who could take whatever situation he found himself in and make the best of it. John Doyle says there are few things more omnipresent in Frost's poems than an attitude of making the best of what is offered. "The attitude appears early and late, in short poems and long, is dramatized and stated directly, is implied and philosophized about."  

"The Investment" is a poem about an almost pathetic attempt to make life livable.

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--

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

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1 Quoted in Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice (New York, 1942), p. 207.
Pathos enters in the very first line with the somewhat startling phrase, "where they speak of life as staying," not living. The final lines point out the refusal to bow to time, the refusal to "sink under being man and wife." There is a determination to meet life's adversities with the courage to try to "get some color and music out of life."

"Our Hold on the Planet" is a poem revealing a serene philosophy about man and his ability to make the best of this world that he has been given to live within:

We may doubt the just proportion of good to ill. There is much in nature against us. But we forget: Take nature altogether since time began, Including human nature, in peace and war, And it must be a little more in favor of man. Say a fraction of one per cent at the very least, Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more, Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased.

Many things may be difficult for man, but the poet contends that many things will also be in his favor. In spite of struggle against great odds, man has not only endured but has also increased.

Reginald Cook has written that "the dominant theme in Frost's poetry is affirmation . . . . The salient thing in his philosophy is the belief that he is equal to anything that can happen to him." In the view of Thomas Hardy, man was plagued by such bitter circumstances that he was no

\[4\] Ibid., p. 469.

match for the opposition. By contrast Frost's man is tough enough to endure in any struggle. Cook goes on to say that "Frost, the realist, takes a steady look at things without succumbing to resignation and despair . . . He takes the world as he sees it, accepting and rejecting, exercising selective judgment and revising wherever he has to." 6

"On a Tree Fallen Across the Road" is a poem which points up Frost's belief in human resourcefulness. The poem speaks of a tree which is obstructing the way "... just to ask us who we think we are/ Insisting always on our own way so" 7 Yet, the poet says:

... she knows obstruction is in vain:
We will not be put off the final goal
We have it hidden in us to obtain.

"Willful Homing" reflects Frost's belief in the invincibility of single-mindedness. This man, traveling through a heavy storm, has made up his mind that he is going to make it home, and although he is put off his time schedule, he intends to arrive. The implication is that mankind will attain whatever goal it sets out to attain:

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

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6 Ibid., p. 145. 7 Frost, p. 296.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., p. 456.
In spite of the snowstorm, this man will get what he set out to get. Cook points out that the man's courage is great because "he shows the confidence of resolution which is greater than the confidence of hope."\(^{10}\)

Robert Frost could never find much sympathy for the man who rails against his lot. As Philip Gerber points out:

The Miniver Cheevy syndrome has no claim upon his heart. Always the great inescapable fact is that man comprises an imperfect being who operates within a larger but equally important universe. Freighted with impossible dreams, man labors toward impossible goals. No salvation can come without the twin keys to release. First comes recognition of man's plight, next acceptance.\(^{11}\)

The woman in the dramatic monologue "A Servant to Servants" is one of the best illustrations of this philosophy. This woman is isolated from society, overworked, and living with the constant fear that the insanity that destroyed her uncle will likewise destroy her. In this poem Frost has presented a situation for which there is no defense beyond "taking it." As the woman says, "By good rights I ought not to have so much/ Put on me, but there seems no other way."\(^{12}\) She continues: "I s'pose I've got to go the road I'm going:/ Other folks have to, and why shouldn't I?"\(^{13}\)

\(^{10}\)Cook, p. 148.


\(^{12}\)Frost, p. 83.

\(^{13}\)Ibid., p. 86.
Her husband tries to help her with her loneliness, but his method of helping himself is to work harder. And so he tries to tell her: "Len says one steady pull more ought to do it./ He says the best way out is always through." 14

What cannot be altered must be understood and accepted. Not to accept may lead to the insanity that the woman fears. So she continues to cook for all the hungry men and to cherish an opportunity to speak to an outsider.

Another dramatic poem, "The Self-Seeker," tells of a man whom Frost calls the Broken One. He is injured in an accident at the mill and will probably never walk again. This condition will prevent his gathering information about the flowers around the countryside that he loves and about which he has become quite well informed. He is prepared to settle with the mill for only five hundred dollars, an eventuality which upsets his friend very much. But the Broken One realizes that his chance of choosing to be a whole man has been lost forever. The only choice left him now is that between taking his luck or making a useless fuss about it, and he prefers to abide by his own principle: "What we live by we die by." 15

A poem that Frost never read in public because "it was too cruel" 16 was "Out, Out--," its title taken from the

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14 Ibid., p. 83.  
15 Ibid., p. 118.  
famous line in *Macbeth*. In this poem a young boy's hand is accidentally severed by a buzz saw, and before anyone can staunch the blood, the boy bleeds to death. The poem ends with these terse lines:

No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little--less--nothing! --and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.  

The witnesses to this tragedy have mastered the difficult art of allowing what will be to be. They do what they can for the boy: they call the doctor, they attempt to stop the flow of blood. But it is to no avail. Suddenly he is gone. Gerber comments on the ending of this poem: "Cold and heartless as this ending seems to many, Frost apparently approves of it. He appends it as the coda of the poem to express the only possible course of action guaranteed to preserve equilibrium. The boy has loosed his hold on life. Now those gathered round him must loose their hold on him."  

But Frost is not unfeeling at all, only pragmatic. Earlier in the poem he reveals a tenderness toward and an understanding of young boys:

... day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.

17 Frost, pp. 171-172.
18 Gerber, p. 142.
19 Frost, p. 171.
Elizabeth Jennings points out that "it is not at all that the poet does not feel deeply and painfully, but rather that he never allows his emotions to overwhelm him . . ., indeed his more personal poems derive much of power from a sense of passion being held in check . . ."\(^{20}\)

Frost illustrates this power to hold his deep feelings in check in many poems. In one, "Nothing Gold Can Stay," he is able to present the awareness of passing time without bewailing it. For two hundred years English literature has lamented the fleeting moment, the brevity of youth. Frost foregoes such lamentation: thus, "Nothing Gold Can Stay" ends where it began, with a repetition of the initial statement. The important thing is to master the flux of life, accept the moment before it passes. Frost accepts the transitory as a fact. Doyle believes that "this attitude of acceptance is one reason for the lyric strength of his poems: his attitude allows him to love many aspects of external nature because he is not taken up with lamenting what he cannot change."\(^{21}\)

And so Frost writes:

\begin{quote}
Nature's first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf's a flower;  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief.  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.\(^{22}\)
\end{quote}

\(^{21}\)Doyle, p. 176.  
\(^{22}\)Frost, p. 272.
Another trait that Frost greatly admired in man was his courage to be an individual. In "The Road Not Taken" the speaker exhibits the courage to be independent. He observes two roads as they diverge in the woods. Then he makes a decision as to which road he would choose: "I took the one less traveled by . . . ." Moreover, he held throughout his life to the choice he had made: "And that has made all the difference."  

In "Build Soil--A Political Pastoral" Frost's praise of being an individual is found in such lines as:

I bid you to a one-man revolution--
The only revolution that is coming.
We're too unseparate out among each other--

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Don't join too many gangs. Join few if any.
Join the United States and join the family--
But not much in between unless a college.  

One can get the impression that Frost would not always even recommend joining a college. Lawrance Thompson observes that "social institutions represented by schools and colleges come in for their share of criticism by Frost because they are too prone to superimpose artificial concepts on the individual instead of encouraging the student . . . to discover his own position and beliefs as an individual."  

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23 Ibid., p. 131.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., pp. 429-430.
26 Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 215.
Some critics have accused Frost of wanting to be too much of an individual, to the extent that he would like to withdraw or escape from the world altogether. To a degree, this is true. A recurrent wish that he might run away from it all was a mood that he often had to fight. Thompson writes that "often he would plunge into the woods behind his farm and walk until he was almost exhausted. Then he would come back, repentant."27 During this period he wrote the defensive sonnet, "Into My Own," which he later placed in a context which treated it ironically, as if implying, "I was right and you'll be sorry when I'm gone."28

Frost's ambivalent attitude toward escape troubled him throughout his life. In 1932 he confessed to his friend John Bartlett, referring to the years he spent on the farm at Derry, "I sometimes think of those years as almost a fadeout, an escape into a dream existence, as in dementia praecox."29 Yet in 1917 Frost had tried to convince Bartlett that, under certain circumstances, the only way to preserve one's sanity was to escape deliberately: "... you'll have to give up everything for a little while. Cut and run away from every care: that is the rule. Nothing else will do. No faltering."30

28 Ibid.
29 Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, p. 561.
30 Ibid.
Frost also told Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant that he objected to the negative meaning of the term "escapist." He said that possibly one might be escaping from something that is strangling him to something he might need and must have.  

Of the poem "Into My Own" Mrs. Sergeant says: "Frost has told me that this poem represents his first desire to escape from something, his fear of something," and she also comments that the poem "suggests in metaphorical terms the meaning to a sensitive spirit of the self-chosen and almost compulsively isolated life."  

"Into My Own" is the first poem to appear in A Boy's Will as well as the very first selection in the Complete Poems. This might indicate that it was only an early, rather childish theme of the poet's. Yet we shall see that this assumption cannot be maintained. Here is the entire poem:

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

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

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

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31 Sergeant, p. 57.  
32 Ibid.  
33 Ibid., p. 56.
They would not find me changed from him they knew—
Only more sure of all I thought was true.34

George Nitchie discusses how Frost's ambivalence toward
escape persisted throughout his life:

If "Into My Own" is a fantasy escape from the world
of social considerations and ethical complexity . . .
so, more responsibly and ambivalently, is "Stopping
by Woods on a Snowy Evening," from New Hampshire,
ten years later. With still further modification,
so is "Come In," from A Witness Tree, almost thirty
years later. It is true that the latter poems
explicitly reject the woods, while "Into My Own"
at least yearns to enter them, but . . . this fact
is less a simple contradiction with a clear chronology
than an ambivalence. . . . All three poems are
concerned with an imagined withdrawal from the
complicated world we all know into a mysterious
loveliness symbolized by woods or darkness.35

In "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," one of Frost's
best-known poems, he rejects the temptation to escape:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,36
And miles to go before I sleep.

Here the speaker does not repeat the rebellious "I do
not see why I should e'er turn back."37 Instead, he realizes
the obligations he has to meet, the responsibilities that are
his, the "promises to keep." And he refuses, albeit reluctantly,
to shirk them.

34 Frost, p. 5.
35 George W. Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert
36 Frost, p. 275.
37 Ibid., p. 5.
In the later poem, "Come In," the speaker hears a thrush's song which seems like a call for him to give up his present course of action and "come in/ To the dark and lament." But in the last stanza he rejects this idea:

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

The speaker refuses to depart from his present course because "he was out for stars," and here Frost's ever-recurrent star image seems to symbolize an already determined course. He has decided not to deviate from his plans "even if asked." And, the poet continues, "I hadn't been." This line reflects the speaker's realization that nature is in fact oblivious of him, that there really had never been a call issued at all. The bird's song had been only "almost like a call."

There is another poem in which the speaker rejects a call--this time a call from the wilderness. This poem is "An Empty Threat," which speaks of the poet's desire to get off to Hudson Bay and be himself. He never really will, but it comforts him somehow to know that the Hudson Bay is always there.

Frost admires a person who has the self-will to escape to the woods if he wants to. "The Gum-Gatherer" is a poem

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38 Ibid., p. 446.
39 Ibid.
about such a man. He lives alone in the woods, making his living by gathering gum from the trees and taking it to town to sell. Frost writes:

I told him this is a pleasant life
To set your breast to the bark of trees
That all your days are dim beneath,
And reaching up with a little knife,
To loose the resin and take it down
And bring it to market when you please.

There is also a certain wistfulness in the author's tone when he speaks of "The Figure in a Doorway." Here is a man, a hermit, who comes out of his cabin door to watch the trains go by. Frost writes:

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.

Nor did he lack for common entertainment.
That I assume was what our passing train meant. 41

To Frost, this hermit had all the necessities of life and especially the courage to live alone if he wanted to.

Frost himself actually made certain escapes or withdrawals at times. The poem "A Lone Striker" is based on a true experience. In 1894 Frost was working as a mill hand. The policy of the mill was to lock the gate against tardy employees who arrived after the last bell. One morning this happened to Frost, yet he "found it easy to resist" 42 because:

40 Ibid., p. 177. 41 Ibid., p. 378.
42 Ibid., p. 356.
He knew a path that wanted walking;
He knew a spring that wanted drinking;
A thought that wanted further thinking;
A love that wanted re-renewing.\textsuperscript{43}

So he left the factory and went into the woods; and, he says, if they wanted him "why,/ Come get him--they knew where
to search."\textsuperscript{44}

"Birches" is a poem that well illustrates Frost's
ambivalent attitude toward escape. After speaking nostalgically
of the way boys bend down birches to swing on them, he says:

So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. . . . \textsuperscript{45}

It is when the world and its burdens get to be too much
for him that Frost most longs to escape--as do most human
beings. And although he makes clear in this poem that he
does not actually wish to take the final step, that he intends
at the last to withdraw from withdrawal--this, too, is the
normal human reaction.

In the sense that it is a normal human desire to wish
to get away from pressures and problems, Frost then is not

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid. \textsuperscript{44} Ibid. \textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 153.
so much of an 'escapist as some critics have asserted. He calls this urge making a "strategic retreat" in the poem "A Drumlin Woodchuck." This is a poem about a self-preserving withdrawal. The speaker tells of digging a safe burrow where

I can sit forth exposed to attack
As one who shrewdly pretends
That he and the world are friends. 46

Then, when the "blast" is over, "(Like war and pestilence/
And the loss of common sense)," 47 he will have survived because, as he says, "I have been so instinctively thorough/
About my crevice and burrow." 48

Another poem about retreat, thought by some to be Frost's finest, is "Directive." Here the poet advises the reader to go back to a brook which is a spring of simplicity in this chaotic world. The brook is a symbol of spiritual healing. As Nitchie puts it, the reader is told to move "back beyond civilization, beyond childhood, almost beyond death itself to achieve his quest and 'be whole again beyond confusion.'" 49

Frost writes:

Back out of all this now too much for us,
Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion. 50

47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., p. 366.
49 Nitchie, p. 95.
50 Frost, pp. 520-521.
But, again, it is retreat Frost is speaking of, not escape, because one does not have to remain there; like the swinger of birches one can return to Earth again.

Reuben Brower comments:

Frost finds in "Directive" a way of moving outside time, not by launching into another order of being entirely, but by recreation of the past. . . . So he returns to the beginning of his life and poetry, but it is a return after having taken one road rather than the other, a journey "into his own" quite different from the early lyric, a contrast that adds an unintended irony to "Only more sure of all I thought was true."

Robert Frost believed strongly in the importance of individuality. He believed that a man not only could, but emphatically should, make the best of his own particular world. His poetry reflects his admiration for those who have the courage to be an individual, even a non-conformist in some respects. Conversely, it also reflects his dislike for those who rail against their lot. He was not one who condoned self-pity.

And yet, although he refused to cry out against his own particular tragedies, he had within him a strong urge to escape, to get away when "life is too much like a pathless wood." He wanted to get away--but he wanted to come back. Rather than to leave the world permanently, he was in favor of man's making a "strategic retreat." He wanted, certainly,

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"to get away from earth for awhile," but significantly, he wanted to "come back to it and begin over." This latter desire is the more important to an understanding of Frost, the man and the poet. In that phrase is reflected all the courage, determination, and hope with which he lived and wrote.
Although George W. Nitchie maintains that the message of Frost's poetry presents a "fundamentally asocial dogma," there is no question but that much of Frost's poetry deals with the theme of man's relationship to his fellow man. Nitchie further contends that Frost's poems rarely touch on the subject of collective social significance. In the years of the thirties—depression years—when many of the major writers were concerned with such matters as the growth of European Fascism, Frost published A Further Range, in which he chose to discount many of the social problems of the age. According to Nitchie, "... for Frost all values, both positive and negative... are ultimately defined in terms of individual to individual (husband-wife unit), individual to himself or to his environment, not of the individual to society."  

Frost may not be concerned much with collective social problems (although there is some attention to these matters

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2Ibid., p. 124.
in his later poetry), but at the same time, he saw man as achieving little so long as he considers only himself, isolated from those around him. Philip Gerber points out that, although Frost, who was always a moderate, searched for an ideal reconciliation between the opposing claims of the individual and the group, he never found it. "Throughout his poetry, his statement of man's relationship to man remains ambiguous."\(^3\)

An example of this ambiguity can be found by examining two poems, "The Tuft of Flowers" and "Mending Wall." In "The Tuft of Flowers," which appeared in Frost's first book, A Boy's Will, two field hands work the same field. One mows the grass; later another comes to turn it for better drying:

> And I must be, as he had been--alone,
> 'As all must be,' I said within my heart,
> 'Whether they work together or apart.'\(^4\)

Yet when the grass-turner comes upon a tuft of flowers left standing by the scythe as an act of love on the part of the mower, the mood instantly changes:

> 'Men work together,' I told him from the heart,
> 'Whether they work together or apart.'\(^5\)

If "The Tuft of Flowers" were Frost's last comment on the brotherhood of man, it would be clear where he stood:

\(^5\) Ibid., p. 32.
in the romantic tradition of the great brotherhood of man, where men are bound together by ties of spirituality.

However, his next book, *North of Boston*, begins with the converse of this romantic tradition with its very first poem, "Mending Wall." In this poem two neighbors work side by side repairing the rock wall that divides their property. Between the men is another wall, which will not topple down every year as the stone wall does. It is a wall built of tradition, custom, and set ways. One neighbor recites over and over his creed: "Good fences make good neighbors." The other counters: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down." The two men, though physically working closely together, are actually so far apart that there can be no communication of the spirit.

Another statement of this ambiguity is found in the poem "The Strong Are Saying Nothing":

There is seldom more than a man to a harrowed piece
Men work alone, their lots plowed far apart,
One stringing a chain of seed in an open crease,
And another stumbling after a halting cart.

Radcliffe Squires cites "Two Tramps in Mud Time" in maintaining that the happy notion of men working together as in "The Tuft of Flowers" will not always hold true for Frost. "It is true only so long as the objective is superficial and momentary. Or, more importantly, it is true that men work

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together only if the objective is not practical; if it a flower to be spared, yes; if a belly is to be fed—perhaps no. So the answer to the question, "In the poetry of Frost do men work together or apart?" has to be "Both."

The element that draws men to "work together" or to draw close together as human beings is, in much of Frost's poetry, the fear of loneliness. Elizabeth Isaacs calls Frost "the master of isolation poetry." Man realizes that he is alone on this planet and he yearns for human companionship to relieve the scary darkness of the universe. This theme is particularly strong in his dramatic narratives, but it can also be found in his lyric poems.

The theme of "The Hill Wife" is fear in loneliness. This lyric poem is divided into five parts and is a drama in miniature. In poem one the wife's loneliness is established:

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 goodbye;

Or care so much when they come back
With whatever it is they sing;
The truth being we are as much
Too glad for the one thing . . .


10Frost, p. 160.
In her loneliness the woman knows she should not have to depend on the presence of birds for company.

Poem two presents the loneliness extended to fear:

Always at night when they returned
To the lonely house from far away
To lamps unlighted and fire gone gray,
They learned to rattle the lock and key
To give whatever might chance to be
Warning and time to be off in flight: . . .

These lines present a universal fear—returning to a dark and empty house after being gone. Yet, for the Hill Wife, as John Robert Doyle says, "Clearly the loneliness is beginning to have its effect, fear--objectively unformed but subjectively very particular--is now showing its presence."12

In poem three, the fear becomes actual—the object feared being the stranger who asks for something to eat. The final couplet of this poem reveals the wife's abnormal state of mind in fearing this apparently harmless stranger:

I wonder how far down the road he's got.
He's watching from the woods as like as not.13

Poem four moves to fear in the dream world:

She had no saying dark enough
For the dark pine that kept
Forever trying the window-latch 14
Of the room where they slept.

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11 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
In the last of these five poems, "The Impulse," the wife takes her flight with a suddenness that comes upon the reader before he realizes it. Because there are no children and thus little to keep her in the house, she follows her husband in his work. There one day

Sudden and swift and light as that
The ties gave.
And he learned of finalities
Besides the grave.\textsuperscript{15}

Because loneliness is one of the great basic emotions, Frost can effectively write a drama in a short space.

Sometimes man brings isolation upon himself. "The Fear" is a narrative telling of a woman who has left her husband to run away with another man. She lives in a constant state of apprehension, always fearful that her husband is spying on her and that he will find her and take his retribution. Symbolically, she says to Joel, the common-law husband, "You understand that we have to be careful. / This is a very, very lonely place."\textsuperscript{16}

"The Witch of Coös" is another woman who lives isolated, under the constant fear of a ghostly skeleton from the past. Throughout the speeches of the witch the reader feels the constant pressure of the guilt which she has lived with since she and her husband killed her lover and buried him in the cellar. The reader is given one vivid glimpse of their joint crime: "We were about it one night in the cellar." Then, as

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 162.  \textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 116.
Reuben Brower points out, "The dull echo of this line recurs twice in a passage that shows Frost at his most versatile as he modulates the speech of mother and son to a new deadness of tone and rhythm."\(^{17}\) The following passage illustrates Frost's skill:

Son. We think they had a grave down in the cellar.
Mother. We know they had a grave down in the cellar.
Son. We never could find out whose bones they were.
Mother. Yes, we could too, son. Tell the truth for once.

But tonight I don't care enough to lie—
I don't remember why I ever cared.
Toffile, if he were here, I don't believe
Could tell you why he ever cared himself.\(^ {18}\)

So at last the truth of this long secret murder comes out, the witch communicates her guilt, and, as Brower says, "The end is utter weariness with guilt and concealment, evil played out, the sear and yellow leaf of a New England Macbeth."\(^ {19}\)

In a poem that shows Frost's power of quiet implication, loneliness and isolation have contributed to an overworked woman's derangement. "A Servant to Servants" is a dramatic monologue in the manner of Browning—a grim character sketch created through the point of view of the main character herself. This woman is worn down by an inhuman quantity of work and a


\(^{18}\) Frost, pp. 251-252.

\(^{19}\) Brower, p. 169.
lack of human companionship. The poem illustrates clearly Frost's interest in the psychology of basic human relationships. He pictures stark loneliness as it appears against a background of the rest of the normal world by using a technique of expressive breaks which occur repeatedly and which create a subdued undertow in the progress of the poem. Examples are:

- But I don't know...
- I hope you never...
- You take the lake...
- But I don't know...
- But it's not medicine--
- But work ain't all.

Reuben Brower says: "These are speaking silences: the weariness and numbness, the terror and hopelessness, the grim past and the future too little and too well foreseen—all this and much more is caught in the seeming ineptitude of the monologue." 20

The last line of the poem reveals the wife's pathetic final effort to move toward sanity, dignity, and communion: "I'd rather you'd not go unless you must." 21

"Acquainted With the Night" is a lyric poem which dramatizes man's aloneness. In this poem night symbolizes the basic isolation of man from other men and from nature. Throughout the poem there are people—seen, heard, or known to be there—but no direct contact. Elizabeth Isaacs points out that five direct, flat, repetitious statements all end

20 Ibid., p. 170.
21 Frost, p. 87.
in periods of declarative honesty: leaving in the loneliness of rain and so returning; outwalking the furthest city lights beyond the range of human association; looking down the saddest city lane disassociated from general humanity near at hand; dropping the eyes before the watchman and thus rejecting contact with another human being representing care and caution; and finally trying to disassociate himself entirely from himself in his search for essence.  

In the lyric "Desert Places" the absence of all human companionship is the one thing most prominently established by the diction of the poem, from the title to the last word of the last line: "Desert places... loneliness... lonely... blanker... benighted... no expression... nothing to express... empty spaces... where no human race is... desert places."  

The first stanza impresses the reader with a sense of gloom. The second stanza affirms the lack of any human or animal companionship:

The woods around it have it--it is theirs
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count, 24
The loneliness includes me unawares.  

The third stanza intensifies the man's aloneness and prepares us for the poem's climax:

22 Isaacs, p. 107.
23 Frost, p. 386.
24 Ibid.
They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.  

The interplanetary void does not scare the poet, because he has his own "desert places" of startling aloneness. Reginald Cook says of this poem: "In intention it shows us human loneliness can be incredibly intense and that it is not to be compared with the nonhuman vacuity of interstellar places . . . the poet adjusts our sights so that we see the importance of inner personal matters in comparison with outer impersonal ones."  

Sometimes man finds himself isolated from other men because of an innate fear of the unfamiliar. In the dramatic narrative "A Hundred Collars" Dr. Magoon, a timid professor stranded overnight in a one-hotel town, is given the opportunity to share the last half-bed with a stranger, Lafe, a huge man who is a collector for the Weekly News.

As Lafe and Doctor Magoon face each other, the conflict of the poem comes physically into existence. They represent two ways of living, two attitudes toward life. Magoon wears a size fourteen collar; Lafe an eighteen. Magoon, though on a trip, has only five dollars in his billfold; Lafe has ninety

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25 Ibid.
26 Reginald Cook, Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York, 1958), p. 188.
(the newspaper's money) in his. Magoon would never accept a drink from Lafe, since Lafe has only one bottle from which to drink.

Throughout the poem Magoon is characterized by his fear of any world except his own narrow, scholarly one. Lafe, however, likes people and tries to be friendly to the doctor; though he does not get very far. Lafe is at first amused by the little man's fright. Then he is angered to learn that the fear is motivated through mistrust. Though the doctor has only five dollars and Lafe has ninety, it is the doctor who is suspicious. Lafe ironically advises the doctor:

'You'd better tuck your money under you,
And sleep on it the way I always do
When I'm with people I don't trust at night.'

Later Lafe leaves the room, assuring the doctor that he will make himself known when he returns by knocking at the door:

There's nothing I'm afraid of like scared people.
I don't want you should shoot me in the head.

"On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind" is a poem concerned with the plight of those who live alone in the desert. The speaker is on a train, speeding through the desert at night. Looking out of his lower berth, he spots a single light on the landscape:

A flickering, human pathetic light,
That was maintained against the night,

\[^{27}Frost, p. 64.\] \[^{28}Ibid., p. 67.\]
It seemed to me, by the people there,
With a God-forsaken brute despair.
It would flutter and fall in half an hour
Like the last petal off a flower.29

Later he comes to the conclusion that the light burns in
a home where husband and wife provide for each other, and the
flickering of the light is after all only an illusion caused
by the rapid movement of the train.

One of the poems which illustrates clearly the need of
man for human companionship is "The Census-Taker." In the
climax the speaker reveals himself as a man who needs to live
among men:

The melancholy of having to count souls
Where they grow fewer and fewer every year
Is extreme when they shrink to none at all. 30

Alienation from one's fellow man can arise from breach
of respect, as in "The Code." Because the boss had needlessly
and carelessly urged the farmer to work faster, the farmer,
through pride, asserts his "code" by trying to smother his
boss beneath a load of hay. Earlier in the poem another
farmer had thrust his pitchfork in the ground and stalked
off for home. When the town-bred fellow worker was puzzled,
he was told that it was "Something you just now said. . . ./
He thought you meant to find fault with his work."31

29 Ibid., p. 376.
30 Ibid., p. 217.
31 Ibid., p. 90.
In the poem "Triple Bronze" Frost says that there are three walls that wall men in or wall them out. These walls are their hides, their homes, and their nations. This three-fold defense against "too much" seems essential. Yet sometimes men erect walls between each other where no walls should be and thus shut themselves off from men and things. The death of a child, for instance, should bind a husband and wife closer together in their common grief. Yet, if walls are erected, men may be driven further apart. In "Home Burial" Frost gives us such a poignant situation. The wife holds herself apart from her husband in her grief over the loss of their child, and even resents the manner in which he has chosen to bear his grief by trying to carry on with his life. The husband pleads with her:

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.  

The woman's stubborn and unbalanced perseverance in turning her back on the yearning love of the man heightens the sense of the tragedy of this poem. The core of the tragic situation does not lie in the environment of the individuals. The tragedy is more fundamentally human and universal—a failure in communication. Often the people in the narrative poems of Frost cannot break down the walls separating them from the help of others. Reginald Cook has pointed out:

\[32^\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 71.}\]
The inadequacy in Frost's people is sometimes vocal as in his hired man and hill wife. But usually the dominant failure is in disconnection, as it were, in the flow of feelings. The circuit is cut, the flow interrupted, and repression, the chronic condition of their wounded spirits, seals them off from human intimacy and the possibility of regeneration and rehabilitation. Unable to share their inmost feelings, they slowly bleed to death.33

Though some cannot break down these walls, it is true that in most of Frost's poems, the possibility for human communication does exist. One must respond to such possibilities, as does the farmer in "A Time to Talk." As he is out working in his fields, he sees his neighbor passing by and recognizes from the gesture the neighbor makes in slowing down his horse to a walk that companionship is being asked for:

When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don't stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven't hoed,
And shout from where I am, 'What is it?'
No, not as there is a time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit.34

Sometimes the sharing of only a small gesture can reveal man's communication. "The Figure in a Doorway" is another poem about something seen from a train. As the train travels across scrub-oak mountains, a hermit is seen in the doorway of his tiny cabin beside the tracks. He is stranded by more

33Cook, p. 129. 34Frost, p. 156.
than miles from other men, and yet his life was "evidently something he could bear."\textsuperscript{35} For entertainment, he watched the trains pass by. And if so inclined he would "uncurl a hand in greeting,"\textsuperscript{36} a simple human gesture of companionship, though ever so slight.

Radcliffe Squires asserts that "ultimately, Frost prefers to let the way of man's relation to man fall to chance—or to a faith in some kind of spontaneous understanding."\textsuperscript{37} Yet without an active and conscious awareness of another's needs, communication cannot take place. "The Housekeeper" is the story of John and Estelle, who have lived together for fifteen years in common law, to all appearances with satisfaction and mutual respect. Yet Estelle suddenly elopes with another man because he offers her marriage. For Estelle, there was a gnawing need to have the ceremony that would make her John's wife in the eyes of the world. John lacked either the discernment to see this or the will to respond to her need.

Many of the poems of Frost present people with such deep needs or with sorrows or misfortunes, but only a few of the poems show people in the process of concerning themselves with the problems of others. When Jesus Christ told his disciples to "Love thy neighbor as thyself" the question arose: "Who is my neighbor?" The answer given suggested

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{35}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 378. \\
\textsuperscript{36}\textit{Ibid.} \\
\textsuperscript{37}\textit{Squires}, p. 72.
\end{flushright}
that one's neighbor might be any other man. The Biblical account of the Good Samaritan is perhaps the world's most famous story presenting one man's concern for the sorrows and misfortunes of another. One such Good Samaritan story written by Frost is "The Death of the Hired Man." As in the Biblical story of the Good Samaritan, Warren and Mary are under no obligation to help old Silas, who has come to them hoping they will take him in, but they feel the universal obligation that comes with being a part of humanity. Mary remarks that

'Of course he's nothing to us any more
Than was the hound that came a stranger back to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.'

Although there is no special reason why he should be taken in, Warren feels that there is good reason why he should not. When Mary warns Warren to be kind to Silas he retorts:

'When was I ever anything but kind to him?
But I'll not have the fellow back . . .
I told him so last haying, didn't I?
If he left then, I said, that ended it.
What good is he? . . .'

Husband and wife agree on the fact that Silas is of little or no use to them, and their evaluation does not change throughout the poem. Yet gradually they decide that they will accept the pretense with which Silas maintains his self-respect. And since he has no other place to go and since they are the kind

\[38\] Frost, p. 53.
\[39\] Ibid., p. 49.
of human beings who cannot refuse another human being in need, they will take him in.

In "A Roadside Stand" there is no person present within the poem to face the problems of another, yet the poet is so obviously concerned with the misfortunes of others that the reader sees the poet himself in the process of accepting the problem. A family has put up a little vegetable stand by the road in an effort to secure a little cash. Using the method of direct comment, Frost says of their dismal failure:

Sometimes I feel myself I can hardly bear
The thought of so much childish longing in vain,
The sadness that lurks near the open window there,
That waits all day in almost open prayer
For the squeal of brakes, the sound of a stopping car,
Of all the thousand selfish cars that pass
Just one to inquire what a farmer's prices are. 40

In the climax of the poem the poet touchingly puts himself in the place of his fellow man and at the same time identifies himself with his fellow man's pain:

I can't help owning the great relief it would be
To put these people at one stroke out of their pain.
And then next day as I come back into the sane,
I wonder how I should like you to come to me
And offer to put me gently out of my pain. 41

A poem which shows neighbors helping one another in spite of themselves is "Snow." The Coles are routed out of their beds on a blizzard midnight to provide shelter for their neighbor, a fundamentalist preacher, Brother Meserve. However, Meserve is determined to push on home that night rather than

40 Ibid., p. 371. 41 Ibid.
stay with the Coles. Out of his hearing the Coles debate his merits much as Warren and Mary debate the merits of the hired man. The Coles do not like Meserve and mistrust even his motives for undertaking what seems to them a foolhardy trip. Why must he feel so compelled to face the storm?

"He's getting up a miracle this minute,
Privately—to himself, right now, he's thinking
He'll make a case of it if he succeeds,
But keep still if he fails."42

The Coles know that if Meserve does fail, he will be dead under the snow. Also, despite their disapproval of his actions, the Coles have called him "Brother" Meserve and now they wonder why. Unconsciously, they know he is their brother in spite of their different religious views. Meserve leaves and the Coles are uneasy. Only later, when Meserve has reached home, do they relax. Then, as Philip Gerber observes: "... in a supremely human touch, their deep concern becomes righteous indignation. What was the point of this upstart Meserve's subjecting them to such an ordeal?"43 Mrs. Cole sums the matter up:

The whole to-do seems to have been for nothing.
What spoiled our night was to him just for fun.

... if he thinks he is going to make our house
A halfway coffee house 'twixt town and nowhere--44

But of course they would do the same again if he came back. They cannot help themselves and this is the point that

42 Ibid., p. 183.  
43 Gerber, p. 152.  
44 Frost, p. 193.
Frost is making. Intolerance of other's foibles holds men apart—erects walls between them. The worry, the inconvenience caused by helping others is a part of the sharing of life. Without some effort at sharing, man is isolated from others. Fred Cole says:

'But let's forgive him. We've had a share in one night of his life.'45

As we have observed in the preceding chapter, much of Frost's poetry deals with man as he is alone in the world. Robert Frost was himself a loner in many respects. And yet he realized, too, that in the very nature of things we must exist among other people. In our modern world even a lone hermit communicates briefly with the people on a passing train. According to Frost, men can work together or they can build walls around themselves and work apart. Yet even within these walls a man is existing within a society.

We have seen that in Frost's poetry a man who might otherwise wish to dwell apart is drawn to human companionship out of fear or loneliness. Too, most people feel an obligation to help those who are in need of help, and this draws men together.

Other men bring isolation upon themselves because of guilt, timidity, or an inability to share grief. But it is clear that to Frost such isolation is tragic. The poetry of Robert Frost indicates that complete isolation from others is the greatest catastrophe that can happen to man.

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CHAPTER IV

MAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO HIS WIFE

Robert Frost once said, "All of my poems are love poems." Of course the term "love" in the poetry of Frost can and does apply to many different kinds of love: family love, love of nature, love of country, love of God—and it applies also in the more usual sense of love between man and woman. Frost had something to say in his poems not only of an innocent type of love, but also of passionate love, and especially of love as it matures or fails to mature within the marriage relationship. Frost wrote of the kind of love that has gone wrong, of hopes and dreams that have failed to materialize. The pathos of this situation is most clearly illustrated in his dramatic poems.

Frost had an uncanny understanding of the workings of the female mind. Jesse Rittenhouse wrote:

Frost has an insight into the lives of women not to be matched by any poet of our day. . . . The woman in "Home Burial" whose spiritual recoil against the man who could dig his own child's grave is more than a specific thing, it is a typical thing, showing the essential

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1Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice (New York, 1942), p. 184.
gulf between the nature of a man and that of a woman when it comes to the finest distinctions of feeling.  

"Home Burial" also illustrates Frost's understanding of the masculine mind as it attempts to cope with the unpredictability of women. Indeed, the dominant tone of this dramatic narrative is the poet's understanding of both the husband and the wife.

Conflict in this poem develops over the different ways of bearing grief over the loss of a child. The man tries to cover grief with daily tasks and commonplace remarks; the woman carries her sorrow openly and seems to have no way to cover her grief at all. The tragic situation is heightened because Frost shows us that each is partly right in the manner in which they conduct themselves.

The husband's is the practical, healthy attitude of a man living close to the soil, able to adjust to sorrow by trying to go on with life as he has always lived it, knowing that after a death the living are left to do just that. He is eager to please his wife, willing to forgive, ready to be open. He pleads to be let into her grief:

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.  

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But she answers with high irony: how could he possibly hope to understand?

... 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?

William Pritchard writes of this passage and the lines that follow it:

The power of this passage lies in its style. Although the first three lines are representative of the colloquial speech Frost usually employs—the use of contractions, the interpolated, questioning aside--these are only part of the impact of this speech.

Pritchard explains that the devices of alliteration and assonance give power to this passage. The following lines show unobtrusive use of alliteration:

I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly . . .

Moreover, the deadly assonance of the last line and the repetition of "like that" serve as a departure from the simple colloquial speech to which we have become accustomed in this and other Frost poems. As Pritchard says,

This stylized artificial speech brings home to us the specially heightened presence of a dream or vision from the past that has been the wife's private possession until this moment. The

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4Ibid.


6Frost, p. 71.
vigororous repetition and alliteration of her style
both imitate and rebuke the shocking energy of
the husband's performance at the grave, setting
it in implicit contrast with the dead child and
her own motionless grief.7

To her husband the grave-digging had been an outlet for
his grief. He feels the loss as keenly as she, but knowing
that life is for the living, he is trying to do something.
He is attempting to face reality--she to escape it. She is
unwilling to forgive or forget. Her anger with her husband
even causes her to lash out at the reaction of the world in
general in the face of death:

Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand.
But the world's evil. I won't have grief go
If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!8

The tension has mounted about as far as it can. She
goes to the door to leave. The final indignity to him would
be for someone to see her leave, for now pride is at stake.

Of the sudden conclusion of this poem, which is highly
emotional and which does not return the reader to his own
world, George Nitchie has written approvingly:

In a sense the whole poem is there, epitomized
in the door that is neither open or shut. The
wife cannot really leave; the husband cannot
really make her stay. The talk is all, in the
sense that neither husband or wife is capable
of conclusive action, of liberating either
himself or the other. Not quite capable of
self-realization, they have only will, with no

7Pritchard, p. 45. 8Frost, p. 72.
object for it to work on but one another: "How can I make you--?" "I'll follow you and bring you back by force"; and the unshut, unopen door. This, at least, is the aptness of great poetry.  

Reginald Cook also comments on Frost's excellent technique in this poem:

One of Frost's skills is to make the obvious sound different. He does it by the voice which is so intextured in the essential meaning that only by the variations in voice tones do we understand the differences in emotional stress.

Frost repeatedly insisted that his source for "Home Burial" was the crucial marital estrangement which overtook his sister-in-law and brother-in-law after the death of their first child. Yet Lawrance Thompson has written:

But the writing of it could not have been separated from the grief shared by RF and his wife following the death of their first-born, Elliott, in 1900. The poem seems to have thematic bearing on the difficulty with which Mrs. Frost survived that grief. According to RF, his wife repeatedly said, following the loss, "The world's evil . . . ." In his hundreds of public and private readings, RF told LT, he never did read "Home Burial." It was, he said, "too sad" for him to read aloud.

Frost has written other dramatic poems about the inability of husband and wife to meet each other's needs. "A Servant to Servants," a dramatic monologue, is such a

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11Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years (New York, 1966), pp. 597-598.
poem. Frost plunges us into the middle of the drama with the words:

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. . . .

and her voice trails off as she explains that she can't seem to express herself. This woman is overworked and isolated from outside society. She is glad to see the stranger from the outside world who has come to set up a botanist's camp beside their lake to study the ferns.

As the poem progresses, we learn that Len, her husband, is as overworked as she, but he seems to have more purpose to his work. Len is not one who seeks the easy way out; he wants the best for her and tries to get it for her. The relationship between this husband and wife is not bad; it is just not adequate. Work is his means of coping with difficulty, just as the work of grave-digging helped the young husband in "Home Burial." "But work ain't all," she says, though she really has no clear notion of what "all" might include.

There has been insanity in her family and the woman is as sure of her own doomed weakness for madness as she is sure of her husband's strength. She lives with the horrible memory of her insane uncle's twanging of the bars of his cage. She

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12 Frost, p. 82.
13 Ibid., p. 84.
knows of her mother's married life in a madman's house, of her own beginning in the same house, of her husband's attempt to help by moving, and of her own terrified struggle to keep her sanity.

If hard work is not the solution to her problems, there is no suggestion that love might find an easy way out. As Reuben Brower observes, "The countryman and wife of this eclogue are up against something where any conceivable human affection is no resource. The terror and secret attraction of the psychotic can't be willed or wished away."\(^{14}\)

Another poem in which the husband seems unable to help the wife is "The Hill Wife." Lawrance Thompson comments that "the entire poem hinges on the growing failure of the man to sympathize with the wife's accumulated psychosis."\(^{15}\) Her fear and loneliness cause her to run away on an impulse. The husband "... never found her, though he looked/ Everywhere... And he learned of finalities/ Besides the grave."\(^{16}\)

"The Housekeeper" is a dramatic narrative in which the trouble exists not because of marriage but because of the lack of it. Estelle had come to keep house for John Hall fifteen years before, but had drifted into a common-law


\(^{15}\) Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 118.

\(^{16}\) Frost, p. 162.
relationship. As the poem opens, we find that Estelle has left John to run off with a man who promises marriage. John's attitude had been that "Better than married ought to be as good/ As married." 17

The neighbor who comes to see John begins to probe Estelle's mother for reasons why this drastic action has occurred after a seemingly peaceful fifteen years. As Estelle's mother gradually reveals the situation that had been building up for fifteen years, the neighbor learns much that he did not know about John. John Robert Doyle points out that "it is in the development of John Hall's character that the center of the poem is reached. Because of her intimate knowledge of all that has gone on, she reveals exactly what the reader needs to know about John at precisely the moment he needs to know it." 18 The mother says of John:

You spoke of John's not being safe to stay with. You don't know what a gentle lot we are: We wouldn't hurt a hen! You ought to see us Moving a flock of hens from place to place. We're not allowed to take them upside down, All we can hold together by the legs. Two at a time's the rule, one on each arm, No matter how far and how many times We have to go. 19

17 Ibid., p. 106.
These lines establish John's character as that of a gentle person. He feels that he has given Estelle and her mother a good home. They have interests in common; in fact, the situation seems so ideal to him that when he was asked, "Why shouldn't they be married?" He'd say, "Why should they?" 20

But John is wrong. George Nitchie comments, "Concerned more for his chickens than for his wife . . . Hall discovers too late that habitual kindness is no substitute for deliberate commitment." 21

Estelle has given herself and her property to the man she loves, and in return she has always hoped that he would honor her with what is accepted in their society—honorable marriage. But he has not seen this. Estelle reasons that "... if it was bad to live with him, / It must be right to leave." 22 This, of course, is rationalization, just as John's reasoning had been. John Doyle comments on their rationalization and its literary interest for us:

John stands in his little circle and does not see beyond it; Estelle stands in hers and sees no more; the mother sees her own and part of the way into both of the others. It is only the reader who sees into all simultaneously. His advantageous position makes him feel very wise. This inflation of the ego is one of the reasons why man loves literature. His profound grasp of the problem enables him to tell all of them what to do. Others he can save; himself he cannot save. 23

20 Ibid., p. 106.  
21 Nitchie, p. 166.  
22 Frost, p. 105.  
23 Doyle, p. 126.
Interestingly, Lawrance Thompson tells us that there was a real John Hall, whom Frost knew when he lived at Derry, and whom he admired because he was an expert poultry-man. According to Thompson, Hall "lived in relative peace and comfort with a common-law housekeeper-wife and her mother ...." 24

Not all of Frost's man-woman relationships are of a tragic nature. In "The Death of the Hired Man" the coming home of old Silas to die brings husband and wife to a fuller understanding of each other and themselves. The main drama of the poem does not lie in Silas' past, but in the present relationship between man and wife, and through the contrasting of their attitudes to Silas runs a growing responsiveness of each to the other. We never observe the person of Silas either in speech or in action. We learn about him as we listen to the thoughtful opposition and agreement of Mary and Warren as they talk about him. Through the modulation and corrections of voices speaking to one another, our final understanding of Silas is brought into balance.

The drama reveals itself in the movement of Warren's responses to the hired man from an original refusal of sympathy to a growing involvement in Silas' fate. Early in the poem Warren responds to Mary's pleas for kindness with:

'When was I ever anything but kind to him? But I'll not have the fellow back,' he said. 'I told him so last haying, didn't I?"

24 Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, p. 283.
If he left then, I said, that ended it.
What good is he? Who else will harbor him
At his age for the little he can do?²⁵

Warren's righteous insistence on what he said and did shows him to be on the defensive. Although Warren cannot share Mary's feelings of tenderness towards Silas, he knows that she is sincere. Mary expresses her concern for Silas in lines which seem to sum up Silas' whole life as well:

Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
And nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different.²⁶

Throughout the poem Mary's tone is both begging and explanatory. Mary's character, like that of her husband, grows more distinct as she paints a picture of Silas, talking always from his point of view.

Warren's speech is defensive, abrupt and shows him to be shrewd and practical. He finally goes in to see Silas, and when he returns, he takes Mary's hand, signifying the feeling of closeness that is between them. Yet they remain always in their distinct roles as man and woman. Reuben Brower writes:

But though their feelings converge, their last words are thoroughly characteristic, hers questioning, his brief, hard and final, though much is unsaid. "All," he answered, points beyond Silas' character and history to the drama of tensions and releases in the dialogue of the man and woman on the death of the hired man. Beyond that is the drama of man's justice and woman's mercy and the pull of both values when

²⁵Frost, p. 49.
²⁶Ibid., p. 52.
set against the simplest and deepest of claims—the dignity of man.

"The Investment" makes an observation on the will of a marriage to survive. This sonnet gives a picture of the husband out digging for potatoes—"winter dinners"—while listening with half an ear to a piano playing back at his newly painted house. In his typical manner of presenting questions, then leaving the answer to the reader, Frost asks:

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

Frost's answer is probably that this is an example of "old love" refusing to bow to time or to let either the burdens or the monotony of marriage "sink" them. Of this poem Sidney Cox wrote, "When imagination is in the love it finds out how to 'get some color and music out of life.'"

"Snow" is a poem which has two sets of happily married couples: the Coles and the Meserves. Brother Meserve, a fundamentalist preacher, has stopped at the home of the Coles at midnight out of a fierce snow storm. They are irritated with him, not only because he has routed them out of bed, but also because they feel he is foolish. Meserve decides

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27 Brower, p. 162.

28 Frost, p. 337.

to call his wife to reassure her that he is safe and that he will be home soon. Displaying a touching sensitivity for his wife he says:

    I'll call her softly so that if she's wise
    And gone to sleep, she needn't wake to answer. 30

She does not want him to get out in the storm again, but he answers:

    My dear, I'm coming just the same. I didn't
    Call you to ask you to invite me home.--31

While Meserve is out in the barn seeing to his horses, the Coles exchange words over him. Helen Cole begins accusingly:

    'You like the runt.'

    'Don't you a little?'

    'Well,
    I don't like what he's doing, which is what You like, and like him for.'

    'Oh, yes you do. You like your fun as well as anyone; Only you women have to put these airs on To impress men. . . . .32

The Coles prevail upon him to stay the night, but he starts out again near one o'clock. After three o'clock Meserve's wife calls, worried. Then she drops the phone, and the Coles fear that she has rushed out into the storm, for they can hear no sound. But then Meserve arrives and picks up the phone to assure them that he has arrived safely.

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., pp. 183-184.
John Doyle points out that "roughly speaking, Helen Cole represents the feminine nature in such a situation and Fred Cole the masculine . . . . Fred plays the role of interlocutor. He taunts Helen to make Meserve stay when the audience knows he wants Meserve to continue."  

The lines of conversation between the Coles are filled with Fred's enjoyment of the gentle teasing of Helen. Helen comments on Meserve's actions; Fred comments, sometimes mockingly, on what Helen says.

Doyle observes of this poem, "Though conflict and suspense are important in Snow, the poem is ultimately a study of character, of human relationships."  

Many of Frost's best love poems never mention the term. This is especially true of the tender lyrics of Frost's first book, A Boy's Will, published in England in 1913. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant says that this book is no literal or even symbolic autobiography of his last adolescent years or his first years of marriage in Derry. "Yet," she goes on to say, "the subject-speaker, the 'I' of the lyrics, a young man under a spell, has a clear and sensitive identity. The prose gloss--dropped in later editions and in the Complete Poems--is a sort of permission or even invitation to confuse the hero with the author."  

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33 Doyle, p. 92.
34 Ibid.
Although the wife is never mentioned in such poems as "The Pasture," "Flower-Gathering," and "Going for Water," these lyrics suggest the tenderness and happiness, the closeness and joy of sharing, found in young love. But in such poems Frost speaks only of love by synecdochical displacement.

One of Frost's happier poems about marriage is "West-Running Brook." Philip Gerber points out that this is "a scene of near-nuptial celebration." A newly married couple observe that a brook runs west, contrary to the direction of all the other brooks, which run east. In a mood of fantasy the wife speaks:

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.
Look, look, it's waving to us with a wave
To let us know it hears me.

The husband answers matter-of-factly, "It wasn't waved to us."

When she insists that it did wave to her—in an annunciation, she says--, he answers her with typical male impatience when faced with feminine fancy:

Oh, if you take it off to lady-land,
As't were the country of the Amazons
We men must see you to the confines of

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37 Frost, p. 327.
38 Ibid., p. 328.
And leave you there, ourselves forbid to enter,—
It is your brook! I have no more to say. 39

Then, with eloquent restraint, he speaks at length, pointing out the existence of both fantasy and truth in the brook: even the brook which runs counter to the usual direction contains a wave running counter to the brook itself. The wife says of her husband's speech of "contraries," "Today will be the day/ You said so." He replies, "No, today will be the day/ You said the brook was called West-running Brook." And then in a final line which reaffirms their unity, the wife says, "Today will be the day of what we both said." 40 Reuben Brower comments that "the rebellious flowing of the stream is a figure for the loving trust of husband and wife in the other's difference, the expected and desired contraries that make a marriage." 41

"In the Home Stretch" is a dramatic narrative somewhat similar in theme to "West-Running Brook," except that here the relationship is one of an older couple rather than a newly married one. The elderly couple, like the younger, can trust one another to go by contraries, as is evidenced by the maneuverings of each one to wangle from the other an admission that retiring to a farm was his idea. George Nitchie observes that "in both poems, accustomed intimacy makes possible a kind of speech that, in almost any other

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., p. 329.

41 Brower, p. 189.
context, would have the ring of pedantry or of excessive ingenuousness." An example of this kind of speech from "In the Home Stretch" is:

... You're searching, Joe, For things that don't exist; I mean beginnings. Ends and beginnings--there are no such things. There are only middles.

This couple has made the choice of moving to the country to spend their last years. Or rather, it was his choice, but she is willing to do whatever he wishes. Their mutual love and understanding is demonstrated in the teasing that takes place as she tries to convince herself that she wanted this move as much as he did.

"The Subverted Flower" is a poem unlike any other that Frost wrote. Its subject is the passion of young love. The poem begins in the midst of a quarrel, brought on by the boy's display of physical passion that has offended the young girl. The poem develops as she interprets her young lover as a beast. Metaphorically, it extends the meaning of the title until it includes the attitude of the young girl towards passion. The climax of the poem reads:

A girl could only see That a flower had marred a man, But what she could not see Was that the flower might be Other than base and fetid: That the flower had done but part,

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42 Mitchie, p. 128.
43 Frost, p. 145.
And what the flower began
Her own too meager heart.
Had terribly completed.\textsuperscript{44}

This poem is significant among Frost's love poems because of its autobiographical interest. Frost told Lawrance Thompson that "he had hesitated to publish it for many reasons, including his fear that it might seem too daring and too revealingly autobiographical. He might have added that his wife would never have given him her permission to publish it."\textsuperscript{45} Thompson writes that during the early days of courtship, his wife Elinor had been shy and had embarrassed him by her rejection of his importunate lovemaking.\textsuperscript{46}

Most of the poems written by Frost about the relationship between a man and a woman are poems about married people. This is a theme difficult to treat in poetry without irony or over-sentimentality, but Frost has achieved success with this theme in many poems, such as "Snow" and "In the Home Stretch." It is probable that Frost could treat such a theme with understanding only because he personally had experienced a married love that was both close and solid, and yet not free from sorrow or conflict. His poems of love that have gone unfulfilled are treated with sympathetic understanding and pathos.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 454.
\textsuperscript{45} Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, p. 512.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p. 136.
Frost understood well that a crucial area in human life is that of one's relationship to one's mate—for better or for worse. This relationship not only shapes man's attitudes, but the actual course of man's life. To Frost, it was a significant theme for poetic treatment. And if one is tempted to maintain that Frost knew more about the disillusionment of love than about its power, one has only to read the poem he wrote for his daughter on the occasion of her marriage, "The Master Speed":

Two such as you with such a master speed
Cannot be parted nor be swept away
From one another once you are agreed
That life is only life forevermore
Together wing to wing and oar to oar.

47 Frost, p. 392.
A quiet tone of skepticism is found in much of the poetry of Frost. His ideas of religion vary from poem to poem; some reveal a potentially strong religious faith, while others show his admitted agnosticism. Mingled with this tone of skepticism, however, is always the willingness to believe. As Marion Montgomery has written, "He is quite willing to believe that which is appealing if it is also reasonable ... at the same time he is not willing to discard completely the appealing if it fails to be reasonable, knowing the fallibility of reason. He rather reserves judgement."¹ This willingness to reserve judgment in matters of the supernatural is due more to his acceptance of man's limitations and of the mystery of existence than to atheism. His skepticism restrains him from giving final and absolute answers in his poetry. Yet he has not developed a negative attitude toward life. Elizabeth Jennings observes that "what is most noticeable in all Frost's reflective poems is an almost total absence of despair or pessimism; it is

not that he shuns darkness or difficulties—quite the reverse—but rather that something in his own mind and imagination makes him eager to accept, to examine, and sometimes to reconcile, opposites.\textsuperscript{2}

Because he was taught to believe in God from the time he was very young, he was both unwilling and unable to abandon religious faith completely. Although he always hoped the fundamental beliefs were true, his reason would not permit him to believe wholeheartedly. He kept to a middle position to the end of his life, never wholly relinquishing faith, never flatly denying. Lawrance Thompson points out that "it should be recognized that Frost's middle-ground position in the Golden Mean has been shaped less by Stoicism than by his New England practicality somehow blended with that genuinely mystical instinct which seems to be one heritage from his saintly Scotch mother."\textsuperscript{3}

Evidence seems to reveal that Frost did believe in the existence of God. His friend Sidney Cox wrote, "He is religious. 'God,' he said, 'is that which a man is sure cares, and will save him, no matter how many times or how completely he has failed.' We have talked of religion repeatedly since then, and he has never recanted."\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{3}Lawrance Thompson, \textit{Fire and Ice} (New York, 1942), p. 182.
many poems about darkness, chaos, isolation, and loneliness reveal that Frost feels that God is often far away from man. As Miss Jennings says,

The poet does not deny His existence, but he is frequently very much occupied with describing or suggesting how it feels to live in a world bereft of God. This is just one more example of the duality, complexity, and ambiguity of Frost's vision of life. He can never satisfy himself by presenting one side of a situation only . . . where he cannot understand he is always willing to say so. His integrity is far more deeply rooted than his wit or occasional flashes of apparent irresponsibility.\(^5\)

That Frost did believe in God is further evidenced by his humility. Reginald Cook says that Frost was "filled with honest doubt that what he has to offer of himself will be sufficiently acceptable in the sight of God."\(^6\) He hoped that one way he could be found acceptable would be through his poetry. Anna Juhnke points out that "The fear of being finally unacceptable to God is translated into a Yankee trader joke in 'Astrometaphysical.'"\(^7\)

Not only his poems but also his prose statements reflect his long struggle to preserve a wavering faith. Thompson quotes Frost as saying, "One can safely say after from six to thirty thousand years of experience that the evident design

\(^5\)Jennings., p. 95.


is a situation here in which it will always be about equally hard to save your soul . . . or if you dislike hearing your soul mentioned in open meeting, say your decency, your integrity."

Although Frost's poetry could not be described as religious, the speaker in the poetry is always aware of the possibility that something greater than man sustains order and purpose in the universe and may sometimes break through man's isolation to reveal itself.

Frost deliberately enacts doubtful searching, hopes, and fears in his poems, refusing either to reject religion or to give himself to it. In this way he, in a sense, works out his own salvation. By manipulation through poetic form, he can make a joke, play with a tricky argument by analogy, or simply withdraw from commitment by a distancing in tone or idea at the end of the poem. Such a distancing in tone is found in the last two lines of "The Strong Are Saying Nothing": "There may be little or much beyond the grave,/ But the strong are saying nothing until they see."

The stoic restraint of those last two lines is quite different in tone from "A Prayer in Spring," one of Frost's early poems, published in *A Boy's Will*. This poem presents

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a belief in the present moment, a plea not to be troubled by
the uncertain harvest of death:

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

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

George Nitchie comments that this poem "has a degree of
wistfulness about it that suggests less a belief than a will
to believe." And Anna Juhnke wrote of it, "Frost never
repeats that poem's childlike trust in God or its fret about
the uncertain harvest. He learns to use form to maintain a
guarded ability to wait and see," as in "The strong are
saying nothing until they see."  

This guarded tone is one way Frost can refuse to commit
himself to belief or disbelief. It is a result of his need
to keep to the middle ground. Humor is the method he employs
to keep on guard. Frost said, "The very religious nature is
not humorous, not on guard."  

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10 Ibid., p. 17.
11 Nitchie, p. 181.
14 Quoted by Sidney Cox, A Swinger of Birches (New York,
The exaggerated irreverence and double-edged satire of "Not All There" protect the author from having to commit himself to the possibility of communication between God and man:

I turned to speak to God
About the world's despair;
But to make bad matters worse
I found God wasn't there.

God turned to speak to me
(Don't anybody laugh)
God found I wasn't there--
At least not over half. 15

There is much weight in Anna Juhnke's statement that "in the rather shallow poems of his last years . . . one can risk the commitments demanded of total faith." 16

Frost rarely questioned the meaning of life in direct poems, but usually approached this subject obliquely, through symbolism, and with his typical method of presenting a question that he himself does not answer. The most frequent symbol that Frost uses to illustrate his thoughts on things eternal is stars. For Frost, the stars provide a natural figure for both affirming and denying heavenly communication.

Lawrence Thompson has pointed out that "perhaps the most strikingly balanced and rounded expression of Frost's faith-restrained-by-skepticism may be found in the progressive

15 Frost, p. 408.
16 Juhnke, p. 164.
metaphors of 'A Star in a Stone-Boat,' with its constant allusions to evolutionary astronomy. In that poem the believing and doubting unbeliever develops his thoughts casually, loquaciously, and with wonder."\(^{17}\)

In "The Star-Splitter" a man burns down his farm and uses the insurance money to buy a telescope. But after searching the sky with the telescope, the man learns little. Frost asks:

> We've looked and looked, but after all where are we?  
> Do we know any better where we are,  
> And how it stands between the night tonight  
> And a man with a smoky lantern chimney?  
> How different from the way it ever stood?\(^{18}\)

Here Frost implies that even a telescope cannot bring man close enough to the stars so that he can find out the answers to the eternal questions.

"I Will Sing You One-O" from New Hampshire differs in form, tone, and attitude from other poems with the star image. The other poems stress the separateness between man and the heavens. "I Will Sing You One-O" stresses man's oneness with the universe. Reginald Cook observes: "Like George Meredith's recognition of 'unalterable law' in 'Lucifer in Starlight,' Frost perceives a human oneness that not only is related to but synchronizes with universal unalterable oneness."\(^{19}\)

\(^{17}\)Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 193.  
\(^{18}\)Frost, p. 221.  
\(^{19}\)Cook, p. 201.
A poem of loneliness and emptiness, "Desert Places," ends with this stanza:

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

John Doyle discusses the effectiveness of the phrase "empty spaces between stars" in this poem:

Beginning with the Renaissance, perhaps few developing areas of knowledge did more than astronomy to destroy man's faith in himself as lord of the universe . . . overwhelming impersonal interstellar space made of man a cowering microscopic animal . . . He suddenly saw himself a finite midge attacking the infinite . . . It is against this powerful opposing force that the protagonist of "Desert Places" takes his stand--he neither trembles or runs. Such emptiness does not scare him because it fades before a more powerful and frightening emptiness "so much nearer home."  

In *A Boy's Will* Frost glossed the poem "Stars": "There is no oversight in human affairs."  

In this poem Frost portrays the stars as being coolly detached from human affairs--they appear "with neither love or hate."  

By implication he suggests that the God of the stars possesses the same attitude toward man's problems.

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20 Frost, p. 386.
22 Thompson, Robert Frost: *The Early Years*, p. 259.
23 Frost, p. 12.
Cook tells us that approximately ten per cent of the poems in Complete Poems refer to stars. He goes on to say that "to Frost the star image grows organically out of the experience of the poet and comes to stand naturally for the signature of his spirit."\textsuperscript{24}

To offset the negative mood of "Stars," however, Frost put the affirmative poem "The Trial By Existence" after "Stars" when A Boy's Will was published.\textsuperscript{25} In "The Trial By Existence" each soul in heaven is given the chance by God to make a deliberate choice whether or not to be born. If he chooses to be born, he is allowed to have no memory during life of having made this choice. In this way man can receive a valid test of faith, of "trial by existence." When the bravest soul is slain, he will awake in paradise to find that the greatest rewards of daring to struggle is still to dare. Suffering, then, is in terms of what we are, not something alien that is hitting us from without.

This poem is quite similar to Wordworth's "Ode on Intimations of Immortality." However, unlike those in Wordworth's ode, Frost's souls are not allowed the memory of any previous existence, thus making the survival of troubles here on earth more heroic. God says to the soul ready to leave heaven:

\textsuperscript{24}Cook, p. 204.
\textsuperscript{25}Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, p. 399.
. . . the pure fate to which you go
Admits no memory of choice,
Or the woe were no earthly woe
To which you give the assenting voice. 26

Marion Montgomery points out that, in view of this speech, "it is consistent to find Frost's God saying, thirty-five years later, that, 'There's no connection man can reason out/ Between his just deserts and what he gets.'"27

Some of Frost's poems reveal an urge toward heaven, even though Frost was a lover of earth. Radcliffe Squires asserts that "all of his important poems move one way or another from a plexus where a discontent with the book of nature tempts him toward a celestial journey."28

In "A Steeple on the House" Frost writes: "A spire and belfry on the roof/ Means that a soul is coming on the flesh."29 Squires says that the spire and belfry symbol "stand with no uncertainty for the urge toward heaven."30 Elizabeth Jennings, herself a poet, admires this poem and says of it, "The power and effectiveness of this poem lie in both the tentativeness of its statement and also in the absolute concreteness of the writing."31

26 Frost, p. 29. 27 Montgomery, p. 144.
29 Frost, p. 540.
30 Squires, p. 51.
31 Jennings, p. 65.
Another poem which shows the urge toward heaven is "Birches":

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\begin{align*}
\text{It's when I'm weary of considerations,} \\
\text{And life is too much like a pathless wood} \\
\text{Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs} \\
\text{Broken across it, and one eye is weeping} \\
\text{From a twig's having lashed across it open.} \\
\text{I'd like to get away from earth awhile} \\
\text{And then come back to it and begin over.} \quad 32 \\
\end{align*}
\]

Yet Frost does not want to get away permanently—does not want to die—for in the next few lines he says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{May no fate willfully misunderstand me} \\
\text{And half grant what I wish and snatch me away} \\
\text{Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:} \\
\text{I don't know where it's likely to go better.} \quad 33 \\
\end{align*}
\]

Frost prefers Earth because that is what he knows. Besides, he is not sure that heaven would grant him any answers were his birches to get him that far. In "A Passing Glimpse" he suggests that the answer to the meaning of life is not given to those who seek for it too closely: "Heaven gives its glimpses only to those/ Not in a position to look too close." 34

Although in "Birches" it is clear that Frost prefers the security of the known Earth, in "Misgiving" he speaks of a continuing search for things unknown. This poem is about the leaves, who say they will follow the wind, but when the time comes they give only "... a little reluctant whirl/  

33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., p. 311.
That drops them no further than where they were."  He ends by saying wistfully:

I only hope that when I am free
As they are free to go in quest
Of the knowledge beyond the bounds of life
It may not seem better to me to rest.  

In the poem "Skeptic" Frost demonstrates that he adheres to no specific set of dogmas, but lives by one provisional belief after another. He did not hesitate to satirize science as well as adamant orthodox religion. Miss Jennings points out that in "Why Wait for Science?" "it is not so much science itself which Frost castigates as the omniscience which some scientists claim for themselves."  In this poem Frost is speaking of "How we propose to get away from here" and says:

The way to go should be the same
As fifty million years ago we came—
If anyone remembers how that was.
I have a theory, but it hardly does.  

Yet Frost is never willing to abandon the reason he finds in science. Squires points out that "on occasion Frost may treat a scientific theory with the tenderness usually accorded myth."  For example, in "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight," he speaks of the beginning of life in these terms:

And if men have watched a long time
And never seen sun-smitten slime

\(^{35}\)Ibid., p. 292.  \(^{36}\)Ibid.

\(^{37}\)Jennings, p. 66.  \(^{38}\)Frost, p. 563.

\(^{39}\)Ibid.
Again come to life and crawl off. As Squires says, "Though this particular theory is contrary to the cherished notion of special creation, though it quarrels absolutely with religion, Frost's tone is that of the protector of the faith." This confidence is expressed in the concluding quatrains:

God once spoke to people by name.
The sun once imparted its flame.
One impulse persists as in our breath;
The other persists as our faith.

The reference to flame here is to the Biblical miracle of the burning bush. In this way this poem is a curious mixture of both science and religion.

A poem that is frankly agnostic in tone is "Design." In this poem Frost recounts an incident in nature that has disturbed him:

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

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

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41 Frost, p. 342.
42 Squires, p. 53.
43 Frost, p. 342.
44 Ibid., p. 396.
The incident seems insignificant, yet to Frost, if this accident of nature has been planned and designed, then it is impossibly terrifying. Yet if it is unplanned, then the possible conclusions are worse: life is utterly desolate in connotation. As Elizabeth Isaacs points out, "The man watching is forced to wonder when and where his own particular danse macabre may be so arranged—so 'designed'—in the universal scheme of which he is sure he is a part; an arrangement for the design of death seems to give him certain satisfaction."  

The thrust of the poem lies in the last line, in its first word: "If design govern in a thing so small." Man has always assumed some type of design in the universe, a Creator of it all. But the poet now causes the man to face the possibility that there may be no design in his own miniature situation in the universe. Miss Isaacs comments, "He is left with whatever tragic heroism his own existential glory may be able to summon."  

In his later poetry Frost spoke more freely of God. In A Masque of Reason (1945) Frost attempts to justify God's ways to man, which justification is that none is necessary. The play opens as Job and his wife Thyatira awake to find God stepping out of the Burning Bush. God says to Job:

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46 Ibid., p. 118.
I've had you on my mind a thousand years
To thank you someday for the way you helped me
Establish once for all the principle
There's no connection man can reason out
Between his just deserts and what he gets.
Virtue may fail and wickedness succeed.
' Twas a great demonstration we put on.

Too long I've owed you this apology
For the apparently unmeaning sorrow
You were afflicted with in those days.
But it was of the essence of the trial
You shouldn't understand it at the time. 47
It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning.

The last three lines quoted illustrate that thirty years
after Frost had written "The Trial By Existence," its theme
was still significant for him.

Job's wife is embarrassingly facetious. She remarks
that she recognized God because "I'd know Him by Blake's
picture anywhere." 48 She dashes around trying to get a
photograph of Job with God and later with the Devil too.

Reuben Brower suggests that "Frost did not have to go beyond
the Book of Job to find grounds for his ironic treatment of
Job's wife." 49 In the Bible at the height of Job's affliction
his wife says, "Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse
God and die." 50

47 Frost, p. 589.
48 Ibid., p. 588.
49 Reuben Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost (New York,
1963), p. 213.
50 The Bible, Authorized King James Version, Job 2:9.
The question that Job puts to God is, "Why did You hurt me so? . . ." which in six words combines bitterness and pathos in familiar idiom.

God explains that "... Job and I together/ Found out the discipline man needed most/ Was to learn his submission to unreason."52

When Job wonders why the lesson of submission to unreason had to be at his expense, God replies:

It had to be at somebody's expense. 
Society can never think things out: It has to see them acted out by actors, 
Devoted actors at a sacrifice—
The ablest actors I can lay my hands on.53

Later God explains that his reason for torturing Job was somewhat less than noble: "I was just showing off to the Devil."54 Frost has presented a stage where God and Satan wage a continual war and where neither is the victor for long. This is hardly the orthodox Christian view. In fact, Frost's portrayal of God in this masque is that of an undignified God. As Elizabeth Jennings points out, "God, in this masque, resembles closely some of the opinionated countrymen in Frost's narrative poems. He is humorous, argumentative, sometimes perverse."55 She also quotes Lawrance Thompson as arguing that it is intimacy which permits Job to question God with

51Frost, p. 598.  
52Ibid., p. 596.  
53Ibid.  
54Ibid., p. 600.  
55Jennings, p. 71.
all the boldness and insolence characteristic of a family quarrel. Yet she herself feels that by "so carefully avoiding the solemn or portentous . . . he has only succeeded in making his play sound specious and frivolous." 57

Marion Montgomery disagrees somewhat and contends that Frost's presentation of a cavalier God is a deliberate device which points up the theme of the masque. "He is showing us not lack of reason or justice in God, but rather man's stubbornness and lack of understanding: it has always been the human error to try to read God into man." 58

Frost's second masque, A Masque of Mercy, was written in 1947. This masque is set in a New York bookstore and its chief characters are Jonah, Keeper, Keeper's Wife (Jesse Bel), and Paul. Jonah enters the bookstore and announces that he has lost the ability to prophesy:

I'm in the Bible, all done out in story.
I've lost the faith in God to carry out
The threats he makes against the city evil.
I can't trust God to be unmerciful. 59

Keeper is a realistic humanitarian, a cynic. Jesse Bel is sharp-tongued. Paul, who is supposed to represent the Paul of the New Testament, is to convert Jonah to an understanding of God's mercy-justice paradox. Paul recognizes Jonah's problem and tells him:

56 Ibid., p. 72. 57 Ibid.
58 Montgomery, p. 142.
You are the universal fugitive,
Escapist as we say, though you are not
Running away from Him you think you are
But from His mercy-justice contradiction.
But here's where your evasion has an end.
I have to tell you something that will spoil
Indulgence in your form of melancholy
Once and for all. I'm going to make you see
How relatively little justice matters.

Jonah is afraid that God will not remain the stern Old Testament God that Jonah has known Him to be. Paul makes a significant summary which, Reginald Cook says, "is the very essence of Frost's own position toward religion, in view of which all the other poems with religious implications are variants. Here the closely reasoned 'argument' is sinewed by tough thought ligatures . . . .":

Paul: We have to stay afraid deep in our souls
Our sacrifice, the best we have to offer,
And not our worst nor second best, our best,
Our very best, our lives laid down like Jonah's,
Our lives laid down in war and peace, may not
Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight.
And that they may be is the only prayer
Worth praying. May my sacrifice
Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight.

Keeper is also given a final summary that expresses Frost's own views: his belief that life is lived between powerful forces, mind and heart--seeking, respectively, justice and reason:

Keeper: My failure is no different from Jonah's.
We both have lacked the courage in the heart
To overcome the fear within the soul

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60 Ibid., p. 615.  
61 Cook, p. 193.  
62 Frost, pp. 641-642.
And go ahead to any accomplishment. 
Courage is what it takes and takes the more of 
Because the deeper fear is so eternal. 
Nothing can make injustice just but mercy. 63

Elizabeth Jennings believes this masque is more successful than A Masque of Reason because "it really does engender and communicate a sense of urgency; the arguments are humanly important arguments, not simply dispassionately presented fragments of dialectic. The reader really cares about the characters, especially Paul and Jonah." 64

Reuben Brower, however, says that A Masque of Mercy is "a more bewildering performance" and "the drama is too unsteady on the surface for the reader to be sure of the characters and where they are going." 65

Cook tells us that once in a classroom with graduate students Frost discussed A Masque of Mercy. When a student asked Frost about his slant on God, he replied, "How do you mean God? I'm always polite about other people's God." 66

Cook then describes what he feels to be Frost's conception of God:

He conceived of God neither as an avenging Jehovah, nor as a Great Mathematician, neither as an enigma, nor as a cunning contriver; neither as a universal anomaly, or as the inobvious. On the basis of his poetry, to Frost, God is an unseen reality: an ultimate divine wisdom beyond penultimate human wisdom.

63 Ibid., p. 642.  
64 Jennings, p. 76.  
65 Brower, p. 221.  
66 Quoted in Cook, p. 189.
Certainly he does not conceive of a God of dread whose terror is inescapable. . . . Nor does he hold God culpable for man's sufferings in a world he never made. 67

Frost's struggle to maintain a wavering faith—a faith that would not allow him to give up to negativistic conclusions, yet could not lead him to absolute acceptance—pervades his poetry. Because of this wavering, yet tenaciously held, faith, a tone of skepticism reveals itself as one of the dominant features of his poetry, a tone of which critics and readers soon become aware. Because of his ambivalent feelings on God, Eternity, and the human soul, Frost wrote in such variant moods as reverence ("A Prayer in Spring"), familiarity (A Masque of Reason), and jest ("Not All There"). Though his attitude toward God varies from poem to poem, Frost never completely denies His existence or questions His power. Frost has Keeper say:

I can see that the uncertainty
In which we act is a severity,
A cruelty, amounting to injustice
That nothing but God's mercy can assuage. 68

Frost, well aware of human fallibility, especially his own, perhaps trusted that God's mercy would overlook the skepticism which the poet was never able to overcome.

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67 Ibid.; pp. 189-190.
68 Frost, p. 641.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

One of the secrets of Frost's wide popular appeal as a poet is his sympathetic understanding of the human situation which his readers share. As Reginald Cook has suggested:

... he has been involved in the normal life of his time, country, section and family, and also deeply involved in conflicts that torment the human heart. Apparently he has learned a great deal from personal tensions, and, by way of compensations, these struggles have honed his insight into problems of human relationships... . . . No writer ever has created what his mind could not imagine. It is a safe bet that if he describes intra-familial relationships these must have haunted his mind, arising either from personal experience or from experience close to the personal.¹

Frost understood, for instance, what it was to have the feeling of isolation simultaneous with existence in a populous world. He enjoyed being alone with himself, and though he could be frightened by the "desert places," was not overwhelmed by them. His awareness of the ambiguities of life, of its often unendurable struggles, caused him to yearn for escape. Yet this was not to be an irresponsible, permanent escape; it was to be a retreat for relief, for spiritual

refreshment. He expected that the resourcefulness and the
courage of the individual would sustain one when such a
retreat was not possible, when the inevitable must be accepted.

Though he sometimes disdained some aspects of society,
Frost believed that men need one another. Men "work apart"
but ideally they "work together." Throughout his poems he
seems to be searching for an ideal reconciliation between the
opposing claims of the individual and the group. Men can
deliberately bring isolation upon themselves, but Frost
indicates that this is invariably a tragic situation. For
centuries authors have written of the tragedies involved in
the lack of human communication, and Frost is no exception
to this testimony. Yet hopefully, he has often written of
the ever-present possibility of achieving such communication
with one's fellow man.

One area where the lack of communication is particularly
tragic is that of the husband-wife relationship. Again, this
is an area universally treated by poets and novelists. In
such poems as "Home Burial" Frost has excelled in this under-
standing of the fundamental differences between the sexes and
the differences in the way they approach the problems of life.
He has also written of married love with unusual skill, in
that he writes without sentimentality or irony of situations
which can be universally perceived outside of their New
England settings.
The essential ambiguity of Frost's style is nowhere more apparent than in his poems that seek to understand man's relationship to God and the eternal. He writes of the mercy of God as well as of the necessity for man to "learn the submission to unreason." He wrote poems of affirmation as well as those of frank agnosticism. It can be shown from an examination of his poetry and his personal statements that he never went so far as to deny the existence of God, but he often wistfully hoped that he could believe that God was concerned with each individual man—specifically, with Robert Frost.

Frost is admittedly a poet of ambivalent ideas on the subject of human relationships: he admires and practices acceptance of the inevitable, yet he has an urge to escape to the dark woods; he believes men can and do live in neighborliness and harmony, but they can also erect walls between them; he has experienced the tenderness of love, yet he knows the pain that husbands and wives can cause each other; he has an enduring belief in God, but he often wrote of how it felt to live in a world bereft of His presence. His severest critics have pointed out this ambivalence and have concluded that because he refuses to commit himself, he will never be assessed as a major American poet.

This ambivalence, however, is a part of the personality and character of Robert Frost that is as inherent to his poetic style as is his love of New England. He could not have written otherwise if he had desired to do so. He is ambiguous because that is the way he found life to be. Frost was a realist; he wrote of situations as he found them. He looked upon life without sentimentality—where there was tragedy, he portrayed its pathos; where there was humor, he caught its essence; where there was ambiguity, he did not demand rigid answers. His was the common technique of asking questions which he did not answer, but rather left for the reader to answer—if he could.

Frost's death having so recently occurred, in early 1963, there will no doubt appear many further studies of the poetry of Robert Frost; certainly the beginnings of objectivity in appraisal of his work have already occurred. It is being pointed out that he has given to American literature situations from man's everyday life, lyrically described in a language that is close to actual speech. Yet it may be that a truly objective view of his work will have to await the passage of still more time to dim the memory of Frost the myth and leave a fuller awareness of what his contributions to American poetry have been.
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